

## Matthew 7:1-12 – Seeking The Kingdom In All Spheres of Life

*St Mark's Northbridge – 14/03/2021 AD*

*BIG Idea:* Jesus teaches us how to relate well in all spheres of life

**Pray.**

### **1. Intro: The many spheres of life**

Last summer I had several books on my reading list. And as usual, this list was too ambitious and I didn't end up reading everything I wanted.

But one book which I did get around to reading was a book about productivity called *What's Best Next?* It's written by a Christian and is loaded with tips on how to be more productive and gives a framework for Christians to think about how we can be wise in how we use our time. And like all books, there are things which you're on board with and other things which you question.

But amidst all the tips in this book, one of the key principles that this book had for being productive is the importance of defining and clarifying your roles – to know all the areas of your life and the responsibilities you have.

So before you think about **how** to be productive, you first need to know **where** you will be productive. And as examples this book listed some different areas of responsibility that a Christian may have in their life: as an individual, as part of a family or household, as a member of church, in your social life, and in your professional or work life. All these different spheres and spaces in your life.

The simple point being that you need to know all the different places and contexts where you are, in order to know how to be “productive” in these spaces.

And as Christians, we have a lot of overlapping spheres– that when you go to work (or school) you are a Christian. When you are grabbing a coffee with a friend, you're still a follower of Jesus.

And the nature of the Christian life is such that we are to be followers of Jesus in every sphere of our lives. We've seen so far in the Sermon on the Mount that we are to be salt and light in every context and area of our lives.

And this morning/evening this passage gives us another window into this, with Jesus once again showing how living for the kingdom of heaven affects our whole lives and the different spaces we find ourselves in: with other Christians – our brothers and sisters, with the world around us, and with our relationship with God our heavenly Father. In these dimensions of life we are to seek the kingdom of heaven.

## **2. Humility towards your brothers and sisters (vv.1-5)**

So firstly, our relationships with fellow Christians is defined by the kingdom of heaven.

And Jesus teaches that humility must characterise how we relate to our brothers and sisters. Why? Because we have a tendency to be self-righteousness.

If you have a look at verse 1 Jesus says:

*<sup>1</sup>“Do not judge, or you too will be judged.*

Here Jesus wants his disciples to avoid an attitude of self-righteousness. It's that tendency we have to compare ourselves to others and look down on them – by seeing some fault or flaw in them and sitting in judgment over them because we are morally

superior. It's those thoughts that creep in where we see others and think, 'Wow he's struggling with those sins and problems in his life, at least I'm not as bad as him.'<sup>1</sup>

But Jesus says "do not judge, or you too will be judged".

But the issue here is not about exercising **judgment** full stop, but about being **judgmental**. And that's an important distinction to make. Because we judge whenever we make choices and discern things. We do this everyday when we get out of bed. "I'm going to have Weetbix instead of corn flakes today". God gives us minds so we can think and assess things and make decisions.

But the point here is we are not to be **judgmental** by being self-righteous and placing ourselves in moral judgment over another person.

And this type of attitude and behaviour is problematic because as Jesus says there in verse 2, the standard which you judge others by will be the same standard used against you.

The reality here is that you are going to face judgment yourself! You are going to be held to account for your actions. So if you want to be unmerciful and ungracious towards someone, then expect that same standard to apply to yourself as well! If you want to be gracious and forgiving to others, then expect to have that standard of grace and forgiveness shown to you.

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<sup>1</sup> If you remember, Jesus told a parable about a Pharisee and a tax collector who were in the temple together. And the Pharisee openly said, "At least I'm not as bad as that tax collector over there". (Luke 18:9-14) This is a classic example of self-righteousness and the judging that Jesus is talking about here.

Behind all of this is the truth that ultimate judgment is reserved for God alone. When it comes to weighing up everything we have ever said, thought, or done, this is God's role. So it's not the role of any human to make an ultimate and eternal moral judgment over another person. By doing that, we place ourselves in the position of God the eternal judge.

And that is not fitting for followers of Jesus. We are in no place to do so because we are tainted with all manner of flaws and failures. We are guilty sinners who are in no position to condemn another person. If we do, then we are hypocrites.

And Jesus illustrates this point in verse 3 with that comical example of someone who points out a speck of dust in another person's eye, all the while ignoring a big plank in their own eye. This illustration is both comical and sobering. Of someone trying to help with another person's problem while not seeing their own problems. It's hypocrisy.

If you're familiar with *The Simpsons*, then you'd know the character Nelson Muntz. He's the school bully who goes around laughing at and pointing out the failures of all the kids at Springfield Elementary. And yet, as you learn more about him you see that his life is full of failures as well. It's hypocrisy.

Well like Nelson Muntz, when we point out the flaws and failures of others, there are always three fingers pointing back at us. We all have planks in our own eyes.

So how do we deal with this? Do we just agree to not talk about or even acknowledge our failings and sweep things under the carpet? After all, Jesus says, "Don't judge" and no one wants to be a hypocrite. So are we to remain silent?

