

MATTHEW 7

7: 1-6 – Judging Others, Profaning the Holy

In chapter 6 Jesus condemns hypocrisy, and clearly, he has Israel's religious leaders as prime targets. Jesus is trying to teach and lead by example another understanding of God and God's will for living life.

In this passage, we are told we must not judge others. This is about ordinary life, not public life in society. Judgments are unavoidable in society and punishment is not only aimed at reforming the offender if possible but protecting the victim and potential victims. But in personal relationships, as neighbours and citizens, we are terribly busy judging one another. Moreover, we are always more lenient and understanding with ourselves than we are with others. But it can go in other ways as well. Sometimes we are always letting others off the hook because we want to avoid dealing with issues or confronting others, and we can be terribly hard and unforgiving of ourselves. Sometimes our expectations of others are too high and other times they are not high enough. How do we find our way?

This passage is quite straightforward. It says: 1) We must have the courage to face our situation honestly, and the situation of our neighbours generously. That's always a good place to begin. The same mix of generosity and honesty will serve us well whether we apply judgments upon others as much as upon ourselves and our own. 2) "Dogs" and "swine" are typical references to non-Jews, Gentiles, outsiders, those who know little about the scriptures and the standards of holiness God expects of God's people. Until Israel gets it right, it must not try to share all this with those outside because what they share will be false and damaging. This is a theme of Jesus throughout his ministry. Once the crucifixion and resurrection take place, then the story of fulfillment is complete and part 2 begins: the spreading of redemption from Israel to the rest of the world. At this early point in Jesus' ministry, however, holy things and pearls (Jesus teaching and healing) are not being received any better by his own people, and as we will see, some of the gentiles will be more open to receive them than many of the Jews.

Perhaps the way for us to apply these words today is to consider whether we who would tell others the way to God are ourselves beacons of light or shadows of darkness. Sincerity of motives has already been identified by Jesus as central to the ethics of his way. In this chapter, he will add the importance of practice and lifestyle. Whom do people meet when they meet us? Is it Christ, Christ's love and Christ's methods of justice?

7: 7-12 – Ask, Search, Knock, and the Golden Rule

The accent in this passage is not on God giving us everything we ask for. Rather, the accent is on asking. Often, we don't bother asking because either we don't believe it can really make a difference, or else, we don't think it's important enough for God to be bothered with it. This passage tells us that we must keep asking God for things that matter to us. As we mature and deepen in faith, we also mature and deepen in terms of what matters to us and what we ask of God. It's not about asking God for the comforts of life, success, prosperity, etc. Rather, it's about asking for those things that will not only bless us but bless the world around us also.

The Golden rule is fairly universal in one form or another. What is unique from the biblical/Christian point of view is that the God-human relationship defines the human-human and human-earth relationship. As God is infinitely loving, generous, forgiving, patient and genuine with us, so we are inspired and challenged to be in relation to others.

7: 13-23 – Life choices, results, and consequences

First there are choices, and often, the choices that define who we are and who we become involve a cost, a challenge, a path for which we may be in the minority or alone. We have to ground ourselves in something deeper and stronger than the majority/popular view. The wide gate involves many. The narrow gate only allows a few through. Are we prepared to make the right choice no matter how lonely and costly it may be, no matter the sacrifice? Chances are, the things that matter to us most and the principles which we value most, have been grounded in us through commitment that has cost us something.

Second, there are results. We can say all kinds of things and maybe even fool a number of people. But what quality and substance of fruit does the tree that is our life bear? This is a good rule of thumb into a person's character and trustworthiness.

Finally, there are consequences to our choices and the results of our lives. Many believe that they are important and valuable because of their many accomplishments, abilities and successes. They make a great splash in the ocean of life. But any splash is not necessarily a good splash. God looks first into the heart, and then into the results. The world is full of great promises, outlandish claims, and answers to life's many problems.

Jesus teaches that what will ultimately establish a person with a solid foundation is quite basic. Be slow to judge and lavishly generous in loving. Treat yourself and others with respect. Be a child before God in asking, seeking and knocking, because you believe it can make a real difference to the quality of your life and the good of the world around you. Love others and care for the world because God loves you. Don't skimp on making hard choices when they are the right choices. Focus on the results not the glitz, glitter and show. Don't try to fool

yourself, others and certainly not God. Be real and trust God's inexhaustibly generous, forgiving love to heal your failings and flaws. And finally,....

7: 24-29 – Hearing, doing and building a solid spiritual foundation

The movement of reading these words, hearing them, and then, actually acting upon them, can be a great challenge. Many listened to Jesus. A precious few acted on his words, and even fewer actually passed through the narrow gate all the way to the end with God. But this is the way to building a really solid foundation. Everything else will fall should the right trial and tribulation sweep through like a flood. Christians aren't spared the floods, and in some ways, they hurt more deeply because hurt is often in proportion to love and commitment. However, love and commitment have resurrection power. The alternative is perpetual disappointment in life, which leads to cynicism, bitterness, defeat, apathy, and many other attributes that reflect a deadness of spirit.

What's the foundation your life and spirit are built on? Solid doesn't mean no worry and doubt. Solid means what it is we're striving for and what it is we stand on to regroup and keep finding our way. Is it Christ and his way of loving? Is it his forgiveness and grace received and then shared? This is the rock under our feet.