

Prayer

Glory be to You, O Lord our God, for you have brought us into a world in which there are so many wonderful things. Thank you for books to read, for the use of the internet, for beautiful objects to place in my home and food to buy in the shops. Save us from using these things inappropriately or for evil, and help us to value all Your gifts, through Jesus Christ we pray, AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Thanks for Life

Give thanks to God for the opportunities you have had in life and for the people who have helped you and blessed you. Ask the Lord to help you be a blessing to others.

On-going prayers

- *Pray for those who are employed to work in extreme conditions*
- *Pray about the politics which lie behind energy production*
- *Give thanks for your home*

Meditation

We use cameras to take pictures or clips,
We do it whenever we can;
We may have hundreds of photographs
Stored on film or computer.

Each moment is captured for posterity,
Reminding us of something;
A beautiful scene, a special family event,
A flower, a precious moment.

Lord, forgive us if our faith is just memories
Gathered from long ago;
A collection of religious memorabilia;
A sermon, your healing, a baptism;

Change us, Lord, from being just gatherers
To loves of your graciousness;
Those who need no reminding of Your presence,
For You are with us, all the time.

Bible Study - Matthew 7:1-6

¹ 'Stop condemning others, or else you too will be condemned; ² For you will be condemned according to your own condemnations, and you will be measured by your own measures. ³ Why are you aware of the tiny speck in your friend's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? ⁴ Or how can you tell your friend, "Let me take the speck from your eye," while the log is in your own eye? ⁵ You hypocrite, remove the log from your own eye, and then you will see well enough to remove speck from your friend's eye.

⁶ 'Do not give holy things to dogs, and do not throw down your pearls in front of swine, or they will trample all over them and turn to attack you.'

Review

It may appear to us that the subjects Jesus taught in the 'Sermon on the Mount' are only loosely connected, and chapter seven seems to begin with a quite different set of teaching from what went before. Our passage features criticism, hypocrisy and lack of discernment, and there is no immediately obvious connection with the previous sayings about worry (6:25-34). However, there is an explanation which holds everything together. Jesus started the Sermon with a discussion of the Kingdom of God, but set out a challenge when He said 'no-one can serve two masters ... you cannot serve God and wealth' (6:24). This challenge was quite sharp, as Jesus asked His hearers to face up to what He was saying and decide to accept God's way, according to His teaching. He knew that people would respond with a certain amount of fear and trepidation, and this explains why He taught about worry immediately after this challenge.

In our passage today, Jesus continued to teach in response to people's reactions to what He had said. People may have criticised Jesus for speaking in such a black and white manner about the things of God, and perhaps even accused Him of being a hypocrite, seeking to belittle what He said because He was not an authorised teacher of the Law. So in specific response to such attitudes, Jesus taught about critical attitudes (7:1,2), hypocrisy (7:3-5) and the discernment of holy things (7:6).

The first subject is that of judgement and criticism. Some versions of the Bible translate verse 1; 'stop judging others ...' From this, some people have concluded that Jesus wanted people to refrain from using their reasoning facilities to assess or 'judge' other people and what they say. This is not what Jesus meant or what He generally taught, so I hope that my translation 'stop condemning others ...' will avoid the confusion. Jesus was speaking here about those who dismissed or condemned people without the basic humanity and courtesy of equal treatment. Jesus strongly reminded his hearers of their religious duty, long established within Judaism, of thinking the best of others and treating them as equals. Here, Jesus was not teaching something new; He was reminding His hearers of their duty under God's law. With this open attitude, He asked people to give proper consideration of His teaching about the Kingdom, without making snap critical judgements and condemning either Himself or anyone else who might decide to follow Him.

This subject naturally flows in to that of hypocrisy, which is the 'sin' of saying one thing and doing another. Jesus' famous saying about not noticing the 'log' in one's own eye when complaining about a speck in someone else's has become famous everywhere; and there is no other saying which better captures the ludicrous and sometimes evil nature of human presumption and arrogance. Whether Jesus said this after someone tried to correct Him, we will never know, but everyone who reads this passage gets the message about criticism and judgement very clearly! But Jesus did not say this just to teach a good moral point; it was important that those who listened to what He had to say did so with due humility.

The last saying has always been the subject of disagreement and misunderstanding. Some feel that it is unduly dismissive of dogs, and others think the story false because no-one would keep pearls whilst near pigs! This story however, is an allegory. Dogs were not valued 'friends' as they are for some today, they were working animals fed on 'unholy' scraps of food unfit for human consumption, for convenience and economy. The 'holy things', in the allegory equate to the Kingdom of God, as do the pearls; and the whole verse is a typical Hebrew 'saying' spoken in parallel verse, with each half of the saying complementing the other and a twist at the end to bring home the meaning. There are thousands of examples of this manner of speech in the Psalms! Jesus' example is extravagant and a little ridiculous, but this was His point. It was wrong to treat the Kingdom of God as if it was of mere casual interest, because it was highly valuable. More than this, it was folly to offer this treasure to those who, blinded by unholy religious prejudice,

dismissed it with hardly a thought. This would only bring trouble and persecution (as proved to be the case with the Pharisees; see 12:14).

There were probably those who heard Jesus and immediately criticised what He was doing and what He said, because it did not fit with what they knew. Jesus warned people not to make snap judgements, but to give careful consideration to what He said. They should give Him the courtesy they might expect to receive themselves; after all, the subject of God and His Kingdom was no small matter.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. What things in this life make you judgemental and condemnatory? Should you reconsider your opinions in the light of Jesus' teaching?
2. Do you agree that these sayings of Jesus are about the Kingdom of God, or do they best stand on their own?
3. When have you regretted your hasty presumptions about something or someone and had to 'eat humble pie'?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

How easy it is to be judgemental about the things of the Kingdom of God. Indeed, it seems that God's people rarely agree on anything! But that in itself is a rather negative view. There are many good people who live and work within our churches, despite all their faults, and who are a tremendous example of all that is good about the Kingdom of God. The words in this text are an important brake on our human tendency to criticise and condemn. We need to hear them.

Ideas for discipleship programme

- *How do you hold together the ideal of being clear about what is right and wrong, but avoiding judgemental attitudes towards others? Make this the subject of some prayer and fasting.*
- *Discuss with your spouse or someone close to you, whether you are able to be objective in your attitudes, and refrain from being too judgemental. We all need to hear what others have to tell us about ourselves, and it is best if we seek it!*

Final Prayer

All praise to You, Lord God Almighty, for You see all history, and You created time. We praise You for the beginning of the World, for You created it, and we praise you for its coming End at which You will come in Glory. Through Jesus, make us ready for the coming of Your Kingdom. AMEN