

Bible Commentaries

Coffman's Commentaries on the Bible ▾

Matthew 7 ▾

Verse 1

MATT. 7

SERMON ON THE MOUNT (concluded)

This portion of the Master's great sermon is composed of miscellaneous exhortations and is not easily conformable to any formal outline.

Judge not that ye be not judged. (Matthew 7:1)

The word "judge" in this place is translated from a Greek word, [ακρινο], also found in such passages as **John 12:48**; **Acts 17:31**; and **2 Timothy 4:1**, indicating that the type of judging forbidden in this place is that of presuming to determine salvation, or the lack of it, in others. Not even Christ did this while on earth. "I came not to judge the world but to save the world" (**John 12:47**). The exercise of such judgment is all the more sinful in that it is premature. "Judge nothing before the time" (**1 Corinthians 4:5**). The widespread failure of otherwise devoted people to observe this injunction is tragically regrettable; and yet some insist on their right to judge others and defend it on the basis of Jesus' words, "By their fruits ye shall know them" (**Matthew 7:20**). Discerning and judging, however, are two different things. The Greek term for accounting, or thinking, with reference to another is [αγεομαι]. Making a private, personal, and tentative appraisal of others is not forbidden; but "judging" is prohibited. One must deplore the conduct of self-appointed "fruit inspectors" whose flagrant violations of this commandment have worked untold damage in the church.

Verse 2

For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured unto you.

The thought of these parallel expressions is identical, the repetition being for the sake of emphasis. A censorious, presumptuous preoccupation with other people's destiny encourages a reciprocal judgment from them, resulting in all kinds of bitterness, recriminations, and vindictive hatreds.

Verse 3

And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye?

One who judges others is compared to a person presuming to cast a splinter out of his brother's eye while a plank is in his own eye! This is a vivid picture of a person who ignores his own grievous sins while trying to

correct the relatively minor shortcomings of another. The mote and the beam represent the disparity between that which is tiny, insignificant, almost invisible, and that which is obvious, flagrant, and obtrusive. The mote hunter is the nitpicker, the specialist in fine, disputed points, who focuses on the most minute deviations while ignoring far more basic and important considerations.

Verse 4

Or how wilt thou say to thy brother, Let me cast the mote out of thine eye; and lo, the beam is in thine own eye?

The deftness and accuracy of our Lord's comparisons have never been even approached by other teachers. A mote, although trifling and insignificant, can nevertheless be a serious and painful handicap when located in the eye. Thus, Jesus cannot be charged with making even the slightest sin or fault a matter of indifference. That is not the point under consideration. What he is emphasizing here is the evil inconsistency of Big Guilt correcting Little Guilt. It may be doubted that Christ ever employed humor in his teachings, but there is certainly a suggestion of it here. The ridiculous picture of a man with a plank in his own eye casting a splinter out of his neighbor's eye must have brought a chuckle from those who heard the Master's words.

Verse 5

Thou hypocrite, cast out first the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother's eye.

This shows that Christ does not minimize any moral fault, however tiny. It is implicit in the comparison that the mote should be cast out of the eye. Tiny as it is, it may not be accepted lightly. Surely, this is an inspired metaphor. Judging and disposing of the faults of others is: (1) dangerous, (2) hypocritical, and (3) futile. If one would truly aid another, his first consideration is to get the plank out of his own eye. This means that he should prepare himself by acknowledging his own sins and turning to him alone who is the sinner's friend. Any other method defeats itself.

Verse 6

Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine, lest haply they trample them under their feet, and turn and rend you.

Dummelow thinks this passage means "that the most holy things ought not to be offered indiscriminately to all persons."^[1] In such a view, the dogs and swine would refer to mean and vicious persons who have no desire to apprehend spiritual things. This interpretation has come down from very ancient times. Clement of Alexandria said, "It is difficult to exhibit the true and transparent words respecting the true light to swinish and untrained hearers."^[2] Another view is that the sacred abilities and powers of life should not be squandered upon the appetites and lusts of the flesh which can never be satisfied but which end by "rending" the giver. This, of course, is true, but is not necessarily what Jesus said here.

^[1] J. R. Dummelow, One Volume Commentary (New York: Funk and Wagnalls Company, 1932), p. 649.

^[2] Clement of Alexandria, The Stromata (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1951), The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. II, p. 312.

Verse 7

Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you.

