

Ask, Seek, Knock

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[0 : 00] I'm going to begin with a riddle. You have to guess what I'm referring to. Most people do this.

Sadly, Christians do it, and perhaps they're quite good at it. Some of us in this church have done it. Some would say that politicians make a living out of doing this.

What am I referring to? Well, it could be anything, really, couldn't it? But the answer is judging others. And part of what we read this morning from Matthew's Gospel, we hear Jesus teaching about criticising and judging others.

By the way, my comment about politicians probably isn't quite accurate because they're meant to criticise and evaluate each other's policies. But often they can sort of end up having personal slurs against each other and enter into the realms of being judgmental.

Well, if you'd like to follow as we look at this reading this morning, you'll find it on page 788 of the Black Bibles in the seats in front of you. Matthew's Gospel chapters 5 to 7 is a body of Jesus' teaching called the Sermon on the Mount.

[1 : 24] And we've been looking at this for about the last month or so. And we're in the final stages of this now. And I'm looking at chapter 7, verses 1 to 12. Jesus begins by saying this, Do not judge, so that you may not be judged.

For with the judgment you make, you will be judged. And the measure you give will be the measure you get. I don't know what it's like for you, but it is so easy, isn't it, to find faults in other people.

We can become, figuratively speaking, armchair critics of anyone and anything that isn't quite right. And maybe even for Christians especially, it's just so easy to lapse into being judgmental.

And I think probably it's understandable to an extent because we know God's love and forgiveness in our lives and in grateful thanks and obedience, we desire to live a life holy for him, pleasing and pure, obeying him.

But when we see someone, Christian or not, whose life is below the standards that we aim to live by, we can become incredibly condescending, can't we? We say things like, well, he does swear a lot, or he smokes, you know, or perhaps he tells dirty jokes, or maybe even he's been in jail for his crimes, you know.

[3 : 00] Jesus says in verse 2, With the judgment you make, you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get.

If you're a judgmental person, it's only understandable that people are going to therefore turn that on you and judge you with a standard that you judge others with. But how other people view you is of relatively little consequence.

What Jesus is referring to here is the standards by which God will judge you and me. Jesus is saying that God will judge us by the same measure that we use to judge others.

Surely that's incentive enough not to judge anyone. Mind you, Jesus is not saying turn a blind eye to anything and just become wishy-washy and don't have any discrimination about anything, tolerate low standards, that's okay.

He's not saying that at all. He's asking us though to be generous in our opinions of others. Jesus was really great at a thing called hyperbole.

[4 : 15] Now hyperbole is one of those figures of speech that are unusual and often involve exaggeration. And this is an example of hyperbole in verses 3 to 5.

Why do you see the speck in your neighbour's eye but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbour, let me take the speck out of your eye while the log is in your own eye?

You hypocrite. First take the log out of your own eye and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbour's eye. We have a picture here of someone with a speck in their eye and their well-intentioned and well-meaning neighbour who comes along seeking to help them.

But they just don't notice the log in their own eye. The caption in that picture says, it's only a tree branch. It's a bit more than a speck in any case.

What is in this guy's eye is something far more substantial than a speck. The speck is something which is quite minor that is wrong in the first person's life.

[5 : 26] And the person passing judgement on them has a substantial sin that they can't even notice. Jesus exhorts us with a very humorous picture to take the log out of our own eye before we attempt to take the speck out of anyone else's eye.

Now that's not to say that small sins don't matter to God. They do. The person with the speck in their eye needs that speck taken out. But it is important that we encourage and help others to live lives of obedience.

But let's first examine our own lives. Verse 6. Now this is sort of fairly strange.

This verse is a bit perhaps out of the context. It says, Do not give what is holy to dogs and do not throw your pearls before swine or they will trample them underfoot and turn and maul you.

Do not give what is holy to dogs. Perhaps what is holy here is the gospel, the good news of Jesus' love and forgiveness, his acceptance, the good news that he alone provides us with a way back to God.

[6 : 47] And what of the dogs in verse 6? Sadly, these are they that reject the gift of God, the gift of his forgiveness and the gift of his eternal life.

Perhaps these are the dogs that Jesus refers to. Do not throw your pearls before swine. Beautiful things such as pearls aren't appreciated by pigs.

They couldn't care less how much they are. They're valuable things to us. But for pigs, they're nothing. Why waste something good on those who don't appreciate it or value it?

Similarly, the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ to us, our acceptance before God, our reconciliation with him, our forgiveness wrought by Jesus on the cross.

Why waste that on someone who's obstinate and constantly rejecting it? Now, that's not to say that people who become Christians don't begin that journey being stubborn and rebellious.

