

Matthew 7:1-12

CENTRAL THEME: *'you will seek me and you will find me when you seek me with all your heart.'* Jeremiah 29:13

Context:

After the beatitudes, the Sermon began with a statement in 5:17-20 about how Jesus' kingdom relates to the OT law. Jesus wants us to be people who live out the true meaning of the OT law from our hearts. This is rounded off with the statement in 7:12 about the law and the prophets, and so bookends the central section of this sermon.

7:1-11 is a call to first apply Jesus' teaching in 5:21-6:34 to ourselves, rather than to use it to judge others. Then it is a call to persistently pray for God's help to do that. This is what every preacher wants to say at the end of the sermon – 'Don't think about how this applies to someone else – apply it to your own life and pray that God would change you.'

1. Don't judge, but be discerning (1-6)

Verse 1 is easily misunderstood, because the meaning of the word '*judge*' is rather broad. Let's begin with what it *doesn't* mean: we are not to be undiscerning. That should be abundantly clear from the context: verse 6 requires us to make judgements about the people we are speaking to, and to discern whether it is worthwhile to share the gospel with them. In 7:15 Jesus calls on us to assess the lives of others so that we might judge / discern whether they are genuine or wolves in sheep's clothing (cf John 7:24).

Actually, no-one really thinks it's a good idea to never judge or condemn. "You just beat an old lady to death to steal her pension money? *Who am I to judge?!*" "You cheat on your wife & neglect your children? *You won't hear any condemnation from me...!*"

What then *does* it mean? The real target is hypocrisy and judgementalism, as is clear from Jesus' explanation in verses 2-5: In verse 2 we are warned that if we display a judgmental attitude towards others, then God will treat us accordingly. 5:7 and 6:14 have already introduced us to this thought. A true experience of God's saving grace is wholly incompatible with a harsh, unmerciful attitude towards others. It should go without saying that Jesus is *not* suggesting that we earn God's mercy through our treatment of others. By definition, mercy and grace cannot be earned. At the very least, verses 1-2 warn us to be much more slow in passing judgement on others. We condemn the lying politician, the greedy banker or the unfaithful spouse of a friend. But we forget that we too tell lies to protect ourselves, we too can be greedy (we just can't make such a crass display of it since we have less money), and we too give in to lust.

Verses 3-5 give a concrete example of what Jesus is speaking about. Carson points to king David's response to the prophet Nathan's story in 2 Samuel 12 as a perfect example of this. David is incensed by the account of a rich man who steals a poor man's only lamb when he had a whole flock of his own. David calls for the man's execution. But as Nathan points out ('you are the man!') David has done far worse – he has taken an honest man's wife and killed the man to cover his tracks...

It is a tragic human flaw that we are often most condemnatory of the sins in others which lurk in our own hearts.

It is this self-deception and blindness (Jeremiah 17:9) which means we need brothers and sisters to gently point out our faults. All of us find it easier to spot a speck-sized failing in the life of others than to see the plank-sized sins in our own lives. Jesus does not want church to be a place where there is only affirmation and acceptance. Instead a healthy church is one in which each of us is humble and diligent in addressing our own planks, so that we can help others with their specks. There is something helpful about the proportions too: A good rule of thumb when we are seeking to correct one another, is that there are likely to be some major planks in my eye for every speck I see in yours.

The opposite danger is to be naively indiscriminating. Indeed it is hard not to slip into this if we take verses 1-5 seriously. Once again, the proportions are instructive. There are 5 verses warning against judgementalism and just the one warning against being indiscriminating...

The dogs and pigs in view are not cuddly pet spaniels and miniature pot-bellied pigs. They are savage packs of wild dogs, and pigs that were partly descended from wild boars – they could both be very dangerous. (interestingly they are both mentioned in 2Peter 2:22 as well).

Given the language used it seems that the particular application is to sharing the gospel. In Matthew 10:14 Jesus warns the disciples to shake the dust off their sandals and move on if the message of the kingdom is rejected in one village. They are hardened and implacable in their opposition to Jesus. Likewise Paul eventually turns away from preaching to Jewish people in Corinth after their persistent rejection (Acts 18:5-8). Finally, Paul warns Titus that if divisive people did not respond to warnings, he should have nothing more to do with them (Titus 3:10).

