

The Generous Giver

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[0 : 0 0] Friends, I want to start this week's Bible talk with a problem. You see, we are nearing the end of the Sermon on the Mount and this series on it.

And as I read a number of the commentators this week, I found that quite a number struggled with this little passage we're going to have a look at today. And they struggled with how it fitted into the rest of the Sermon on the Mount.

Some saw that it didn't, but they thought that it had been imported from Luke or elsewhere. Some considered that there was very little cohesion between the elements of these, within these 12 verses themselves.

Others thought that there was very little connection with what had gone before. And some of the commentators just clearly struggled with it. And initially I too wondered, because I like to make sense of all these things and like to see how they fit into their context.

And I thought some of the solutions proposed were a little far-fetched, if not pushed. And so, but then I began to see some connections. And I began to see relationships both internally and with the preceding teaching of Jesus.

[1 : 0 3] And I began to propose a solution in my own mind. And so today I want to try it out on you. You're guinea pigs today. First, I'm going to state my proposed solution.

Then I'm going to work through the passages to show you the connection. So here we go. Now, first, I'm hoping that you remember three things about last week. Okay, first thing, I'm hoping you remember that great Psalm, Psalm 145.

And I wonder if you remember what it said. It said that God is generous, benevolent, kind and loving. His hand is filled with good things for his people.

They look to him and he fills them with good things. Second, I'm hoping that you remember that the passage was all about worry and anxiety. Not only last week, but the week before.

Well, last week was worry and anxiety. The week before was possessions and so on. And I said to you that one of the ways to assuage our anxiety is to remember that God is generous, as the Old Testament says, and as creation itself testifies.

[2 : 0 6] Third, I'm hoping that you remember what Jesus said is the alternative to worry. It is to seek first God's kingdom and his righteousness. And God will generously add all these other things as well.

In other words, Jesus told us to be totally centered on God and his kingdom. We should be totally centered on him. God, the generous God, would look after the rest.

So now here's my proposal. My view is that the link between the verses we read this week and last week and this week are twofold.

First, the verses we look at this week flow from what Jesus said about God-centeredness last week. And second, these verses also flow from what Jesus has just taught us about the character and disposition of God to be generous.

In my view, both of those ideas flow through this, our passage for today. However, there is a difference. You see, in our passage last week and the week before, the focus fell on possessions and money.

[3 : 09] However, in our passage for today, the focus falls on relationships, both with God and each other. So let's try and test this out and see how we go. And you can perhaps give me some feedback afterwards.

So in your Bibles, turn with me to Matthew 7, please. And I think it's 791 from memory, but anyway. 971.

Well, the numbers are right. Now, Jesus is continuing to teach his disciples and the gathered people. And look at verses 1 to 5 first.

Look at what Jesus says and remind yourself of this again. He says, do not judge or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged. And with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.

Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank of wood in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, let me take the speck out of your own eye, when all this time there's a plank in your own eye?

[4 : 06] You hypocrite. First take out the plank from your own eye. And then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye. Now, first, let's make clear what this passage is not about.

It is not about the way most people seem to use it, in my view. That is, it's not about suspending the faculty of judgment. It's not about never finding fault with others. It's not overlooking the sins and foibles of others.

It's not about never discerning what is good and bad and making announcements on it. Now, how do I know that? Well, throughout the whole of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus has been asking us to do that very thing. He's been asking us to make judgments, hasn't he?

He's been asking us to be discerning. And in fact, look at verse 7. In order to do verse 7, you have to actually make some judgments, don't you? You have to do some discerning.

You need to work out who pigs and dogs are, for a start. Okay? And in verse 15, you need to discern who false prophets are by recognizing their fruits. So you've got to do some judgment to do this particular task.

[5 : 08] And then throughout the New Testament, the apostles and Christians as a whole discern truth and falsehood and they name it. So it's not about not making decisions about what's right and wrong.

So what is it about? Look at verses 4 and 5. And I want you to look carefully at their order. First thing we notice is that we notice the speck in the eye of someone else.

