

## **Righteousness and Community. Matthew 7:1-12**

Over the last two chapters we have heard Jesus speak to His followers, His disciples, about those who are blessed in the Kingdom He rules, the righteousness they must pursue, the piety they should practice, and their attitude to money as they prioritise seeking God's Kingdom and righteousness

But disciples are in it together.

Jesus is making a people

How are followers of Jesus to relate to each other in their pursuit of righteousness?

As a community that is serious about righteousness, about living God's way, how are they to stop the pursuit of righteousness from becoming competitive, degenerating into a comparison and criticism.

And you may have noticed Jesus' teaching is very challenging.

He insists, for example, on loving our enemies, on forgiving others, on being pure of heart – and more.

Where can his followers find help to live this way? This is urgent as the starting point for being Jesus' follower is recognising that you are poor in spirit, needy – not rich and resourceful

And at the beginning, Matthew 5:17,

*Matthew 5:17 Do not think that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. ... 20 For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the Kingdom of heaven.*

as Jesus introduced His teaching on what is looked for in the life, the behaviour of His followers, He has spoken of fulfilling the law and the prophets. But in this sermon he has not covered every aspect of life that the law and prophets address, give instruction on – not covered every situation

What should guide us in living out the righteousness that exceeds the scribes and pharisees when we meet new situations, ones Jesus has not specifically addressed – and there are lots of them - driving, using social media, voting

Three questions to answer before Jesus concludes the sermon by challenging His hearers in vv. 13-27 to embrace this righteousness by embracing His teaching.

How are followers of Jesus to relate to each other in their pursuit of righteousness?

Where can his followers find help to live this life of righteousness?

What should guide us in living out the righteousness that exceeds the scribes and pharisees when we meet new situations?

**Relating in Community –**

**Judge not**

*Matthew 7: "Judge not, that you be not judged. <sup>2</sup> For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you.*

Verse 1 is a verse many outside the church seem to know and reference when they are encouraging acceptance of all kinds of behaviours and wanting to crush any reluctance to endorse the behaviour. 'Judge not' is used to suggest that the only standards for behaviour we can have must be purely personal, and that however others feel convicted to behave must be accepted without objection.

And this is also a verse that has been used occasionally by some Christians to suggest that Christians can't be involved in the administration of the law, particularly as judges. [Tolstoy]

Both are misunderstandings.

Jesus is not commenting on the organisation of society or the administration by the state of justice. He is talking about the behaviour of His disciples, how they relate to each other. Romans 13 tell us that the authorities have been instituted by God [Rom. 13:1] for the purpose of administering justice, avenging wrong [13:4]. Christians, according to their opportunities and abilities can participate in this God given task. This verse does not mean you can't be involved in administering the law.

And it also doesn't mean you can't be discerning, can't make distinctions between right and wrong, true and false, good and evil – things which, for the believer, are not relative but established by God and so universally applicable.

Later in this chapter Jesus will tell His followers to look out for false prophets – and that we will know them by their fruit 7:10-15. That is, we must evaluate their lives, their behaviour to see whether it is good or bad. In Matthew 18 He speaks of the need to tell a sinning brother or sister their fault, and that the church should exercise discipline over them where they will not repent. Paul in 1 Corinthians 5 speaks of the need to avoid those who call themselves Christians who continue in certain kinds of wrong behaviours [1 Cor. 5:12-13, 1 Cor. 6:2]. The New Testament is continually calling for Jesus' people to distinguish between right and wrong, true and false, and to embrace and practice what is right and true and avoid what is false and wrong.

So if this is not forbidding participation in the courts, nor is it forbidding the practice of discernment, what is it forbidding?

It is forbidding what John Stott calls 'censoriousness'

That is a critical fault finding attitude, that condemns harshly, that is always looking to find fault, actively seeks out failings, is always putting the worst interpretation on someone's words and actions, that lacks generosity in its treatment of others.

