

Judging and asking

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[0 : 00] So do open your Bible. I'm afraid actually, like Phil this morning, I've got quite a lot to say. I hope you will be able to stay awake. It is a hot day, isn't it?

It's a short passage really, much shorter than the passages I typically speak on, but there's an awful lot in it. Thank you.

We suppress freedom of speech in case someone might be offended. You'll notice someone who appears to only be those who buy into the liberal myth. It's okay, it seems, to offend those who oppose gay marriage because, by definition, they're bigots.

So it's a right to offend them. If you're interested in philosophy, it's worth noting that early post-moderns opposed any form of authority.

They were effectively anarchists. They wanted to deconstruct all authority structures. But, of course, that was rapidly abandoned as being a highway to nowhere.

[1 : 29] You can't run a society that way. You have to have a social contract. You have to have a meaningful agreement, an enforced agreement, as to how we're going to interact as a society together.

You have to lay down the principles by which we should live. And so to fill this moral vacuum with the abolition of religion and, say, the realization that you can't just have anarchy, we've got political correctness, as it's called.

But, in fact, what characterizes this modern so-called liberal attitude, so much, or perhaps above everything else, is its absolute sense of self-righteousness.

Absolute conviction that what these moralizers say is right and that everybody else must be wrong. It's the most intolerant principle of tolerance that you've ever heard. Don Carson wrote a book on that called *The Intolerance of Tolerance* and it's well worth reading.

[2 : 38] And they even apply this intolerance to themselves, actually, to be fair. One moral slip, dig back into somebody's past, one unfortunate remark, one unfortunate act, and suddenly they're non-new.

Any peccadillo, any deviation from perceived moral righteousness, and you are immediately branded as non-new, a bad person, not one of us. Get lost, we don't want you anymore.

Well, it's a new idea and a new way of doing it, but actually it's a very old idea. The Pharisees had very much the same idea.

But there's even worse than this. Even worse than this self-righteousness is the moral mob. When one's only moral guidance while growing up is political correctness, it's a short step to the conclusion that anything that goes wrong is someone else's fault.

Well, it has to be, because it couldn't possibly be my fault, can it? So, we've got to find somebody to blame. You failed your exam. Well, you must have had a bad teacher.

[3 : 50] You have less than perfect health. Well, blame the NHS and sue them if you can. It's interesting to think about this current epidemic of obesity and diabetes that we have in our country at the moment.

It's all about who can we blame, isn't it? It's certainly not the fault of the children themselves. I mean, they fill themselves up with fat and sugar, but it can't be their fault.

They're perfect little angels. They must be somebody else's fault. Well, is it the fault of the parents who fail to instill proper eating habits in their offspring?

But, no, that's a bit too close to home. Us liberals must be right. It can't be our fault either. Those of us who are parents. So, who can we blame? We'll blame the supermarkets and the food multinationals.

It's all their fault. They're advertising salt and sugar and putting in even less natural ingredients. One of the things we notice in this passage, it's only in passing, but in verse 9, Jesus makes it clear that it's a parent's job to ensure that the child is properly fed.

[5 : 08] Now, many parents do not even meet this standard. It's too much trouble, or it's an infringement of the child's personal liberty to make the kids eat their greens.

And worst of all, perhaps, we've reinvented the lynch mob, haven't we?

The Pharisees, whom Jesus is implicitly criticizing here, at least had the decency to show their faces when pronouncing judgment.

The Ku Klux Klan used to cover their faces with masks, but at least they turned up to the hanging in person. But now, you don't even have to do that. Thanks to Twitter, you can join the mob from the comfort and safety of your own bedroom.

Twitter flames are all over. We find them reported all the time. And even better than that, you don't even have to get your hands dirty with the actual hanging part. Instead, just by words, you can drive them, sometimes just literally, to suicide.

[6 : 26] And really, the hypocrisy of it all is breathtaking. Is Harvey Weinberg a sexual predator? Well, it probably is, it seems so. But has this been established by due process of law?

By the examined testimony of reliable witnesses? By the right of the accused to face his accusers? Who cares about that anymore? Trial by Twitter has pronounced judgment and sentence already.

