

Series Sermon on the Mount

Scripture Matthew 7:1-12

The Sermon on the Mount is a wonderful exposition of how to live as a member of the kingdom of God. Jesus challenged His listeners to be unique. He wanted them to have a different kind of values, to live with a different kind of purpose, and to have different kinds of relationships than ordinary people in order that they might show forth God's transforming and transcendent ways. He said that they would be able to do these things only if they put complete trust in God and obeyed Him steadfastly, and sought to live for His glory.

There is a sequence in the topics in chapters 6 and 7. In the first part of chapter 6 Jesus focused on the relationship of kingdom people to God. Jesus used the examples of charitable giving, praying, and fasting to emphasize the need for a personal relationship between the kingdom person and God. In the latter part of chapter 6 Jesus discussed the relationship of kingdom people to material possessions. He emphasized the importance of investing in "heavenly treasures," rather than "earthly treasures," and the wisdom of trusting God for daily needs rather than worrying about personal circumstances. The emphasis in the beginning of chapter 7 is on the relationships of the kingdom person with other people.

Jesus introduced this new topic in the same way He introduced several previous topics. He first admonished His listeners to not do certain actions or have certain attitudes. Then He encouraged them to adopt behaviors which would be pleasing to God. That contrast is clearly seen in the passages we will think about today.

Read Matthew 7:1-6

In these verses Jesus gives His command in verse 1 and then an explanation in the verses that follow. Verse 1 is frequently misunderstood. The verse does not forbid every kind of judging. Jesus was not instructing kingdom people to tolerate or ignore sinful practices. In fact, the teaching throughout the Sermon on the Mount requires kingdom people to make moral distinctions between right and wrong. You will remember what Jesus said previously about anger and lusts and honoring commitments.

Neither was He warning His listeners to not try to discern truth from error. He frequently urged His listeners to evaluate their circumstances and to exercise right judgment. Jesus even told the religious leaders, during one of His confrontations with them, to “Stop judging by mere appearances, and to make a right judgment” (*John 7:24*).

This principle of exercising judgment is repeated throughout the New Testament. For example, the Apostle John instructed his readers to “test the spirits to see whether they are from God or not,” and then he gave a simple test whereby believers could discover whether a person had the spirit of truth or the spirit of the anti-christ (*I John 4:1-3*). The Apostle Paul urged the believers in Philippi to “watch out for ... the men who do evil” and put “confidence in the flesh” (*Philippians 3:2-4*). And in the concluding remarks at the end of one of his letters he wrote, “Test everything.” He wanted his readers to do this so they would “hold on to the good” and “avoid every kind of evil” (*I Thessalonians 5:21-22*). It is obvious from these verses that some kinds of self-judgments are not only legitimate but essential if the kingdom person is to experience a God-pleasing life.

The key to understanding verse 1 is revealed in verse 5: the followers of Jesus were not to judge hypocritically or self-righteously. Jesus was not opposed to His followers correcting bad behavior in people. His teaching here concerns the spirit in which correction is given. The hypocritical person assumes a position of superiority and that he/she is qualified and entitled to point out the faults of other people.

We all have a tendency to exaggerate the faults of others and minimize the seriousness of our own. We seem to find it impossible, when comparing ourselves with others, to be strictly objective and impartial. The critical and judgmental spirit which is focused on others is often a convenient way to ignore the issues that God wants us to focus on in our own lives. This is why Jesus said that hypocrites must be free of their own hang-ups and problems, and must be pure in their own motives, before they should attempt to address the problems of others.

The goal is to help other people, not to knock them down. We may recognize a spiritual problem in another person, but we must be loving and forgiving in the way we confront them or else we will display spiritual smugness.

The saddest fact is that most judgmental people do not realize what they are doing to themselves when they judge others. The Apostle Paul understood the consequences of self-righteous judgments. He wrote, “You ... have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge the other, you are condemning yourself because you who pass judgment do the same things. ... When you, a mere man, pass judgment on them and yet do the same things, do you think you will escape God’s judgments?” (*Romans 2:1, 3*).

That statement of Paul is similar to Jesus’ statement in verse 2. Verse 2 is a severe warning: there is a serious consequence for those who have a judgmental, critical spirit — they will be judged according to their own standards.

Let me explain what I think Jesus meant. Suppose a very poor person needs food for his family. After exhausting all obvious possibilities to earn money for food, he resorts to thievery. He knows his plan is wrong, but he justifies his actions because his family is hungry. He breaks into a house and steals several items. Now suppose that sometime later someone steals something from him. What is his reaction? He becomes angry. He knows that it was wrong for his possessions to be taken. He is upset about the injustice of his loss.

The point here is that people may excuse their own sinful behavior, but they instinctively know it is wrong when it happens to them. What does God do? He turns the irrational logic and behavior of people back against them when He metes out judgment. One day all of us will stand before God and give an account of our attitudes and behaviors, and God will judge us on the basis of our own standards.

Notice that the word “brother” appears three times — in verses 3, 4, and 5. Most commentators assume that this passage is talking about relationships between kingdom people. We can all agree that the kingdom person has the responsibility to encourage, help, provide resources, etc., to others who have problems, but the point is they must be careful about how they do it. They must not presumptuously try to exercise authority over the other person. The disciple who sets himself or herself up to judge the actions of another person is assuming a responsibility that belongs only to God. The problem that believers have is how to help others without being judgmental; how to build up and not tear down. It is not an easy task.

When I was missions pastor, many people came to me for counsel and guidance concerning their future ministry and professional activities. In most cases I formed in my mind specific ideas about what they should do, but I did my best to avoid telling them my thoughts. In our conversations, I promised to walk with them, to pray with them, and to help them find the information they needed. I wanted them to discover for themselves God's answers to their questions and directions for their lives. I told these counselees that I was not God and did not have the authority to tell them what they must do about the future. I did not want the "big pieces of wood" in my eyes to blind me to the unique ways that God might work in the lives of others.