Such an attitude is always destructive. It does not speak out of love. Its goal is not to encourage, but to put someone down, to make them feel unworthy, to shame

Yet it can often take the high moral ground – "I am telling you this for your good"; "we have standards and we have to make sure they are kept"; "We want you to be the best you can be" – and then lets them know how far they are from that goal, and how disappointed the speaker is with them that that is still the case despite having had their fault pointed out repeatedly

This judging is an exercise of power over others to either mould them to the critic's vision of how they should behave or exclude them from the critic's world, an exercise of power that also helps to bolster the critics sense of superiority and control

You see that judging in the world, sometimes sadly in families, and you can see it amongst Jesus' followers

Whether it is criticism of the way someone dresses, or speaks, or parents, of how they spend their time or their money.

But Jesus gives us a reason why we should not practice this judging

*Matthew 7: "Judge not, that you be not judged. <sup>2</sup> For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you.*

There is a judge who will judge us. While verse 2 could be read as saying the way you treat others will determine the way they treat you – and there is some truth in that – it is saying more.

It is God who judges, God who has already said in His insistence that the forgiven must forgive [6:14-15], that He will judge His followers according to the way they treat others. What we want for others, what we choose to show others – well that is what we are choosing for ourselves in His judgment.

If we want the Lord to show us generous patience, a graciousness that picks up and restores, a love that acknowledges the heart's intention even where the outcome is not perfect – that is what we must show others.

If we want to entrust our judgment to the Lord who knows all things, then we should not rush to judgment on partial truth and misrepresentations of motive.

There is a judge, and we are not to put ourselves in His place, pretend that our brothers and sisters are accountable to us for their following of Jesus. As Paul says in *Romans 14:4* "*who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before His own master that he stands or falls.*" Our brothers and sisters, like us, are not perfect – there are things we can all grow in – but Jesus goes on to point out that while we think we are in the position to judge them we are in no position to help them.

**Avoiding Selective blindness** [that exacerbates the offence] [James 4:11-12]

*Matthew 7: <sup>3</sup> Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? <sup>4</sup> Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when there is the log in your own eye? <sup>5</sup> You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.*

It's a picture from the carpenter's workshop. One person has a speck of sawdust in their eye – common enough;

The other a log – a roof beam. Try and visualize having a roof beam in your eye. It is grotesque that someone could be so unaware of that beam that they could think they could help with the other's speck.

It is plain that they can only be of use to their fellow if they deal with their own problem first.

This is a picture that has a general and particular application.

It is Always true that we find it much easier to see the faults of others than our own.

And it is always true that we have to deal with the sin in our own life if we are going to be helpful to others – get rid of that anger or that envy, our gossiping or lewd storytelling – before what we say has credibility.

But Jesus' story has a particular application in the context of someone judging their brother or sister. Such a person has a really big sin problem whatever is going on in the rest of their life, even if from the outside she or he is without visible fault.

Listen to *James 4*:<sup>11</sup> *Do not speak evil against one another, brothers. The one who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks evil against the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge.*<sup>12</sup> *There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor?*

James says that the one who judges their brother is putting themselves in the place of God by judging the law. The law James has in mind is not so much the law that forbids slander, but the royal law, the law of love, that we should love our neighbour as ourselves [James 2:8]. The censorious critic is saying this law does not apply.

Putting yourself in the place of God, saying you know better than God how others should be treated, that your standards are more important than His and His demand that others be treated with love, the love that builds up and encourages – that is a big log.

Despite your conviction of your own capacity, your own right, to point out the faults of others – while that sin is in your heart you are good for nothing

You are, says our Lord, a hypocrite. That is a dreadful judgment on Jesus' lips. You are play acting righteousness, while being a rebel in your heart against the God who is able to save and destroy.

The priority is clear – first deal with your own sin, and in particular with the pride that puts itself in the place of God where those whom God accepts you reckon you can condemn and exclude, where you reckon your being offended matters more than God being offended or your offending God,

Repent of that pride. Say God is the boss, and embrace the humility that reckons yourself to be a sinner saved only by the generous and forgiving love of God, the humility that that forgives those whom God forgives, that welcomes those whom God has welcomed,

Then you may be helpful, and it does help to have those irritating specks taken out of our eyes – but you will be doing it with a different motive and a different manner

Genuine love of the other, and the grace and patience of one who knows they rely on God's grace and patience,

Jesus now finishes this section with an enigmatic saying, addressed to the group, to Jesus' followers collectively

#### **An enigmatic saying v. 6**

*Matthew 7*:<sup>6</sup> *“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.*

On the one hand we can get the general point

We should Value what is holy and precious and not entrust what is precious to those who have no idea of its value and true to their nature will just treat it like a common and worthless thing and you with contempt.

