

# COMMENTARY ON THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

## Matthew 7:1-6

We're in the world. And we're for it. But we're not *of* it. We don't march to it's beat. We march to a beat that transcends this city and its culture, this world and its ways. It's a beat from above. It's the beat of Christ's heart. Its rhythm is his timeless wisdom. Its tempo is his time-tested love. And the Sermon on the Mt is the song. In this Sermon, Christ teaches us to live the right way up, in an upside down world. This commentary, written by Terran Williams, draws from some of the best available sources. It will aid in individuals and groups in their study of Christ's teaching in his Manifesto of Life in the Kingdom, Matthew 5-7.

### Outline of the Sermon on the Mount

- the life God blesses (5:1-12)
- the call to influence (5:13-16)
- love for the scriptures (5:17-20)
- radical love (5:21-48)
- spirituality before the audience of One (6:1-18)
- pursuing that which is worthy of our lives (6:19-24)
- overcoming anxiety about the future and preoccupation with not-so-important things (6:25-34)
- how *not* to help each other change (7:1-6)
- strong encouragements to pray and love (7:7-12)
- responding to the Sermon's call to radical living (7:13-29)

## Matthew 7:1-6 -

### HOW NOT TO HELP EACH OTHER CHANGE (7:1-6)

#### *Judging Others*

1 "Do not judge, or you too will be judged. 2 For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.

#### **An attitude of condemnation is will backfire on you.**

- The overarching theme of verses 1-6 is about how to facilitate change in other people. We know that it is God and God alone who changes us, by turning our hearts towards him and by transforming us in the renewing of our minds, but we know that also he uses people in this process. God uses us to sharpen each other. The Sermon on the Mount so far is all about the spiritual, moral and social transformation of people who surrender their lives to Jesus. But not only does this lead to a personal transformation. It also leads to a longing in our hearts to see a transformation in people around us. But the moment we seek to see others change, we move on to very dangerous ground, as Jesus makes clear in these verses.
- "Do not judge" (v1). The first danger in trying to bring about a change in another is that we might have a condemning attitude towards them. When Jesus tells us not to judge he doesn't mean that we mustn't be discerning and thoughtful. In fact the entire Sermon on the Mount is Jesus helping us to properly discern things. If someone teaches something that contradicts the gospel, we are to quickly discern that this is false teaching. If someone acts in a way that is not reflective of the character of Christ, we can call it what it is. What Jesus means by "judge" here is not "discern" (see 1 Corinthians 5:3 and 1 John 4:1) but rather "condemn". This refers more to the attitude with which we try to help each other. Willard (pg 246) writes, "There is a great difference

between condemning and discerning. Discerning is to compare with the truth, or the standard. Condemning is to blame and criticise in a way that dis-empowers people from living the truth.”

- It's extremely unhelpful to try to help someone in a condemning, judgmental, ungracious, unkind way. Even Jesus said, “For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world” (John 3:17). We need to look at how Christ dealt with the woman caught in sin (John 8:1-11). He did not stone her in judgment as the Pharisees wanted to. Instead he sought to lift up her dignity. He clearly communicated respect to her, though the Pharisees didn't think she deserved it. And then he challenged her. He accepted the sinner, and confronted the sin. To relate to someone in a condemning way is destructive. One might ask, “But if God doesn't want us to judge, why will he judge us on Judgment Day?” The answer is that God alone is able to correctly and totally see the full situation and the deep motivation of each person. We tend to only see part of the real situation, which makes us unable to fairly and finally evaluate anyone at all. “Judgment is mine” says God (Romans 12:19)
- “Or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.” This can be taken in two ways. Firstly, if we condemn others, they tend to lash back at us with the very same judgment. “Who are you to talk?” they may say. Trying to help someone in a condemning way always backfires. And secondly, if we condemn others, it gives God more reason to judge us. This verse puts it the other way round to Jesus' teaching in the Lord's Prayer: “Forgive us, as we forgive others.” In some ways, God treats us disciples like we treat others. The way we treat them (i.e. the “measure we use”) is the way God treats us (i.e. “it will be measured to you”). Eaton (pg 161) writes, “The expert in moral analysis will be treated as an expert in moral analysis.”

3 “Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in someone else's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? 4 How can you say, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? 5 You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from the other person's eye.