And are the accusers entirely innocent? After all, many of these are famous actresses who we've actually heard of. But they didn't complain at the time, did they?

Have they used their sexuality to get the better parts? Probably the real victims are the ones we haven't heard of.

The ones who didn't compromise their integrity. And didn't get the part. But it's inevitable if you base your social contract, your moral system, on the assumption that people are basically good.

[7 : 48] Because when you're addressing people, you address them as their, you have to address them then as a person who's basically good. And you think they're good, basically good as well, but they're not doing good stuff.

So that makes them even more evil, doesn't it? It's inevitable that if we think about judgment, if we think about our social contract that way, then we land up in pharisaism, in judgment.

And the assumption that we're right and everybody else is necessarily wrong. You can't avoid it. It's just logical necessity, pretty much. And what we've forgotten, of course, that even our Western societies, the steps that have been taken towards a truly free society in the last few hundred years, were based on an entirely different idea.

And just as that idea becomes abandoned, freedom is eroded. And what is this principle? Well, we find it all the way through the Sermon on the Mount, but we find it stated explicitly in verse 11.

You are evil. He's saying that to everyone, all his listeners. Not to say some of you are evil, some are better than others, although, of course, some are better than others.

[9 : 11] And none of them are as bad as they might be. They do, after all, give good gifts to their children mostly. Most fathers are reasonably good parents. And yet, at root, in principle, Jesus says, you are evil.

And Christians insist that every child of Adam, every single member of species Homo sapiens, with only one exception, is tainted.

Jesus has been pointing out in the earlier bits of the sermon, hasn't he, that each one of us has in our hearts the capacity to be a murderer, a rapist, an exploiter of the poor.

The whole Sermon on the Mount revolves around this insight, in fact, doesn't it? That's the whole point of it. And yet, generally speaking, we're so convinced of our own self-righteousness.

Sure, we're not as bad as we could be. As I say, most fathers are reasonable parents, as Jesus himself points out. But we're far from what we should be.

[10 : 23] But all those Beatitudes, all the Lord's Prayer, all that ethical stuff about not being angry and so on, that we've looked at in the previous weeks, really are all illustrations of this idea.

And in our passage here, Jesus spells out explicitly what this means. When we were preparing the series, we debated whether the so of verse 12, the therefore, the beginning of verse 12, refers to these verses, or the verses to come, or the whole Sermon.

I'm not sure you can give a simple answer to that question. If you have an ESV, it divides it differently to the NIV, you may notice. But I think the answer is all of them.

It refers to the whole Sermon, but in particular, as Jesus starts to draw his discourse to a close, it therefore applies to these words that he's just spoken, that he's just about to speak. So what's this passage have to say then? I think it's worth looking briefly at the way the passage is put together so we see the flow of the argument.

[11 : 38] It starts by these three sort of sayings, do not judge, the measure applied, this rather humorous one, of the speck and the plank, and then what has the feeling of a proverb, don't give dogs what is sacred, don't cast your pearls to pigs.

Then there seems to be a change of subject, ask, seek, knock, and this stuff on good fathers. But I think it's not actually really a change of subject at all because then Jesus comes back to summing up phrase, what we call the golden rule, do to others what you would have them do to you. So we can think of the first three of these as being warnings, the second three as being a message of hope, or we can actually think of it, if you like, as being exactly Jesus' message, the way he started.

Repent, for the kingdom is near. The first three are the call to repent and the second three are the announcement that nonetheless the kingdom is near.

Jesus moves in this passage from the wrong way to the right way and the emphasis is on the need to ask. The reminder of the fatherhood of God are not digressions from the argument, as I say, but an essential part of the argument.

[13 : 19] Why do we have a hope of a favorable end to our seeking? Because there's a loving father. So let's look at this in a bit more detail and see what Jesus has to say here.

Now, I would suggest to you that what Jesus is not saying here is that we shouldn't make moral judgments or that we shouldn't give ethical guidance.

Obviously, obviously, any society has to do that to survive and the kingdom of God certainly has to do that. Sometimes it has to pronounce judgment on people in the assembly as we were thinking a month or two back.