Well thankfully Jesus shows us what to do. He gives us the solution: hypocrisy is to be replaced with humility. Instead of being judgmental or sweeping things under the carpet and not acknowledging our sin, we are to humbly see our own failings before we look to help others with their failings. As Jesus says there in verse 5:

*<sup>5</sup>...first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.*

The point is you will only be in a position to help another person when you realise that you are just as helpless as they are.

And this teaching from Jesus speaks to us directly as Christians because Jesus is speaking about noticing a speck in your “brother’s eye”? So the context here is about pointing out an imperfection or flaw in your brother or sister. This concerns how we relate to each other as Christians.

And so there are two clear implications for us as brothers and sisters:

The first is to humbly recognise our own sin – the flaws and failures in our own life. We need to see the planks in our eyes. And that we are all deserving of God’s judgment for our sin.

And to humbly see that all the flaws and failures in our lives aren’t removed by our own efforts, but they are taken away through Christ. It’s only by God’s grace and the blood of Jesus shed on the cross that anyone of us gets into the kingdom of heaven. We are in need of God’s grace as much as the person sitting next to us.

So we need to humbly recognise our own sin.

And flowing from this, the second implication is that in humility we must help our brothers and sisters with sin in their life. As we point out the flaws and failures in another, we do so humbly. It means we come **alongside** a brother or sister, and not from **above**. We are not the judge but a fellow sinner who is just as broken.

I think we can all speak of the difference it makes when someone has rebuked us about sin in our life from a position of humility. It never feels good when someone confronts you about your sin. But isn't it so important, especially when it's done from a position of humility with the Scriptures open, and not with a sense of moral superiority.

I've got a dear Christian brother who's an example of what this humility looks like in action. Whenever we have lamented over moral failings in others, he is always quick to say, "But I know that I can be just as susceptible to that as well". It's a humble heart that knows he is not better than anyone else.

So amongst one another as Christians our attitudes and our interactions are to be characterised by humility.

But as we look out and live in the world, what does Jesus say about how we are to relate to those around us?

### 3. Discernment towards the world (v.6)

Well Jesus calls for discernment in our interaction with the world. And that's what verse 6 is getting at. To be honest, this is a very strange verse at first glance. Maybe you felt that as we read through the passage. That in verses 1-5 there's this clear part where Jesus teaches about not judging and then in verses 7-11 Jesus teaches about prayer. And verse 6 just sits awkwardly in the middle as it talks about dogs and pigs. It can seem a bit random and out of place.

But in verse 6 Jesus is teaching the importance of discernment. So while Christians are not to be judgmental, we are to exercise judgement – to be discerning. Jesus wants his disciples to be discerning as they live in this world. In verse 6 Jesus teaches that they are not to give away holy and valuable things to those who are going to disregard them.<sup>2</sup>

In this mini-parable, these sacred and valuable items which Jesus is referring to relates to the kingdom of heaven. Later in Matthew chapter 13 Jesus tells some parables about the kingdom of heaven and he describes the kingdom as being like valuable treasure and a priceless pearl that you would do anything to get your hands on. The kingdom of heaven is precious.

So verse 6 is a call for Jesus' disciples to be discerning when it comes to giving the gospel of the kingdom of heaven out to others. And in this case it's a reminder that there are those who will reject and trample over something so precious and valuable as the

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<sup>2</sup> Much has been made of whether by “dogs” and “pigs” Jesus is referring to Gentiles specifically. Certainly when Jesus spoke this to the Jews this imagery of not giving holy things to unclean people would have come through very starkly. But Jesus is pointing to something much bigger. He's not referring to all Gentiles, but to persons of any race who have clearly shown that they have rejected the gospel with scorn and contempt.

gospel of the kingdom. There are those who have and will make it clear that they don't want anything to do with God's kingdom.<sup>3</sup> And so followers of Jesus need to be discerning in what they do with something so precious as the gospel.

Now this is all quite abstract, so what might this kind of discernment look like in practice?

Well I want you to picture two people – two friends of yours. They could be work colleagues, or neighbours, (or friends of yours at school).

Now the first person is someone you've shared the gospel with over the years. But they've made it clear that they don't want anything to do with it. They are quite hardened and hostile towards the gospel of Jesus.

Now picture the other person, a friend who you've shared the gospel with over the years. They aren't completely opposed but they are open to hearing more – they have questions.

Being discerning means that in your efforts to share the gospel you might decide to deliberately go and spend more time with your friend who is more open to the gospel than the one who isn't. You might seek to catch up with this friend more regularly than your other friend as you seek to speak the gospel into their life.

I think that's the kind of discernment that Jesus has in mind here. That we devote our time and efforts into people and places where the gospel will not be trampled on and rejected out of hand.

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<sup>3</sup> In a few chapters' time in Matthew 10 Jesus delivers His sermon on mission. And he says something similar to verse 6. As he sends his disciples out to proclaim the kingdom of heaven, He warns them that there will be towns who will not welcome or listen to their words. And his instruction to them is to shake the dust off their feet as they leave that town...

It's not that we give up on these people and stop praying for them. But we are discerning in how we use our time and efforts to proclaim the precious gospel of the kingdom.

