

Matthew 7: Biblical Reading and Reflections

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 19 February 2020

Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 00] Matthew chapter 7 And then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.

Do not give dogs what is holy, and do not throw your pearls before pigs, lest they trample them underfoot and turn to attack you. Ask, and it will be given to you.

Seek, and you will find. Knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened.

Which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him?

So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them. For this is the law and the prophets. Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide, and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many.

[1 : 30] For the gate is narrow, and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few. Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves.

You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorn bushes, or figs from thistles? So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit.

A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

Thus you will recognize them by their fruits. Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.

On that day many will say to me, Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name? And then will I declare to them, I never knew you.

[2 : 35] Depart from me, you workers of lawlessness. Everyone then who hears these words of mine, and does them, will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock.

And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine, and does not do them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand.

And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it. When Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes.

Matthew chapter 7 concludes the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount. It begins with a warning against judgment. Judge not, lest you be judged. And with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.

This draws our attention back immediately to earlier statements within the Sermon on the Mount. For instance, in verse 7 of chapter 5, Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.

[3 : 44] And in chapter 6, verses 14 to 15, For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

There is another form of this statement found in Luke chapter 7, verses 37 and 38. Judge not, and you will not be judged. Condemn not, and you will not be condemned.

Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and it will be given to you. Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you.

This statement might make us think of other parts of Scripture. For instance, Deuteronomy chapter 19, verses 18 to 21, concerning hostile false witnesses. The judges shall inquire diligently, and if the

witness is a false witness, and has accused his brother falsely, then you shall do to him as he had meant to do to his brother.

So you shall purge the evil from your midst. And the rest shall hear and fear, and shall never again commit any such evil among you. Your eye shall not pity. It shall be life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.

[4 : 59] With the measure you meet, it shall be measured to you. We might also be put in mind of Romans chapter 2, verse 1. Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges.

For in passing judgment on another, you condemn yourself. Because you, the judge, practice the very same things. The point of Jesus' teaching here is not that we should not make moral judgments, but that we should not play the judge.

Because in so doing, we're taking God's place. And in James chapter 2, verses 12 to 13, we see it's referring to condemnation in particular. That act of casting sentence upon someone else.

So speak, and so act, as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.

Judgment must ultimately wait until the final end. Vengeance and judgment in their final forms belong to God, not to us. And when we assume the task of condemning others and judging others, we put ourselves in God's place.

[6 : 07] And there's a highlighting of hypocrisy here as well. It's emphasized that the person who is judging is guilty of the same things that they are judging in others. We might think of the story of Nathan and David after the sin of David with Bathsheba.

You are the man. You are condemning in this other person what is actually in yourself. It focuses upon the eye. The prominence of the eye in the body is important.

It's a means of perception. And it's a means of judgment. And Jesus teaches about the danger of those without perception leading others. The blind leading the blind. It seems to me that Jesus is primarily referring to relationships among his own disciples.

That this is not the way that we should relate to others. Placing ourselves in the position of the judge over them. They belong to another master, not to us. And they will be accountable to that master.

That doesn't mean we don't make moral judgments. We just don't place ourselves in the position of the judge over other people. We must also sort out our own lives first. There's a danger when we become people who are always blaming some other parties.

[7 : 15] Always pointing the finger. Always saying you are guilty of this or that or the other. That accusatory you can often be a way of displacing our own responsibility.

That we blame upon others what we fail to address in ourselves. And by pointing outwards and by judging others. We avoid reckoning with our own sins. We try and place other people's sins in the worst possible light.

So that we feel better about the unaddressed sins in our own lives. The teaching that Jesus moves on to from this is a particularly difficult one. What is meant by not giving dogs what is holy.

And not throwing your pearls before pigs. It's a very strange statement. It seems to me however that it's referring primarily to Israel's relationship with the Gentiles.

The dogs are the unclean animals. They're related to the Gentiles. And the pigs likewise. They're throwing holy things before these animals that represent the Gentiles.

[8 : 16] And I think that refers particularly to the way that Israel was tempted at that point in history. To put its trust and its faith in the Romans. To look to them for security. And by keeping on their right side to find strength and ability to stand against whatever is assaulting them.