Any society has to be able to make moral judgments. But how do you do it?

And we could say, and I think that's what Jesus is saying here, is that if we make these judgments, we're not making them from the position of a righteous judge, but rather from the position of a fellow criminal.

[14 : 33] Remember, Jesus was crucified with two criminals, but they had two very different reactions. We read about that later on. Well, in Luke, actually, in Luke 23, 39 to 41, we read this.

It says, Which of those two were the ones who received grace, who received the blessing from Jesus, the one who was insistent on his own way and his own righteousness, or the one who acknowledged and says, We are punished justly.

And that was the latter one that Jesus said, Today you will be with me in paradise. The Lord's Prayer says, doesn't it, again, we were looking a few weeks back, forgive us our debts, as we have forgiven our debtors.

The forgive us our debts is not unqualified. The real point, I suggest, of this injunction, do not judge, or you too will be judged, is to instill compassion.

If we see the pictures, don't we, of the Middle Eastern refugees and their overcrowded boats, and even those pictures, probably bring out some compassion and pity in our hearts and minds.

[16 : 18] But how much more sympathy we would have if we had been in that same place ourselves, if we had been stuck in one of those boats ourselves. How much more compassion will we have then?

It would be so much greater, wouldn't it? And it's the same with those who are struggling with sin and failure. We can identify with them because we've been in the same boat, because we are in the same boat.

You wouldn't blame the refugees for making themselves homeless, and yet this remains that they need a home. We would sympathize with those trapped and damaged by the evil in their lives, but they do need to get free.

We can't say, you know, it doesn't matter. That's not what Jesus is saying at all when he says, do not judge. There will be a truly just judge anyway, and that is Jesus himself.

But, Jesus, I think, is saying, when you judge, remember you judge from the position of someone who is in the same position as the person you're pronouncing judgment on.

[17 : 31] God forgives and we forgive. Forgive us our debts, Lord, as we have forgiven our debtors. But we, God forgives and we forgive, but for different reasons.

Why does God forgive? God forgives because of his grace, because of his righteous love. But we forgive because we've been recipients of that love. Yes, of course, there must be a measure, a ruler, a measure of what is right.

And of course, Jesus did not say, don't remove the speck from your brother's eye. We need to do that. But, in holding up that measure, we acknowledge that we ourselves have failed to meet its standards.

That which we hold up as right just emphasizes our own failures. And so we have this rather humorous illustration from the carpenter's shop.

You remember that Jesus was a carpenter by trade. Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, let me take the speck out of your eye when all the time there is a plank in your own eye?

[18 : 49] Of course, it's exaggerated for effect. It's hyperbole. But, you can see what Jesus is getting at, isn't he? He's saying, if you want to see clearly to help somebody who is trapped in sin and wickedness and despair, then you have to do it from realizing that you have been in a worse situation yourself.

And unless that, you're out of that worse situation, you ain't going to do any good. Enjoy your own failure. Take the plank out of your own eye, as it were. And then you might well be able to see to do some good.

The message of Jesus, remember, is repent for the kingdom of heaven is near. And repent means turn or perhaps even return. Return to the Lord.

But we need to remember, of course, that the gospel is not all good news. It does come with a health warning at the beginning. Repent that the kingdom of heaven is near.

And we need to declare that. But we need to declare it as those who themselves have gone through that process and are currently always going through that process ourselves.

[20 : 12] And then we can perhaps declare with authority, repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near. But then Jesus moves on and he goes on to point out this is only half the problem anyway.

Jesus turns from talking about the speaker to the listener. Now, if the preacher is tainted, then so is his audience. Verse 6 has the feeling of a proverb and it's been suggested that it might be a proverb.

But the point of it we can see. Don't give dogs what is unclean. Dogs can't distinguish between clean and unclean foods.

If you watch Peppa Pig, you might see that Peppa Pig's mother wears a necklace. But I'm afraid, guys, Peppa Pig's mother is not a real pig.

Pigs have no interest in jewellery. Sensibly, really, because they can't eat it. It's just not in their nature to be interested in pearls.