Christ said, "Men ought always to pray and not to faint" (**Luke 18:1**). This is the Saviour's great promise that prayer will be answered, although not always in precisely the manner expected. God answers prayer: (1) gradually, as in the case of Hawthorne's little Ernst in "The Great Stone Face," (2) literally as in the case of Jonah, (3) by denial of the request, as in the case of Paul's thorn in the flesh, (4) by sending something other than was requested as in the case of our Lord's prayer for the cup to pass but which was answered by his receiving strength to drink it, and (5) after delay as in the case of Jairus' prayer for Christ to heal his daughter. This wonderful verse is easily memorized by aid of the acronym formed by the letters A-S-K.

A-sk, and ye shall receive ... S-eeek, and ye shall find ... K-nock, and it shall be opened ...

Verse 8

For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened.

These words are far more than a promise to answer prayer; and, depending on what men pray for, they may be even a threat. Certainly, there is a statement of God's law that prayers, in some measure at least, determine the kind of answer. Goodspeed's translation is, "Ask, and what you ask will be given you. Search, and you will find what you search for."**[3]** Thus, if one pursues unworthy goals, he may attain them. Alas, many do. Prayers should be disciplined to request only those things which are truly desirable and should always submissively include the provision, "Nevertheless, not my will but thine be done" (**Matthew 26:39**).

Of all rash things, a rash prayer is the rashest. Rachel prayed, "Give me children, or else I die" (**Genesis 30:1**). God gave her children, "and she died" (**Genesis 35:18**). The children of Israel "lusted exceedingly in the wilderness, and tempted God in the desert. And he gave them their request, but sent leanness into their soul" (**Psalms 106:14,15**). Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote:

"God answers sharp and sudden on some prayers. And thrusts the thing we have prayed for in our face, A gauntlet with a gift in't."**[4]**

Ralph Waldo Emerson put it this way:

What we seek we shall find; what we flee from flees from us; as Goethe said, "What we wish for in youth, comes in heaps on us in old age," too often cursed with the granting of our prayer; and hence the high caution, that, since we are sure of having what we wish, we beware to ask only for high things.**[5]**

[3] Edgar J. Goodspeed, *New Testament* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).

[4] Frank S. Mead, *The Encyclopedia of Religious Quotations* (Westwood, New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1965), p. 338, from Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora*.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 339, from Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Conduct of Life*.

Verse 9

Or what man is there of you, who, if his son shall ask him for a loaf, will give him a stone; or if he shall ask for a fish, will give him a serpent?

Christ's argument here from the predictable conduct of men has strong overtones teaching the likeness between God and man. Of course, this is inherent in the fact that man was created in God's image (**Genesis 1:27**), and Jesus' words here show that something of God can be known by observing that which is highest and best in man. The basic kinship between God and man is a broad principle underlying the entire Judeo-Christian revelation. The apparent relation between a loaf and a stone is that of appearance. Some stones resemble ancient "loaves" of bread. The second portion of this passage repeats for the sake of emphasis the essential wisdom of the first part. These expressions are actually a form of Hebrew poetry in which there is a rhyme of thought rather than of syllables. Another example is in **Matthew 7:2**.

Verse 11

If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father who is in heaven give good things to them that ask him?

Note the contrast between "know how to give" and "give." Although God is like man in man's highest and best capacity, he is also far better than man. Men, taught by the deepest instincts, and carrying within themselves footprints of the Eternal, indeed know how to do good but do not always do it. God, on the other hand, will surely do that which is right.

Verse 12

All things therefore whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, even so do ye also unto them: for this is the law and the prophets.

This is the Golden Rule. Since it is in this place connected with our Lord's teaching on prayer, the observance of this principle, therefore, becomes one of the conditions of acceptable prayer, along with a forgiving heart, importunity, and general submissiveness to the Father's will. There have been countless parodies on this. Westcott said, "Do unto the other feller the way he'd like to do unto you, an' do it fust!"^[6] Mead has another, "Do unto others as they would do unto you if they had a chance."^[7] Still, this verse haunts the human race; and, now and then, some wise man has caught a glimpse of its true importance. Millikan listed the idea of the Golden Rule first among those ideas that "stand out above all others in the influence they have exerted upon and are destined to exert upon the development of the human race."^[8] Kossuth declared, "The era of Christianity - peace, brotherhood, the Golden Rule as applied to governmental matters - is yet to come, and when it comes, then and then only, will the future of nations be sure."^[9]

^[6] Ibid., p. 193, from Edward Noyes Westcott, *Moral and Religious Aphorisms*.