Where that happens what is precious will be trashed and you will be endangered.

That much is clear, but there is debate about what specifically is being referred to as the holy, and whether dogs and pigs have any specific referent.

Many see it, after encouraging a generous spirit, as a reminder that there is still a need to exercise discernment, to recognise when your generous sharing of the truth of the gospel may only provoke an evil response, to recognise when we should move on.

But the context is speaking about the way we are treating each other, our brothers and sisters in the community of Jesus' followers

It is better to see Jesus calling on his followers to reflect on the impact of censoriousness and hypocrisy. Where they go unchecked the holy and precious, Jesus' followers, those He calls His little one in 18:10, are driven out into the world

The world doesn't recognise how precious they are, and such hypocrisy will only provoke the world to further attacks on Jesus' people.

Test all things

But it is true – constant criticism, harsh judgment, determined fault finding – by people who have demonstrable issues with their own obedience – drive believers away, back into the world

And just as it was unthinkable for Jesus' first audience to give the holy to pariah dogs, and pearls – very expensive luxuries – to pigs, it ought to be unthinkable that we could let the congregation become a place that was unwelcoming to believers, that we would drive them away by constant judging and criticism

This story about the log is Challenging, isn't it.

For it is hard to see our own faults

In fact the whole sermon to this point has been challenging

To have that righteousness that exceeds the scribes and pharisees in loving our enemies, keeping our word, reconciling

To live and practice our giving and prayers with God the only audience

Not being anxious but seeking the kingdom

It is all Challenging, particularly because knowing and doing are two different things

And Jesus wants doers –Remember Matt 28:20 - we are to be taught to do, to keep, all that He has commanded [Matthew 28:20]. it is doers Jesus reckons as disciples,

Knowing the challenge Jesus now gives a generous and definite assurance of help to His followers, the poor in spirit

### Help is available vv. 7-11

*Matthew 7: 7 “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. 8 For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. 9 Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? 10 Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? 11 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!*

This assurance that our Father will not withhold any good thing from Jesus’ followers is such a great encouragement to draw near to seek the help we need.

Some people suggest that this is a completely unqualified promise that anything we ask, with enough faith, we will get.

They encourage us to name it and claim it, to think that faith is being able to enlist God’s help for whatever project we are pursuing. That prayer is a kind of Aladdin’s lamp for those who can rub it with enough faith

That suggestion is both terrifying and untrue.

Terrifying to think we are in charge. Alec Motyer wrote “If it were the case that whatever we ask, God was pledged to give, then I for one would never pray again, because I would not have sufficient confidence in my own wisdom to ask God for anything; and I think if you consider it you will agree.” [In Stott p.188]. We should agree for we don’t have the wisdom or knowledge to run the universe. Think of praying for rain. Not knowing the effect of the required weather pattern on your neighbours, let alone the continent, the chaos and disruption that could come from having your request automatically answered, you would never ask for rain again. Or for healing. Would you want everyone you prayed for to be automatically healed – when you don’t know the impact of that on their own lives – might they go on to fall away from the faith, or marry unwisely, commit a crime – and on the lives of myriads of others. Could you bear being responsible for all that?

Thankfully this suggestion is also untrue.

There is nothing mechanical in this promise, no Aladdin’s lamp here

Our Lord is encouraging us to draw near to our good Father, and that relationship qualifies this promise for He remains our almighty Father, sovereign, all wise and all knowing, in charge.

What we are assured of is that HE will hear us and give us good things.

More, that just like a child we can come to Him over and over and over again for the same needs. He won’t tire of our requests.