[21 : 32] And it's quite likely that if you try and feed them pearls, they will turn on you. But by nature, men and women have no interest in hearing about even our own moral advice, let alone what God requires.

Men and women have their own way of relating to the world and they don't want us to try and change it. So don't necessarily expect a favorable reaction when you embark on your moral crusade, if that's what you do.

The more likely reaction is fury. You're more likely to get torn to pieces. But I don't think that Jesus here is suggesting to us that we shouldn't preach the word out of prudence.

In fact, he's already warned us earlier in the sermon, hasn't he, that if we are disciples, if we seek the kingdom, we are going to suffer persecution and opposition. He's not saying don't do it, really, but he's saying that remember that humans, beings, by nature, find no benefit in God's word.

And in fact, they may well just turn on you. So be prepared for that and more to the point, perhaps, pray that there will be a change.

[23 : 00] And that brings us to our next point. Oh yeah, so I was going to say, but if that's the case, if both the preacher and the audience are tainted, basically have evil in their hearts, is that it then?

Perhaps we might as well pack up shop, might as well close the church down. It's game over, isn't it? Because there's no hope, but there is hope.

So let's move on to these famous words in verse 7, ask, seek, knock. because, why is it worth doing that?

Because there are still the promises, the promises that Jesus gave us at the beginning of the sermon. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.

[24 : 21] We ask and seek and knock for that which we need, but don't have, of course. And verse 7 is often applied generally to prayer, and it clearly is about prayer, although it's as much, I think, about faith as about prayer.

But I don't think we should take it out of its context. I think we need to see this as part of Jesus' overall message.

So what are we to ask for? Jesus has already told us that, hasn't he? Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

That was chapter 6 verse 10. What we are to ask for is that the kingdom will come. to pray for the coming of the kingdom.

We ask for the righteousness we do not have. But then Jesus promises that we will receive. And what are we seeking for? Well, Jesus has already told us that in chapter 6 verse 33.

[25 : 32] Seek first, guess what, his kingdom and his righteousness. and all these things will be given to you as well. What we are seeking is the kingdom.

We seek a different kingdom as Hebrews says, one different to the one we live in, a city whose builder and architect is God as the scripture says. And Jesus promises that we will find it.

And then there's this knocking business. What is it exactly that we're trying to get into? Well, I did think about it and look, and I don't think Jesus has answered that.

But the first two are a clue, aren't they? What we're trying to get into, what we're knocking on the door of, is the kingdom. The whole sermon is about the kingdom.

So it is difficult to attribute this knocking to anything else. a certain determination is needed to get into the kingdom. It just doesn't sort of happen. We need to seek it.

[26 : 45] We need to knock to gain admittance. But Jesus has promised that the door will be opened. But we need to think about that a little bit because I think that it's not something you do once, I think.

You could say, well, we knock, we're admitted to the kingdom, great we're in. We can forget about that now. But I don't think that's what Jesus is saying. He is talking to the disciples.

He's talking to those largely who are his disciples. And I think this is something about the kingdom lifestyle. The kingdom lifestyle doesn't mean that just once we ask, just once we seek, just once we knock.

It's a life of asking for the kingdom to come. After all, we pray the Lord's prayer. We don't just pray the Lord's prayer once, do we? We pray it or something like it every time.

It's meant to be a life of seeking that kingdom righteousness, seeking first the good of the kingdom, and we need other stuff as well. Of course we do.

[28 : 02] It wouldn't literally be very good advice if whatever problem you had, all I told you was the story of Jesus. You might need some other advice as well. That is the priority, the business of the kingdom.

kingdom. And that's what we need to be seeking. And it's a lifetime of seeking, the business of the kingdom.

And what about this knocking then? if that's something we're supposed to be doing all the time, how does that work? I'm not sure I can give you a completely clear answer to that, but I think perhaps part of it at least is that we should always be knocking as it were, perhaps to get further in, to get admission further into the locked places of the kingdom, to go in deeper.

If you go to one of the royal palaces you find they have a series of rooms that each one is, you know, pretty well anyone can get in the first room.