In the book of John we see this quite clearly. As they're afraid that the Romans will take away their place and their nationhood. And will occupy them in a far more brutal and immediate fashion.

And then they're also very concerned that they not be seen as rebels against Caesar. We have no king but Caesar. And they end up throwing before the Romans those things that are most precious. They throw before the Romans their status as the people of God. They throw before the Romans all these pearls. And yet what do they find? They end up being trampled underfoot.

In AD 70 Jerusalem and the temple are destroyed. They have cast before the Romans all these things. And they end up finding that they are trampled underfoot. What is the alternative to this?

[9 : 21] Ask, seek and knock. Where do you place your faith when things are difficult in the world?

In the powers? In the principalities? In the rulers of this age? In the halls of power? No. In our heavenly father. He is the one you look to. And when you put your faith in the rulers of this age. You will find that you end up throwing before them those things that are most precious. Your faithfulness to God. Your status as his people. And you'll find out in time that they will trample those things underfoot.

That they will be destroyed. That you'll end up finding that you have nothing. That you've given up those things that are most precious. To find security in a source that there is no security to be found in.

Where do we look to? We look to our father. Who is good to us. Who hears us. Who knows what we need. In Luke's parallel account in Luke chapter 11. He focuses upon the father who gives the gift of his Holy Spirit.

[10:26] To those who ask. He gives us what we need. He gives us what is good. This is the power to live out the way of the kingdom. And it's the true alternative to trusting in the Gentiles.

And the rulers of this age. In verse 12 we see the whole central section of the sermon reaching its completion. The fulfilment of the law and the prophets. And this is a bookend as it were that takes us back to verse 17 of chapter 5.

Which also refers to the fulfilment of the law of the prophets. This is the whole theme of the Sermon on the Mount. The Sermon on the Mount has a there and back again structure. So we're going all this way through these patterns of how the law and the prophets are fulfilled.

And now we're finding ourselves going back to where we started. Although now we're going to be focusing upon woes. In contrast to the blessings with which we began. The law and the prophets are fulfilled as follows.

So whatever you wish that others would do to you. Do also to them. This isn't something that's original to Christ's teaching. We encounter it elsewhere from previous sources.

[11:30] In Tobit 4.15 3rd century BC. What you hate, do to no one. Or Hillel in the Talmud. The generation before Jesus. What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbour.

And this is also a restatement of Leviticus chapter 19 verse 18. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people. But you shall love your neighbour as yourself. I am the Lord. We might note that in contrast to some of the other forms. Leviticus and Christ adopt a positive way of expressing this statement. Aristotle and Confucius both have some form of the golden rule.

But the truth and authority of Jesus' teaching does not depend upon its novelty here. Part of the importance of wisdom is in its relationship with natural law. With the grain of the universe. This is not some novel teaching that has no relationship with the way the world is.

To those who have learnt to act in the way that the world is created. This principle will ring true to them. Jesus concludes with a number of warnings.

[12:32] First of all he speaks of the narrow way. There's a choice between two ways. This is something that we find in other books of scripture. Where there's a choice between blessing and cursing.

Or between two invitations. Or between two different modes of life. We might think about Proverbs or Psalms. In Proverbs chapter 9 there's the call of Lady Wisdom.

Corresponding with the call of Lady Folly. Both of them inviting the simpleton in to eat their fare in their house. And in Psalms, in the first Psalm, we have this contrast between the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked.

Nor stand in the way of sinners. Nor sit in the seat of scoffers. Here the choice is between a narrow way and a broad way. One that leads to life and the other that leads to destruction. We shouldn't necessarily presume that these are timeless statements.

Jesus I think is primarily referring to his own day and age. And to the choice that faces the people in that situation. Are they going to respond to his words? Are they going to live out the vocation of Israel?

[13:34] Because this is what Jesus is addressing. Jesus is speaking to these people who have been called as a nation to be the light of the world. And at this moment in their history they face a decisive choice about the sort of people that they're going to be.