This verse calls for discernment. There may well be situations in which it is not wise or profitable to hold out the pearl of great price (as Jesus calls the gospel in 13:45-46). However, we must remember two things:

- i. the examples we have of this concern groups of Jewish people. They had a long exposure to the Scriptures. Those groups whom Jesus and Paul turn away from have been consistently and persistently rejecting God's word.
- ii. Jesus and Paul are also persistent, patient and gentle with people [see Carson p116]. Most people start out as hostile, cynical and mocking. We must both persevere and be discerning as we seek to proclaim the good news.

→ It is very easy to slip into judgementalism. As we begin to take the demands of discipleship more seriously, we begin to live differently. That difference between our own behaviour and that of those around us can so easily fuel proud judgementalism. On the other side of the fence, where the audience is hostile, mocking or disingenuous, it may be wiser to judge that we should save our efforts for those who are more receptive.

2. Persist in prayer, trusting that he is good (7-11)

A central feature of true Christianity is persistence. Verses 7-8 call on us to persist in prayer. Each of the three verbs '*ask... seek... knock*' is a synonym/metaphor for

prayer. They fit with the very first words of the Sermon on the Mount '*blessed are the poor in spirit...*' A life characterised by prayer is a life that is built on a recognition of our need. It is a life of humble dependence on God.

All three verbs are in present tense, which in Greek implies a continuous action: '*keep on asking, seeking and knocking.*' The reason given in verse 8 is very simple and we find ourselves objecting immediately! Most of us know the experience of praying and praying, and yet finding no positive answer from God. That is why Jesus goes on immediately to teach about the character of God in verses 9-11. God is good and he can be relied upon to give good gifts to his children. He is not stingy, mean-spirited or a grudging gift giver. He is abundantly generous. Why then do so many of us feel that God is a grudging giver? Often it is because of the nature of our requests and our lack of patience: Jesus teaching in verse 7 picks up on the words of Jeremiah 29:13, in which God states '*you will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.*' Furthermore, his teaching in verse 7 comes on the back of 2 chapters in which he has called us to turn away from selfish, worldly obsessions and to '*seek first his kingdom.*' Might it be that our experience of prayer is frustrating because, in the words of James, '*when you ask you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.*'

Similarly, we perhaps miss the need for perseverance. Jesus would not need to reassure us of the generosity of God if he always answered our prayers instantly. It is only because we so often have to wait that he needs to encourage us to keep on asking and trusting.

3. Do unto others... the golden rule (12)

7:12 forms an inclusion (a bracket) with 5:17-20. It helps us to see that what lies between these two statements is designed to explain how the standards and precepts of the kingdom of God relate to and fulfil the Law and the prophets. The summary statement of verse 12 demonstrates again that we are not to take a tick-box approach to God's law. It gives us a helpful way of working out whether we have understood things correctly. It's also notable that the motivation is not that we will be well-treated by others, but that this will enable us to fulfil God's law. This should be our heart motivation.

APPLICATION

- i. Be humble; be wise.
- ii. Persist in prayer, trusting in God.
- iii. Do unto others as you would have them do to you.

Three simple principles which will have a radical impact if we actually put them into practice!

QUESTIONS

Read 5:17-20. Read 7:12.

These verses form a bracket around the central part of the sermon

What has been Jesus' aim in this section?

What particular areas of life has he applied it to?

Read 7:1-11

v1-6

What is the command in v1 and what does it mean?

Why do you think Jesus concludes this part of the sermon by talking about judging others?

⇒ **Why is it so tempting to use Jesus' teaching to nit-pick/judge the lives of other people?**

What is the warning in v1-2?

How do verses 3-5 show the right way to hear Jesus' teaching?

⇒ **How would our lives and our church community be healthier if we approached every sermon/Bible study in this way?**

v6 – Will everyone be open to receive Jesus' teaching? How does their reaction contrast to the 'brother' in v5?

How are we to treat these people?

⇒ **Can you think of examples where this has been appropriate? (either with sharing the gospel with non-Christians, or helping correct a Christian)**

v7-11

What does Jesus tell us to do in v7?

How do the different images teach us about prayer?

Why do you think Jesus tells us to pray at the end of this section?

Why might we forget to pray in response to Jesus' teaching?

What encouragements are there to keep on praying?

⇒ **Pick one section of ch5:21-6:34. Spend five minutes praying individually that God would change us**