We don’t have to get everything right. Which father amongst us will give their child something that is harmful? – if we ask for a rock when we need bread, it is bread our Father will give us.

And while the promise is framed generally the context informs our understanding of the good things we ask for. Jesus has already assured His followers that they can pray for their daily needs, that their Father knows them and will provide them.

So the good things here, while not excluding daily needs, are more focused on seeking God’s help to live His way.

We have examples of this in Scripture

It is, for example, hard to see our own faults.

But the Psalmist prays

*Psalm 139:23 Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!*

*Psalm 19: 12 Who can discern his errors? Declare me innocent from hidden faults. 13 Keep back your servant also from presumptuous sins; let them not have dominion over me!*

It is hard to love

So Paul prays for the Philippians that their *Philippians 1:9 "love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment ..."*

In fact where these promises are spoken in Luke Jesus ends the section by saying

*Luke 11:13 If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!*

This is a great promise of grace to the poor in Spirit, those who know they must depend on God, can only look to God, for help

The disciple starts by knowing her or his need, and here we are assured of grace to live as God's child, live as a citizen of Christ's kingdom, of strength to practice that righteousness that exceeds the scribes and pharisees

We should be praying confidently and constantly for that help

This clear promise counters the fear that we won't be answered, or our Father will run out of patience when we come again asking for strength to obey. He always gives good things

This promise that makes His help so freely available also Challenges pride that thinks we can live as Christ's disciple in our own strength

And this promise Challenges the faithlessness that never starts for fear of failure, that says Jesus' way is too hard or unreal. We are assured of help

Here is the strong encouragement we need to seek good things from our Father

*Matthew 7: 7 "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. 8 For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened.*

Are you asking, seeking, knocking – confident in your heavenly Father?

Having assured us of help the Lord Jesus comes to conclude His teaching that started at 5:17 on the life that fulfills the law and the prophets

### **The summary guide**

Jesus has covered much since 5:20 but there are many situations in life that He has not addressed directly. What will guide His people as they face these – as they engage with social media, deal with the complexities of family, navigate relationships in modern workplaces?

*Matthew 7: 12* “So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.

Here is the summary guide for all our behaviour towards all others in all circumstances, the guide and the great demand of discipleship

Notice first What it is not saying

It’s not “Whatever others have done to you, do to them” That is the way some people live, but it enslaves you to the way others treat you

Nor “Whatever others wish you would do for them, do for them”. That is the way some want to interpret the command to love our neighbour so that we always are to follow our neighbours expressed desire. If they want acceptance for their sexual immorality, well they say to love your neighbour is to show them that acceptance. But that is to enslave you to their desires and wishes

What Jesus does say is “Whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also for them”

For this to be a safe guide, remember the ‘you’ being addressed.

Jesus is speaking to his followers, those who have embraced the repentance of saying Jesus is King, the boss of their lives, who are to hunger and thirst for righteousness, be committed to being children of their heavenly Father, perfect as their Father is perfect - disciples

Disciples could never wish that people could help them to sin or accept their sinning. What they wish is that others help them live God’s way

And this is more than ‘Don’t do to others what you don’t want them to do to you’ – that is a start, and it embraces a lot of the ten commandments

But this Positive command ‘do to others what you wish others would do to you’ – extends the range of our obligation, is more open ended. It is not enough not to harm, we are to do good. Not enough to not pilfer from the wounded man. Like the Samaritan, We have to stop, and attend to his wounds, and provide for his care.

This command fulfills the law and prophets in relation to how they tell you to treat others [not temple rules, or worship of God] 5:17, the law summarised elsewhere as You will love your neighbour as yourself

And living this way – embodies and expresses the freedom of the children of God. Even as it obligates you to all, makes you a servant of all to seek their good – it frees you to live as God’s child. How you live isn’t any longer determined by how others have treated you, nor by their wishes and desires – it is determined by the good that you as a child of God would want. It is behaviour that flows from your relationship with your Father.

How do we do it?

Two things are essential. First you must be godly, have a heart that wants what Jesus wants

Secondly we have to engage with the circumstances of others. We have to put ourselves in their shoes and ask how, in their circumstances, we would want to be treated in word and deed.