With huge consequences. Are they going to follow Christ the narrow way? Or are they going to reject him in a way that leads to them being trampled underfoot by the dogs and the pigs?

We should note that the language of the way was important for early Christianity. To the point of being the name for the entire movement. In the book of Acts it's referred to as the way. We can talk about Christianity or the church. And they would often talk about the way as something that defined the disciples of Christ. You might also think about Jesus' statements concerning himself in John chapter 14.

He is the way, the truth and the life. He's the door. He's the way. From this warning Jesus moves on to speak about the danger of false teachers within the church. Wolves in sheep's clothing.

[14:33] There's a proverbial contrast between sheep who are tame and docile. And ravenous wolves who are bloodthirsty and cruel and untamed. In chapter 10 verse 16 Jesus' disciples will be sent out as like lambs in the midst of wolves.

This I think refers to in part false teachers in the church here. And there are later warnings in chapter 24 about people who will be false messiahs that will lead others after them. And these people are to be recognised by their fruit. In the Old Testament in Deuteronomy chapter 13 or in chapter 18 of Deuteronomy verses 21 to 22. The false prophet is recognised by two things. They lead the people away from God. Or their prophecies fail. The manner of their life and the manner of their teaching are both seen to be unsound. And we can also see the longer term effects of what they do.

Is the fruit that they produce good? Are they producing something within their own lives that bears witness to the truth of their teaching? This is one of the ways that we recognise authority.

[15:37] If you want to recognise someone as a good teacher, you want to see in them some of the things that you want to be developed in you through their teaching. If someone is claiming to teach you how to play a musical instrument and they can't play a single note, then they're probably not the person to look to.

But if you see someone who's a virtuoso, who's able to play with great skill, they have something in that that testifies to them being someone whose example is to be followed, whose teaching can be learned from.

Jesus repeats the warning of John the Baptist here. The axe is laid to the root of the trees and whatever tree does not bear good fruit is about to be cut down. He goes on to speak about those who will be judged on the last day as those who never knew him.

It's important to recognise Jesus presenting himself as the eschatological judge. The one who is not just a teacher, a rabbi, some great sage.

He is the one who will judge all men on that last day. And there are some people who will say that they did many great things in Christ's name. They prophesied in his name. They cast out demons in his name.

[16:46] They did mighty works in his name. And he will declare he never knew them. Depart from me, you workers of wickedness. This is referring back to Psalm 6 verse 8. And there are people within the church who have done great and wonderful things and yet are not true members of Christ.

They have no living connection with him. Matthew's church that he speaks about here is not a pure church where there are no unbelievers present. There are people who are genuinely performing miraculous acts within that church and yet will prove not to be of Christ at all.

Jesus concludes with an illustration of a house being built. A house being built upon a rock and then a house being built upon sand. There's a contrast between wisdom and folly in the book of Proverbs.

And the choice here is between a wise and a foolish man. It's not just between good and evil. It's between wisdom and folly. Which is a more developed contrast than that which we find in the law itself.

The law focuses very much upon obedient and disobedient or faithful and unfaithful. Here the contrast is between wise and foolish. And that I think takes us back to the book of Proverbs.

[18:02] In Proverbs 24 verse 3 we read, By wisdom a house is built and by understanding it is established. Jesus wants us to be alert to the foundation that we are building upon.

And here he emphasises hearing and doing. Not just hearing the word but actually putting it into effect in our lives. And his warning at the beginning of his ministry and at the very end of his ministry is of a falling building.

The falling building here of the person who does not build their life upon the teaching of Christ. And at the end of his ministry the falling temple. Not one stone left upon another.

The first question to consider. Within this sermon Jesus speaks not just to individuals but to Israel as a nation. What are some of the ways in which Israel more particularly could recognise itself as being addressed within this teaching?

A second question to consider. Within the sermon Jesus implicitly presents himself as a particular sort of person. And by the end the people marvel not just at his teaching wise words.

[19 : 14] But by his very manner of teaching he stands out from the scribes and the Pharisees.

What implicit claims are being made by Christ concerning himself within the sermon on the mount?