[7 : 53] But for someone who consistently and constantly goes on rejecting, why cast the pearls of the gospel before swine? Jesus himself taught people very generously, gave his time and energy.

But when he was tried by Pilate, he hardly spoke. And even when Herod tried him, he said nothing. He didn't want to cast any pearls before swine.

He called his disciples to move on from those who wouldn't receive the good news of the gospel and shake the dust off their feet. The gospel was only for those who would appreciate it.

So, Jesus does call for discernment but not judgmentalism. Well, in the second half of today's reading, Jesus teaches about prayer.

Ask and it will be given to you. Search and you will find. Knock and the door will be opened for you.

[9 : 09] For everyone who asks receives and everyone who searches finds and for everyone who knocks the door will be opened.

Friends, prayer is effective. Prayer works. The Bible says the prayers of the righteous person are powerful and effective. There are people in this church who can testify to the power of prayer.

Probably the most well-known example to most of us is that of Hilary, our associate priest's granddaughter, Hannah, who had a tremendously large cancer in her and through prayers and medical treatment she's now completely healed.

But that's just one example of many I could quote you. Jesus, in teaching about prayer, says, ask and it will be given. Search and you will find.

Knock and the door will be opened. These aren't sort of perhaps or maybes or hopefulls. These are definite, positive, affirmative answers. Now, of course, that's not to say that every time we ask God for something we'll automatically get it.

[10 : 24] He is God and He will answer our prayer in the way that is best for us. A friend of mine prayed for eight years that he would find a wife one day.

Eight years he was praying before he got married. It didn't take me quite that long but in fact, I prayed a prayer last year something like God, if you want me to be single, I'm very happy to be.

And then I met and God So God has an incredibly different way to perhaps we expect to answer our prayers but we can trust Him that He knows what is best for us better than we know ourselves.

Let me read what one commentator said about prayer. Thank God He also sometimes denies our requests.

I thank God that He is not prepared to do anything I may chance to ask Him. I am profoundly grateful to God that He did not grant me certain things for which I asked and that He shut certain doors in my face.

[11 : 44] God knows what is best for us better than we know ourselves. We may not understand exactly what He is doing when we pray for something but we can trust His heavenly fatherly care for us that He has the best in store for us.

He will answer our prayers the best way for us. Our prayers of course need to be made in faith and in accord with God's will. But the great thing is that God answers those and God gives to those who ask Him.

Jesus goes on in verse 9. Is there anyone among you if your child asks for bread will give a stone or if the child asks for a fish will give a snake?

If you then who are evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask Him?

God is just waiting for us to ask for the good things He has for us.

[13 : 13] As I say, God may not answer our prayers the way that we expect and when we want them answered, but He has the best in store for us. And so to verse 12.

In everything do to others as you would have them do to you, for this is the law and the prophets. Do to others as you would have them do to you.

That has been known through the centuries as the golden rule. Now the negative form of this rule, which is do not do anything to anyone that you would not have done to you, that negative form is found in many religions including rabbinic Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism and Confucianism.

A commentator has said, but Jesus gives the positive form of this rule and the difference between the two forms is profound.

For example, the negative form would teach behaviour like this. If you do not enjoy being robbed, well don't rob others. If you do not like being cursed, don't curse others.

[14 : 33] If you do not enjoy being hated, don't hate others. If you do not care to be clubbed over the head, well don't club others over the head. However, the positive form of this rule teaches behaviour like this.

If you enjoy being loved, love others. If you like to receive things, give to others. If you like being appreciated, appreciate others.

The positive form is thus far more searching than its negative counterpart. Jesus turns this so-called golden rule on its head and speaks it positively.

Apparently, the late Paul Eddington, who you probably know was the actor who played the prime minister in the series, Yes, Prime Minister, said in an interview that the epitaph he would like is that he never hurt anyone.

It's commendable that he didn't want to hurt anyone. But, that's sort of stating what he didn't want to do. I think an epitaph I would be more pleased with is one that says, I want to do things in a positive way for others.

[15 : 48] Jesus said, in everything do to others as you would have them do to you, for this is the law and the prophets. If you do this, you'll be adhering closely to God's expectations of us.

Well, as we finish, quoting Jesus again, do not judge so that you may not be judged. May we not judge and condemn others, but address the sin in our own lives first.

Jesus said, do not give what is holy to dogs and do not throw your pearls before swine. May we be discerning as to where we spend our energies in Christian ministry.

Jesus said, ask and it will be given to you. Search and you will find. Knock and the door will be opened for you. May we ask and seek and knock with confidence, knowing God's desire to give us all that is good and do to others as you would have them do to you.

May we seek to be God's people in the world, doing to others as we would have them do to us, but not always expecting that they will. May God help us to be better followers of him in all these things.

[17 : 09] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.