Now this is another hard saying from Jesus and there is a real tension here for Christians. Like God, we have a desire and a heart that no one will perish and that all will hear the good news and repent and believe in the Lord Jesus. And yet we live in a world where there is opposition to the gospel. This becomes more personal when we stop and think about those close to us who are far from the kingdom of God – and those close to us who have continually trampled over this precious gospel.

Yet we also know and trust that God can soften the hardest of hearts and turn people to Himself, even those who are so far away.

So as we exercise discernment to the world around us, it is always done in faith.

#### **4. Persistent prayer towards your Father in heaven (vv.7-11)**

Now so far in this passage we have seen the horizontal spheres and spaces of life – those around us. But Jesus now turns to the vertical. His teaching turns to our attitude towards our heavenly Father.

And Jesus returns to His teaching on prayer. He teaches His disciples and commends an attitude of persistent prayer to our heavenly Father.

If you look at verses 7 and 8 when Jesus says, “Ask”, He is pointing to his disciples praying, and when they “seek” they are praying with earnestness, and as they “knock” they are diligently pursuing God's way.

So Jesus is teaching his disciples to seek God's way in diligent and persistent prayer as they relate towards God.

Now in these verses there seems to be a guarantee that: those who ask **will** receive, and those who seek **will** find, and those who knock, the door **will** be opened. It seems to imply a blanket guarantee that God will answer and give everything we ask for. A bit of a 'name it and claim it' approach to prayer.

And if we read these verses in isolation we could definitely come to that conclusion.

But we know that's not the case. We have all prayed prayers which haven't been answered as we have desired. So the key question is: what does Jesus mean when he says that "Everyone who asks will receive"?

Well the key is what Jesus has already taught in the Lord's Prayer. Back in chapter 6 Jesus taught about the nature of prayer – that it is not a selfish exercise in asking things for ourselves, but it is about asking in line with God's will and desire.

And as Jesus taught, when we pray we are asking our heavenly Father for things. This is something that Jesus wants to emphasise again in verses 9 and 10. And he wants us to remember the goodness of God as our heavenly Father. That He isn't stingy, but is generous. As a reference point, even the best of our earthly fathers do not compare to the goodness and generosity of our heavenly Father. For He is a loving Father who gives good gifts to His children whom He dearly loves.

And what are these gifts that our heavenly Father gives us?

Well again, the Lord's Prayer gives us some clues as to some of these gifts: the kingdom of God, our daily bread and provision, forgiveness of sins, protection from the evil one.

These are good gifts that no one else can ever give us.

So what this means is that Jesus is encouraging us as His followers to keep praying to our heavenly Father. That we mustn't give up, but earnestly seek Him and keep praying in line with His will. It's a promise from God that when we ask in line with His will, we will receive.

And the reason we can have this confidence is because we have a generous heavenly Father. I think quite often when we forget this important truth about God, it affects our prayer life. We become stagnant and silent because whether consciously or sub-consciously we start to see God as either stingy or incapable of giving us good gifts. But when we remember the goodness and generosity of our heavenly Father then it spurs us to earnestly and persistently turn to Him in prayer.

So Jesus wants us to remember the generosity of our loving heavenly Father as we relate to Him in prayer.

##### **5. Love towards all (v.12)**

Well Jesus finishes this passage in verse 12 by calling on His disciples to love others – to love all people by doing to others what you would have them do to you. This is Jesus' conclusion to what He has just taught and has come to be known as 'The Golden

Rule’. A teaching of Jesus that has become so famous. Many a parent has said to their child, “Now Johnny, how would you like it if Billy hit you over the head”.

But this ‘golden rule’ would be better known as the ‘golden recap’ or the ‘golden reminder’ of what Jesus has already taught. ‘Doing to others as you would have them do to you’ is a summary of when Jesus taught his disciples to ‘love your neighbour as yourself’. And if you skim over the Sermon on the Mount you’ll see that ‘doing to others as you would have them do to you’ comes through in many things that Jesus has taught: about not murdering or committing adultery, speaking the truth, resisting revenge, loving your enemies. All of this could be summed up by ‘do to others as you would have them do to you’.

And as Jesus says, this sums up the Law and the Prophets. This is Jesus’ fulfilment of the Old Testament: loving God and **loving your neighbour – doing to others as you would have them do to you.**

And of course this command from Jesus is for us too. It’s very self-explanatory, yet very challenging. Do you notice that there’s no condition attached to what Jesus is saying? He doesn’t say ‘do to others as you would have them do to you, only if they hold up their end of the deal’. No, it’s unconditional. You do to others as you would have them do to you, even if they don’t! It’s not transactional.

I’ll level with you on this: it’s very risky. There is no guarantee that people will return and reciprocate. There is no guarantee that by treating someone with love, that it will be returned to you.

But we are called to be like our Lord Jesus in this manner. He did to others as he would have them do to him – and yet they ended up hating Him and putting Him to death!

But we are called to be like Christ in how we relate to all people. To do to others as we would have them do to us. To be sacrificial and self-giving. For this is the way of the kingdom.

So as we navigate the many spheres and spaces of life, and the many different contexts and relationships we find ourselves in, seeking the kingdom of God is the constant heartbeat.

**Let's Pray.**