Second thing, there's a plank in our own eye. Third, we're told by Jesus to take the plank out of our own eye. Fourth, that will then allow us to see clearly instead of falsely.

And fifth, that will allow us to do this fifth thing, which is to take the speck out of our brother's eye or sister's eye. So what do you think the center is of this little scenario? It's number three, isn't it?

It's taking the plank out of your own eye. I like to think it's a bit of 2x4 or something like that. You know, really big and there's a little bit of sawdust in the other person's eye. So once we've done that, you see, once we've taken the plank out of our own eye, we can see clearly to help and not condemn the other person.

[6 : 18] So what do you think then this passage is about? It's not about prohibiting judgment, as I've said. It's about telling us to place God at the center because he's the judge, not us.

It's about letting God be God and not to try and take his place in assessing others. But there's more. It is about centering on helping others rather than justifying ourselves and condemning others.

That's why God's so concerned or Jesus is so concerned with the plank. Take the 2x4 out of your eye so you can do the appropriate thing, which is to help your brother who's got this tiny little speck in their own eye.

It's about not being judgmental and censorious, in other words. It's about knowing yourself well and being concerned about others. Now flip over in your Bibles to Romans 14 verse 10.

Not far to go. Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts, Romans 14. And look at verse 10. So Romans 14 verse 10. Look at what Paul says.

[7 : 18] He says, Why then do you judge your brother or sister? And why do you treat them with contempt? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat.

It is written, As surely as I live, says the Lord, every knee will bow before me, every tongue will acknowledge God. So then, each of us will give an account of ourselves before God.

Therefore, let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put a stumbling block or an obstacle in the way of the brother or sister. Can you see the weight of this passage?

The weight is on letting God be God and helping your brother or sister. Which I think is where the weight is in Matthew's Gospel. So flip back to Matthew's Gospel. Can you see what's being said?

This is about God and people-centeredness. Making judgments about others does what? It puts us at the center, doesn't it? Truly understanding our place in relation to God will actually make us humble.

[8 : 16] Truly understanding the priority of others in our actions will cause us to be godly. Now let's go to Matthew 7 verse 6 and look at what Jesus says. He says, Do not give dogs what is sacred.

Do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet and turn and tear you to pieces. Now, the words what is sacred here more literally mean what is holy and the sense is this.

Don't give what is holy to dogs and don't throw your pearls before swine or they, that is the swine, will trample your pearls underfoot and the dogs will outturn and maw you.

So you can see the sense of it. Now let's try and understand it. First, I need to tell you a little about the dogs here. They are not my dear little Kelpies who are fed twice a day, follow me around, sit at my feet and mostly do what I tell them to do.

No, no, these dogs spoken about are more like dingoes. That is, they are wild scavenging dogs that are never fed by anyone and they fend for themselves and in the ancient world they were very valuable.

[9 : 30] They played a useful role in disposing of rubbish in the ancient world. But they were always hungry. They are always capable of aggression in order to get their food.

Pigs, you see, are a quite different image, aren't they, when you think about it? Pigs are, well they were, though they can be feral, they were probably domestic animals being referred to here that are fed and fed for a purpose and unlike dogs, they are therefore well fed and they like their food.

and let me tell you that pigs, strangely enough, have absolutely no interest in pearls. It is of absolutely no concern to them. Alright, so that's a little bit of background about dogs and pigs in ancient Palestine.

Now, now for the second thing. I've told you the word sacred in our versions probably means, it's better translated, what is holy. Now, if you were a Jew, imagine you're a Jew listening to Jesus and that's probably who most of the people were, your mind wouldn't actually, when he talks about what is holy, think about holy food.

That is dedicated food, food dedicated to God. And can you see what then is being said? Jesus is saying that both dogs and pigs are interested in food. However, holy food, food dedicated to God is totally inappropriate for dogs.

[10 : 53] It belongs to God. And pearls, where they're totally inappropriate for pigs, they may be good for some purposes, pearls, but as food for pigs, they just don't work and they're totally inappropriate.