To get in the second room you've got to be an aristocrat or somebody in the service of the king. And of course the nearer you get to the king then the more rooms you have to go. I don't know whether that's a useful illustration or not, but I'm sure that there's something like that that we're supposed to be knocking always.

[29 : 27] So I want to know more about the kingdom. I want to get closer to the throne room. So we live on a constant life of asking and seeking and knocking.

Now I started by talking about the moral views of the society around us and it's a fair question I guess to ask whether this applies to Jesus' disciples only or whether we should seek to apply it to the world around us.

Paul later says I don't judge the outside world, I judge only in the church. And verse six would certainly seem to indicate the main focus is in the church.

It is living this lifestyle ourselves and having compassion for those around us among God's people. The world is not prepared to listen.

And yet on the other hand Jesus did also say you are the light of the world, a city on a hill cannot be hidden. Chapter five verse fourteen. He talks about us being the salt and light of the world, church being that, which suggests that we are supposed to shed some light out into the world as well, not just be a sort of closed, put up the wall around and close ourselves off from the world.

[31 : 04] We are to be a light to the world, but even then of course we remember that a light has a dual function. I've got a light that comes on when you come up to our porch, turns itself on automatically.

And for those of us who are coming in, it's a light of welcome, isn't it? It says there's comfort and welcome to be found here. But it has a dual function, it also shines a light on anybody who's trying to break in and exposes the activities of the burglar and when we think about being the light of the world.

I suppose we have to remember that both those who are involved. We welcome those who will come into the kingdom, but we also have to say that to shine on what is wrong in the world around us, and yet we have to do it, as I've said, with compassion, thinking that we are sinners ourselves, thinking it is all of grace.

Paul himself described himself as the chief of sinners, didn't he? and we all ought to be, in a sense, competitors for that title. If we all remember that we are the chief of sinners, each one of us is the chief of sinners, then we will have compassion in the world around while we try and put things right. The church models the kingdom, and the kingdom is hidden, but it's revealed to the world through the church. but whether we apply this largely to ourselves as a people or to the world outside, it is still a matter of lifestyle, of modelling how the kingdom should run, how the kingdom works.

[32 : 53] This is the social contract, if you like, of the kingdom. We seek and we knock because we hunger and thirst for righteousness, and we expect a good outcome, because there's a good father.

A truly loving father does not feed his children on crisps and Mars bars. He provides good, nutritious food. The commentator, R.T.

France, reports interestingly, I don't know how he knows this, but he's probably got it from somebody else, but he reports that there's a catfish that lives in the Sea of Galilee, called Clarius Lazera, it's called, apparently, and it's rather eel-like, and so it might at first be mistaken for a snake.

But the fish, of course, is harmless, you can eat it safely, whereas the snake will bite. And you could say there's something about Mars bars, can't you?

They may look like nutritious food, but they can cause you harm. So, not saying you should never eat Mars bars, I eat Mars bars sometimes, I should say, but if we live on a diet in Mars bars, it ain't gonna do us any good.

[34 : 13] But what have we got to say here?

That if we do want to model the lifestyle of the kingdom, then self-righteous moralizing might appear to be helpful, but it actually does more harm than good. But if we want to provide true nutrition for the hungry, true quenching for those who are dying of thirst, then we need the gifts provided by the good father.

And we need to be obedient children, don't we? A child might scream at first when she's told to eat her greens, to eat up the stuff that's good for her.

She'll scream for sweets and sugar. But the father will not give in. A son will be allowed in the kitchen once he learns to take care with the knives and not raid the fridge.

Perhaps that's knocking as it were, we're knocking to get into the kitchen perhaps of the kingdom to be trusted with the knives and not take out what we shouldn't.

[35 : 34] So we ask for real righteousness and we seek the one kingdom, the kingdom not of this world and we knock to gain admittance.

So if you do look at this sermon thing, checklist that Phil's got, it says you've got to have an impact statement. The kind of thing that sums up the whole sermon.

And in verse 12 of course we have Jesus' impact statement. The point really that he's been working through although it's sermon and which he's going to expand in the rest of the stuff that Ben's going to tell us about next week.

