



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

Take Care of God's Pearls

Matthew 7:1-11

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Three Stories, Two Outcomes

Consider three episodes from the days just before Jesus died.

- Matthew 20:29-34 — As he left Jericho, Jesus healed two blind men by the roadside who had been calling to him. They became his followers.
- Matthew 21:12-17 — Upon entering Jerusalem, Jesus drove the money changers from the temple and then healed some who came to him, angering the chief priests and scribes.
- Matthew 21:23-27 — The day after cleansing the temple, Jesus returned and was asked by the leaders by what authority he had cleansed the temple and healed there. Ultimately, he refused to answer.

Why the difference? One would think Jesus would have welcomed the opportunity to explain himself to the leaders, to try to convince them he was the Christ and Son of God.

The Gospels tell us several things about those leaders that show why trying to convince them would have been futile, including their focus on outward form (Mt. 23:13-36), their love of money (Lk. 16:14), and their concern for their political position (Jn. 11:45-53; 19:12-15). All show that when he refused to answer them, Jesus practiced what he had taught in Matthew 7:6.

A Puzzling Statement

Matthew 7:6 presents two questions: [1] What does it mean? [2] How does it fit its context?

At one level, it is clear: there are two negative imperatives, followed by two consequences. But, how are the figures to be understood? Several points of background help answer.

1. The meanings of “dogs” and “pigs.”
 - a. Dogs were not domesticated pets, but mongrels which scavenged for food in city dumps. Jewish writings used the term as an insult to refer to Gentiles who were believed to be inferior because they did not know the law.
 - b. Pigs were also unclean; one would not think of throwing them pearls.
 - c. “What is holy” (literally “the holy”) was an OT idea, especially used of food offered in sacrifice to God (Ex. 29:33; Lev. 2:3; 22:10-16; Num. 18:9-19). Significantly, “a foreign guest” was prohibited from eating “a holy thing” (Lev. 22:10).

2. OT texts like Prov. 9:8 and 23:9 are similar to Mt. 7:6 and show the point. So, too, are some statements by rabbis that are nearly identical to what Jesus said.¹
3. Other NT statements shed light on our text, e.g., Mt. 10:14 (= Lk 10:11); 15:26-27.

Frank Matera's summary in light of the Proverbs passages clarifies the point:

Trying to rebuke an insolent person or speak wisdom to a fool is a waste of time since such people are not receptive to correction and wisdom. Indeed, they are more likely to turn on those who seek to correct and instruct them than they are to learn from them.²

An Example of Single-Minded Devotion

When we discern the verse's emphasis on holiness, we see how v. 6 fits its context.

1. Jesus' concern throughout the body of the Sermon is to call disciples to "righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees" (5:20).
2. Chapter 6 deals with the true nature of that righteousness: not hypocritical (6:1-18), but single-minded in its focus (6:19-34).
3. In 6:33, we find the key that unlocks the section and pinpoints the focus of a sincere disciple as one who pursues God's reign and righteousness.

How does 7:6 fit with 7:1-5? It provides balance.

If we are not to "judge" others, finding fault with them in a censorious, condemning or hypocritical way, we are not to ignore their faults either and pretend that everybody is the same. Both extremes are to be avoided. . . . If we first remove the log from our eye and thus see clearly to take a speck from our brother's eye, he (if he is a true brother in the Lord) will appreciate our solicitude. But not everyone is grateful for criticism and correction.³

Accomplishing the Difficult

Understanding what Jesus meant in v. 6 takes us just so far. How do we apply it? Not all "dogs" and "pigs" are as obvious about their unholiness as the leaders Jesus refused to answer. Some simply take longer to see and respond to Jesus. Verses 7-11 show the way.

Notice that these verses have been separated from the Disciple's Prayer (Mt. 6:5-13), the opposite of what we see in Luke 11:1-13. What do we learn from that? We generally approach them as general principles about prayer, in effect treating them as if they are misplaced in Matthew. In fact, their placement in Matthew calls us to apply them to the challenge of not being judgmental or profaning God's holiness. Consider them in that light.

1. Verses 7-8 make a promise, using three present imperatives: "Ask . . . seek . . . knock." "It" does not refer to any particular request, but to the general idea that God will give us what we need: to be single-minded in our devotion (6:1-34), to see ourselves and others properly (7:1-5), to know whether or not someone is receptive to teaching (7:6).

¹ *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* 3: 1102.

² Frank J. Matera, *The Sermon on the Mount: The Perfect Measure of the Christian Life* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2013), 101.

³ John R. W. Stott, *Christian Counter-Culture: The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*, *The Bible Speaks Today* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1978), 180-181.

2. Verses 9-11 use a lesser-to-greater argument to illustrate. Small loaves of bread looked similar to stones; some eel-like fish looked like snakes. Imperfect, but discerning parents would never feed their children such things. Won't the heavenly Father give us what we need to do the things required of a disciple?
3. Verse 11, then, is another call to pursue God's rule and righteousness by coming to understand and remember the nature of his character. He is never malevolent, but always seeks our best. The more we conform to his nature, the better our ability to discern between the holy and unholy.

Respect for the Holy

We have seen that Matthew 7:1-11 teaches important principles about relating to others and the most important principle of relying on God to help us do that. His holiness must be respected above all else..

That is a challenge, for we too are susceptible to the norms and priorities of those who do not follow Jesus (6:19-7:5). As David Clarkson put it, we are part of a world where "idols are set up in every room."⁴

But, we can be different, holy, who we were intended to be. It all depends on what we pursue.

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⁴ Cited in Timothy Keller, *Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope That Matters* (New York: Dutton, 2009), 154.