Kingdom people have a responsibility to help others, especially other believers, but there is a proper way to go about helping. It is never appropriate to have an attitude of superiority. A humble, compassionate, and understanding attitude is appropriate. Gentleness is an essential demeanor.

Now we come to the words in verse 6. The words are startling, but the verse is still on topic. The emphasis in this verse is on individuals who are not spiritual "brothers," but, rather, are those who are resistant to the ways of God. The instruction in verse 6 is clear: kingdom people should discern the spiritual capacity of the other person before offering help to them. Proverbs 9:7 states this another way: "Whoever corrects a mocker invites insult; whoever rebukes a wicked man incurs abuse." Proverbs 23:9 instructs us to "not speak to a fool, for he will scorn the wisdom of your words." We may sincerely want to provide spiritual help to everyone, but if some of them are hostile to us and unreceptive to what we offer them, then we will be wasting our time and energy on them.

Verse 6 informs us that our efforts to provide spiritual help must be appropriate to the character of the other person. "Sacred" gifts must not be offered to "dogs" and "pigs." The word "dog" is used several times in Scripture to describe evil people (*for examples, see Philippians 3:2, Revelation 22:15*). It also might be a term describing hard-core hypocrites. I think you can appreciate the wisdom of not offering "sacred" pearls to a pig when the pig is only interested in garbage. Pearls are valuable to us, but not to pigs. Pigs and people have a radically different set of values.

The Apostle Paul captured the thought here when he wrote to Titus, “Avoid foolish controversies and genealogies and arguments and quarrels about the law, because these are unprofitable and useless. Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him. You may be sure that such a man is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned” (*Titus 3:9-11*). Perhaps Paul was too kind to write that such a man was a dog or pig.

Kingdom people are called to live out their faith in a unique way. They are to demonstrate to this world that there is something better than the highly competitive, “me first” way of our culture. Kingdom people are called to live out their faith in radical submission to the instructions of Jesus, and this means that they must love one another and encourage and build up one another without inflicting their judgmental attitudes.

In the first six verses of chapter 7, Jesus alerted His listeners to one kind of unproductive and unacceptable activity. In the next paragraph Jesus provided them with a creative and acceptable method for handling their interpersonal relationships. The new topic concerns prayer. Prayer will provide for kingdom people wisdom and insight into the spiritual capacity and interests of others.

Read Matthew 7:7-12

Verses 7 and 8 do not imply that a believer can ask for anything he/she wants and expect to receive it. These two verses are frequently taken out of context, but we should keep them linked to the preceding verses because they are related to the need for wisdom, discernment, and good judgment in interpersonal relationships.

Generally speaking, the best way to neutralize a critical spirit toward other individuals is to pray for them. It is impossible to be angry at people for whom we are praying. In a more specific sense, the New Testament teaches that believers are to discern between good and evil, truth and falsehood, false and true teachers. Only God can provide those kinds of wisdom and discernment, so, as the New Testament writer James advised, “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God” (*James 1:5*).

In the context of the passage, kingdom people must “ask” and “seek” God’s help in their efforts to understand the words and deeds of others, especially other believers. Notice how many times the word “ask” is used in verses 7-11.

In counseling and helping individuals, the first responsibility of the counselor is to understand them. The kingdom counselor or helper must carefully note what the individual says and does, and then must look to God for insights and enlightenment. The counselor or helper must also make sure that he/she has no prejudices, biases, pride, or hypocritical attitudes that will lead to inappropriate judgmental criticism, and only then will the counselor or helper be in a position to offer genuine constructive help.

Verses 9-11 provide illustrations about how the asking and receiving works. Jesus pointed out that earthly parents are willing to give good gifts to their children when asked, so, if earthly parents who are evil (outside the family of God) know how to give good gifts to their children, then the heavenly Father, who only does what is loving and correct, will respond to those who are members of His family. He will give good gifts to those of His children who ask. Once again Jesus uses the words “how much more” to accentuate the contrast between human ways and God’s ways.

There are promised assurances in verses 7 and 8. Answers will be given to those who ask, solutions will be found for those who search, opportunities will become available for those who knock on the right doors. Life would be a lot more pleasant in our interpersonal relationships and in our church fellowships if believers would apply the teaching of these verses before criticizing, complaining, and making quick judgments about the behavior and words of other believers.

All the verses we are thinking about today are focused on our attitudes toward other people. That makes the concluding verse in this passage (verse 12) especially important. “We are to do to others what we would have them do to us.” Let me restate the intention of verse 12 in different words: We should “treat others in the way that we would like or want for them to treat us.” This verse implies that people may not respond to us in the way we would like. We might even run into some “dogs” and “pigs” who will turn against us. However, negative responses should not matter to us. Our responsibility is to do good, and to keep on doing good, to everyone. We should not cease doing good things to others even if they don’t or can’t reciprocate.

One more important point: verse 12 indicates that kingdom people must take the initiative in doing good works. This initiative embraces quantity, that’s what the words “in everything” refer to, and kingdom initiative also embraces quality, that’s why the passage refers to “good gifts.”

Jesus' final comment in this passage indicated that kingdom people, if they followed His teachings, would fulfill "the Law and the Prophets." In chapter 5 Jesus said that He had come to fulfill the Law and the Prophets. In the Sermon on the Mount, He was preparing His followers so that they also would fulfill all the guidelines which God had given throughout the Old Testament. Jesus is our role model in regards to obedience and doing the will of the Father.

Jesus summed up our responsibilities back in Matthew 5:16 when He said, "Let your light shine before men that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven." (*cf I Peter 2:12.*)