^[7] Ibid., p. 191.

^[8] Ibid., p. 192, from Robert Andrews Millikan, *Forbes Magazine*.

^[9] Ibid., p. 192, from Lajos Kossuth.

Verse 13

Enter ye in by the narrow gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many are they that enter in thereby. For narrow is the gate, and straitened the way, that leadeth unto life, and few are they that find it.

The relative number of the saved and the lost is plain from this. They shall be as the few to the many. This eternally recurring contrast between the numbers of the saved and the lost with reference to each succeeding generation should not be discouraging. Wheat does not grow grain all the way to the ground but only in the ear. Although salvation is obtainable and available for all who truly desire it, the plain fact is that the majority in all generations will despise it. And, of wheat, it will be remembered that Christ himself used this grain as a figure of the saved and lost in **Matthew 3:12**. The relative number of redeemed souls in any generation is not the scale by which God's success may be measured. God will keep on saving men until the "fullness" of his purpose is achieved (**Romans 11:25**).

The term "narrow" is meaningful. Truth can be no other way than narrow, as attested in any field of knowledge whatsoever. A radio band width may be moved almost imperceptibly to tune out a dance orchestra in New York City and tune in a political rally in Southern California. Changing a chemical formula by the narrowest degree possible can profoundly alter a compound. The relation of the diameter to the circumference of a circle is so "narrow" that man's mathematical vocabulary is not precise enough to define it, so it is approximated at 1 to 3.14159. The velocity required to place a satellite in orbit is precisely 17,500 miles per hour. Why should it seem strange, then, that entering eternal life should be any other way than by the "narrow gate"? The narrowness consists of the restrictions, disciplines, and requirements throughout the whole area of Christian living. Such things as self-denial, forgiveness of others, monogamy, meekness, renunciation of the pursuit of wealth as the chief end of life, and countless other basic scriptural principles are opposed to the natural man whose baser instincts propel him constantly in the direction of the wide gate and the broad way. Only those who are truly spiritual, who have set their minds upon the things in heaven, shall enter and negotiate the straitened way that leads to life; and yet, "Whosoever will may come!"

Verse 15

Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravening wolves. By their fruits ye shall know them.

This warning naturally flows out of what Jesus had just said. The broad way will have its advocates, false teachers, who will attempt to widen the narrow way and breach the strait gate. This passage suggests the great apostasy which is elaborated in the following New Testament passages: **Acts 20:29-31**; **2 Corinthians 11:1-3**; **2 Thessalonians 2:1-12**; **1 Timothy 4:1-5**; **2 Timothy 3:1-8**; 4:1-5; **2 Peter 2:1-3**; 3:1-7; and **Revelation 17** and **Revelation 18**. It is essential that Christians recognize false teachers or prophets, as they are called here.

By their fruits ye shall know them. To be effective in deceiving God's people, it is essential that false teachers be disguised, hence the "sheep's clothing." This means that the church itself shall be the theater of operations for these destructive teachers. They will appear as ministers, officers, and advocates of religion. The one sure test is their fruits. That which sows discord, divides, debilitates, hinders, or thwarts in any way the true spiritual family of God is to be rejected. The great test is the false teacher's attitude toward Christ. Those who question his authority or go beyond his word are clearly of the evil one. The only proper way in which this admonition can be heeded is for the Lord's sheep to know the Shepherd's voice, that is, they must know his word and doctrine. The remainder of the Sermon on the Mount is devoted to those things which will enable the child of God to distinguish between true and false teachers of religion.

Verse 17

Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but the corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit. A good tree cannot bring forth evil

fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit. Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire. Therefore by their fruits ye shall know them.

This teaching pertains primarily to the identification of false teachers whose true character is inevitably exposed by the results of their efforts. However cloaked with specious piety, however influential through personal charm, however marked by brilliant intellect or high educational attainment, or however distinguished in any other manner, false teachers are not to be trusted above the word of Christ. The teacher that divides and scatters the flock must be rejected. Evil fruits, or results, constitute certain and unmistakable identification with the "wolves" Jesus mentioned here.

Verse 21

Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father who is in heaven.

False teachers are clearly religious persons, crying, "Lord, Lord." Their failure is not that of inactivity but indulgence in the wrong activity. They not only deceive but are themselves deceived, as appears in what follows. Their grand error is in doing their own will instead of Christ's.