**Don't try to help anyone until you have dealt with your own tendency to condemn.**

- This teaching shows Jesus' sense of humour. What can be more ridiculous than a person with a plank in his/her eye trying to remove a speck from another person's eye?
- On the one hand Jesus speaks to that tendency in us to try to change others without first going to work on our own lives. It reflect that old proverb, “If you want to see someone else change, first change yourself.” He calls us hypocrites. A hypocrite is someone who, like a theatre actor in Jesus' day, projects an image that is not reflective of who the person really is. Jesus is challenging us not to pretend to be

perfect or better than we really are. We need to be real about our own weaknesses and sins. We need to open ourselves to God's transforming grace in our own lives first. Once we're experiencing God's transforming grace in our lives, only then can we become mediators of God's transforming grace in the lives of others.

- On the other hand, he is illustrating the same point he has just made (v1-2). In verse 1-2, he spoke of the folly of trying to help people in a condemning, accusing, ungracious way. Now he illustrates it. Having an ungracious, condemning attitude is like having a plank in one's eye. It makes it impossible for us to see the other person as they are. Christ wants us to treat and help each other in a gracious way. Our eyes need to be grace healed. Before God can use us to set people free from their sin or error (the speck in their eye), we first need to be set free from a tendency to condemn fallen people. As an example of this, think of Galatians 6:1 which says, "If anyone is caught in sin, you who are spiritual should gently restore them. But be careful that you do not fall into the same sin."
- This verse reminds us of four things: 1) We must be sure that there is sin; don't assume a person has sinned until it is exposed. 2) The person who corrects must be a spiritual person who has experienced God's transforming grace, particularly freedom from the tendency to condemn and heap shame on others. 3) The aim is not to make the person feel bad, but to see them restored. 4) The person correcting must humbly remember their own fallibility.)

6 "Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and then turn and tear you to pieces.

**It's unwise to try to help someone far from God, but to do so in an unhelpful way.**

- It's important to take this verse in the context of the preceding verses. If we treat it as a stand-alone proverb, it will be misunderstood. Taken in context, it fits into the flow of Jesus' teaching on a particular theme. If it were a stand-alone saying it could be taken to mean: "Don't share good things with people who lack the maturity or discernment to appreciate the good thing you're giving them." And this interpretation does indeed offer much wisdom. But in context of 7:1-6, it means something different.
- The larger theme of 7:1-6 is "how not to try change people". Specifically these verses challenge us to resist trying to help others while possessing a condemning, judgmental attitude towards the very person we're trying to help. In verses 3-5, Jesus speaks of our attempt to try help 'a brother' (i.e. a fellow disciple) while we're full of hypocrisy and judgment. Now, in verse 6, Jesus speaks about what happens when we try to help *an unbeliever* to change – and given the context of the above verses – while we are still full of hypocrisy and judgment.

- Dogs and pigs were perceived by Jews to be unclean animals. That’s why the mention of “dogs” and “pigs” was a common Jewish reference to unbelievers. Probably, Jesus uses it to refer to a person who is very far from God, and seems to lack any sensitivity to God, and openness to his ways. Jesus said that when we try to help a fellow disciple in an unhelpful way, they will judge us in return (v1). But how much worse will it be if we try to help a person far from God when we ourselves have the wrong heart? More than merely judging us in return, as a fellow disciple will tend to, a hard-hearted unbeliever will likely trample our help underfoot, and will possibly turn on us in a far fiercer counter attack. It’s bad enough when we err in our dealings with believers, but it’s so much worse when we err in our relationships with unbelievers, who may be less forgiving.
- Jesus is not saying that we should withhold the gospel or help from people who are far from God. Not at all. His last instruction to his disciples is to take the gospel to the entire world (Matthew 28:19). He’s saying that we should be very careful about the presence of hypocrisy and condemnation in our hearts, while we try to share the gospel with others. And he’s possibly counselling us, it seems, against an “in-your-face”, overly direct method of reaching out.
- So, how are we meant to help people far from God? In Matthew 10:16, Jesus tells us to have the practical good sense of a snake, and to be un-devious and innocent like a dove. We are still to seek to influence people toward God and his wisdom, but to make sure we are free from a condemning attitude as we do so. And we need to give thought to how we come across. The direct, in-your-face approach – though necessary from time to time – is not always best. More gentle, subtle and indirect ways of influencing people are available to us: humble dialogue, friendship, thought-provoking questions, Christ-like living, story-telling, prayer, acts of kindness and forgiveness, for example.

*Reference is made to these sources throughout this commentary. Each time the author and the page number is mentioned, but not the book title.*

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