And that means if we can't do that – if our range of experience is limited, or we can't imagine what it would be like to be in their circumstances – we have to ask, to talk to them and listen so that we can understand their circumstances

But to see where this command might take us let's think through some examples – some day to day ones, and then more difficult ones.

### **Some examples**

How do you want to be treated when you have made an appointment for someone to meet you?

You want them to be on time. Doing to others will make you a punctual person – that's love.

But how do you want to be treated when you are running late – traffic is heavy, or you just tried to do too much before you got out the door?

You want grace, understanding – not anger

So love will be punctual, but gracious to those who aren't.

Another – how do you want to be treated when you have a boring job at the end of the day? Like cleaning the church.

Do you want to be left on your own, or for someone to offer to help?

Love is aware and offers.

But how do you want to be treated when you have to get away, have another appointment

You want to be treated graciously, and not resented

Doing unto others will not grumble about having to pick up the slack

They are easy examples because they are close to our experience – but there are always more difficult situations

### **More difficult**

How would you want to be treated if you were a Same sex attracted person coming into our church?

Talked about, made to feel uncomfortable?

Or would you want to find someone to talk to about your struggles to live faithful to Jesus, to be encouraged and welcomed

How would you want to be treated if you were someone with a demanding child – and you were doing everything you knew of to bring them up well, but still they didn't always behave as they should?

Avoided? Or encouraged and comforted, and maybe even invited around to someone's house for a change?

Sometimes we have to stop and think – how would I want to be treated if one of my family members was seriously ill, or I was someone now stuck in visa limbo, or could only get a temporary protection visa, or I was begging on the street?

In regard to the latter – for whatever reason I was there, I don't think I would want to meet disapproval or neglect, but kindness and help, however small.

In all circumstances, in all our dealing with others – whatever you wish others that others would do to you, we are to do for them

It is such a good guide – but what might make it hard to consistently practice what Jesus commands?

What might make it hard

Busyness – just not taking the time to think about what I would want people to do for me in their circumstances

Indifference – so pre-occupied with your own plans you don't even notice others

Pride – I could never imagine myself in that situation, never say there but for the grace of God go I

Ignorance – lack of experience without the humility to ask

Perhaps an unwillingness to see them as a genuine other person, someone like us, made in God's image

And our emotions

Anger – at them being in that situation, or interrupting our plans

Fear of them

Anxiety

All of those flow from a lack of trust in our sovereign God, who rules all things, who can always keep us and who has put that other person in our lives for a good purpose

It is worth reflecting on what stops us from doing unto some what we would have others do for us, for whatever the reason – this is still Jesus' command,

And thinking about why we might find it hard to practice this consistently reminds us this love flows from faith and humility

The humility that recognises our own need for help and is so grateful for the love of God that provided His Son to save us and so is glad to love in return

The faith that tells us we need not be anxious – about the demand on our time and resources – for we know and trust that where we seek God's Kingdom and righteousness, He will provide for all we need as well, and that where we ask, our Father will give us good things – wisdom and courage, patience and kindness

### **A different people together**

Our Lord Jesus calls us to be and teaches us to be a different people – together

Obedience to Him is to be expressed in all of life – in all our dealings with others in every part of our lives

And it is to be expressed throughout our whole lives.

There never is a time, for example, when we do not have to do to others what we would want them to do for us.

He is calling us to the long obedience in the one direction, but it is a journey undertaken one day at a time, a journey undertaken together.

It is as we listen to him that together we will be salt and light, do good to our community and bring honour to our God

Jesus is not looking for agreement with or approval of His teaching

He is looking for obedience, the obedience of faith.

Let's help each other to stay on the journey

By being a community that is serious about doing Jesus' will, and expresses that, not in criticism and fault finding, but in encouraging each other, reckoning every believer precious

And by being the Poor in Spirit who have no confidence in their own goodness but know their need, and so ask, seek, knock for the good things – for a Spirit empowered life of godliness, and ask not for ourselves alone, but for each other

Ask because we know how much more our heavenly Father will give those good things to His children.