And it's been called the golden rule. Christians have called it the golden rule for a long time. It's not a scripture term but it's not a bad term for it. And what is it?

It's in everything do to others what you would have them do to you. You want to know what the law and the prophets are about? Then that's it. In everything do to others what you would have them do to you.

[36 : 51] But the interesting thing actually of course is that Jesus didn't exactly invent this. from scratch.

We think it's Jesus teaching but there was a form of the golden rule before that. Similar ideas actually are found in both Greek thought and in some Jewish rabbis notably in one called Hillel. But there is a crucial difference. What Hillel says is the law is about not doing to others what you would rather they did not do to you.

but Jesus turns this on its head. The law is not only about prohibiting that which is good which is wrong sorry.

If you think of it that way and you will try and tick the boxes and you will land up with self-righteous judgment. judgment. And you'll judge everybody who does not fit exactly into your mould.

[37 : 55] And of course you conveniently forget the bits of the law that you're not doing properly and just focus on the bits that the people next to you are not doing properly. But ultimately it's only you that will fit into your mould and that will make the kingdom very lonely but fortunately it doesn't work like that.

We don't look at it as as the law as merely prohibiting what is wrong. The law is there in fact to tell us what the kingdom is about.

How the kingdom works. What the social contract of the kingdom is. So Jesus tells us to look at it his way round. Not that the law is not doing to others what you don't want them to do to you but that it is doing to others what you would like them to do to you.

And of course he's going to say more about that next week when Ben comes to bring the end of the sermon to us. But now we can say the law is not just a measure of sin it is that but more significantly it exists to promote righteousness.

So when the Ten Commandments say do not commit adultery what it's really saying is be faithful in your marriage covenant and in other covenants that you're involved in.

[39 : 24] When it's saying do not make worship false gods it's saying you should worship the true God. the law is there to promote righteousness and that's what it's about.

Think positive Jesus says like the father who seeks to be good gifts if we want to be his children we should be actively seeking the good of others.

and if you're not sure what that means then this golden rule is a good way to look at it. Just think what you would like others to do to you. You would like them to forgive rather than condemn wouldn't you?

Because you know that you need forgiveness. You would like them to be generous rather than trying to rip you off. You'd like them to be honest to you and so you'd better be generous and honest with others.

You'd like them to be friendly and patient rather than angry and impatient wouldn't you? Because it hurts when somebody gets angry with you or somebody is impatient with you.

[40 : 42] Fair enough. If you'd like them to be friendly and patient then how about being friendly and patient with those around you. Blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth.

You'd like them to treat your marriage and family with respect so don't go around undermining your family or anyone else's marriage. You would like them to encourage and support you in your walk with God won't you?

You would like them to tell you the story of Jesus when you need to be reminded of it. So don't go putting others down claiming they're a spiritual disaster even if they are in a sense but rather come

with a word of encouragement come with a word of support reminding them of the love of Jesus of the love of the Father who gives good gifts and if they're not behaving in an appropriate way then remember who they're really offending.

so what's my impact statement well I suppose I would say it's that Christian ethics starts from the position that every and each one of us is a murderer at heart each one of us has in ourselves the capacity to do great evil and each one of us does is a sinner and has sinned in many ways we may not have committed adultery we may not have committed murder but as Jesus points out we've been angry we've been impatient we've put others down to promote ourselves but if you start from that point and the world would say if you start from that point that each of us has it in us to be a murderer then there is hope the world would say well that's a terrible thing it means that there is no hope but no there is hope if we start from that place then we can move away from there because Jesus tells us how to do that he's told us that we can seek righteousness and the gifts that he the God Father gives us will be those that we need he tells us that there is forgiveness and righteousness and it is found in Jesus and I won't steal Ben's thunder but he's going to tell us next week that we build on the words of Jesus and if we do that then we will not find ourselves destroyed but the gospel is not all good news remember the gospel is still repent for the kingdom of heaven is near and we need always to be asking are we living in that way are we always living in the way of kingdom righteousness so let's sing again again