Verse 22

Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy by thy name, and by thy name cast out demons, and by thy name do many mighty works?

The fact that "many" such persons exist identifies them as followers of the broad way. The religious nature of their errors is emphasized by their prophesying, casting out demons, and doing many mighty works in Christ's name. What was wrong with all this? They did those mighty works in Christ's name but without his authority or sanction. No one can doubt that this is exactly the situation with reference to the vast majority of religious actions today practiced in the world. They are done in Jesus' name, but not by his authority. This means, simply, that the things done were not commanded by Christ. What is the projected result of such conduct? See next verse.

Verse 23

And they will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity.

In **Matthew 7:22**, above, "that day" obviously refers to the judgment; and in this verse Christ claims for himself the right to consign men to banishment from his holy presence. The entire tone and tenor of this sermon is predicated on the assumption that Christ is God. Language of the kind recorded here would be the utmost nonsense if this is not his claim. Biederwolf said, "A man who can read the New Testament and not see that Christ claims to be more than a man, can look all over the sky at high noon on a cloudless day and not see the sun."**[10]**

This verse contains, without doubt, one of the most terrible thoughts in the Scriptures. Many souls shall diligently serve God and do many mighty things in his name, only to discover at last that they have never really served him at all. This blessed warning from Christ should stop every man short and suddenly until he is sure beyond all possibility of deception that he is truly doing Christ's will. The final and climactic paragraph of the Sermon on the Mount lays down the true guidelines for souls truly desirous of knowing what is the will of God.

Verse 24

Every one therefore that heareth these words of mine, and doeth them, shall be likened unto a wise man, who built his house upon the rock.

The key to everlasting life is in Jesus' saying, "these words of mine!" Throughout the New Testament, the final, ultimate and exclusive authority in true religion is the word spoken by Christ. Jesus commanded the church to teach "whatsoever I have commanded you" (**Matthew 28:20**). He declared that the words he spoke would judge men at the last day (**John 12:48**). The true religion was "first spoken" by Christ (**Hebrews 2:3**). "Whosoever goeth onward and abideth not in the teaching of Christ, hath not God (**2 John 1:1:9**). Apostles warned that men ought to learn how "not to go beyond the things which are written" (**1 Corinthians 4:6**). "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly" (**Colossians 3:16**), Jesus said, "Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away" (**Matthew 24:35**). The most important fact to know with reference to Christianity is that it is "of Christ"! Not even the apostles were commissioned to go beyond the word of Christ. Even the reception of the Holy Spirit in their hearts was not for the purpose of imparting additional truth but for bringing to their remembrance the things Christ taught (**John 14:26**). The current notion that any man in whom the Holy Spirit is supposed to dwell may properly determine the true nature and content of Christian doctrine is emphatically denied in the affirmation of Christ that, even in the apostles, the Holy Spirit did not speak "of himself." "For he shall not speak from himself; but what things soever he shall hear, these shall he speak ... for he shall take of mine, and shall declare it unto you" (**John 16:13-15**).

Wise man who built his house upon the rock. The "rock" is nothing more nor less than "these words of mine," namely, the words of Christ.

Verse 25

And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell not: for it was founded upon the rock.

Rains, floods, and winds, in this place, suggest oppositions from above, beneath, and all around. The stability of the wise man's house was due to the fact that it was built, not upon "a rock," but upon "**THE** rock"! Only the life founded upon and guided by the principles of Christ shall stand. His teaching is the rock; all else is shifting sand.

Verse 26

And everyone that heareth these words of mine, and doeth them not, shalt be likened unto a foolish man, who built his house upon the sand: and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew, and smote upon that house; and it fell: and great was the fall thereof.

All this is a recapitulation, in the negative, of what was said immediately before. The focus of attention here should be upon the revelation of what the true rock actually is, namely, the words or teachings of Christ. This is the point so many seem to miss.

Verse 28

And it came to pass when Jesus had finished these words, the multitudes were astonished at his teaching: for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.

The significance of this great sermon was not lost upon those who first heard it. They understood, although probably not all of them believed, that Jesus in this magnificent discourse laid claim to authority surpassing that of: (1) the scribes, (2) the Decalogue, (3) Moses, (4) the Holy Scriptures, and (5) all earthly and human authorities. The truly perceptive must surely have detected the advance indications that here indeed was **THE MESSIAH**.

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