Don't do it. Can you see what's going on? Jesus is saying we should be very careful. We should devote appropriate things to appropriate causes. And Jesus has told us already in the Sermon on the Mount what is the ultimate cause.

The ultimate cause is God's kingdom and his righteousness. Now let's try and work it through. We are holy people. We are set aside for God.

Not devoting ourselves and all that we have and are to God, but is not doing that, is like giving holy food to scavenging dogs and pearls to swine. It may end up being trampled on by them or torn in, we may end up being trampled on by them or torn to pieces by them.

Friends, I wonder if you can see the similarities between what Jesus is saying here and what we heard him say last week. He's saying that compared to God, every other cause or object that you might devote your attention to is a dog or a pig.

[12 : 04] Okay? Neither are fit recipients of the things that actually belong to God. We were created for God. We are holy to God.

We are to be centered on God and the things of God. Giving ourselves other than to God may actually destroy us in the long run. So can you hear it again? Can you hear what Jesus is saying?

He's saying, be centered on God. Make him the focus of your attention. Now let's turn to the third saying for today, verses 7 to 11. Look at it with me. Jesus says, Ask and it will be given to you.

Seek and you will find. Knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives. The one who seeks finds and to the one who knocks the door will be opened. Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone?

Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If then you who are evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him?

[13 : 03] Now, let me again point out some things to you. First, the saying of Jesus here begins and ends by talking about asking God for things. It's therefore about people in want of things.

Then in the middle of the saying, there's a comparison between human parents, evil human parents, and the good God. And what Jesus says is, if sinful human beings are generous with their children, how much more will the good and generous God overflow with good things for his children?

By the way, there was a how much more that we heard last week as well, wasn't it? If God can clothe the lilies of the field, how much more will he not look after you? So, the interesting thing here is that we're not told what the children of God ask him for, are we?

Nor are we told what they seek out. And nor are we told where they are to knock and what they are to hope is opened. Well, actually a door, but not what lies behind it.

However, if we read the whole of the Sermon on the Mount, we would know. Imagine you had just heard the last verses of chapter 6. You'd know what you ought to be seeking, wouldn't you?

[14 : 15] Our passage last week told us we're to seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness. And while Jesus may have had other things in mind, if his disciples had just been listening, you know, two or three minutes earlier, and if they'd listened to his prayer that he prayed at the beginning of chapter 6, they would know.

What would they want? They would want God's name to be hallowed. They'd want his kingdom to come. They would want his will to be done. Or they would pray to him for daily bread, as he told them to.

But the overwhelming desire that they would have would be that God's kingdom come and his righteousness would be seen. They would in prayer, therefore, seek first his kingdom, and his righteousness.

And as they did, what would they find? They would find that God gives generously to those who so ask, seek and knock. I wonder if you can see the parallel here.

In chapter 6, Jesus assured the disciples that God the creator dressed the flowers of the field, even though they were destined for destruction. He was merciful, gracious, benevolent, giving, kind.

[15 : 20] He decked out the flowers of the field with grander clothes than even Solomon in all his grandeur had ever been clothed with. And then he said, if that was so, then how much more would he supply the needs of his children?

Remember Psalm 145, friends? God fills his hands with good things for his people. And if so, then surely he will answer the prayers of his saints when they seek first his kingdom and his righteousness.

He'll answer many more prayers for them as well, but surely he will answer that prayer. He will do it when they ask, when they seek, when they knock.

And when they put him and his priorities at the center of their lives and turn to him, he will give them all good things that their hearts cry out for. With that, we come to verse 12.

Have a look at it. Jesus says, so in everything do to others what you would have them do to you. For this sums up the law and the prophets. Again, I just want to tell you a few things about this.

[16 : 24] Since the 18th century, this saying by Jesus has been known as the golden rule. Now we need to notice a few things about it. First, we need to make sure that we hear the word so or therefore right at the beginning.

And we need to ask, what is the so or the therefore referring to? What is the therefore, therefore, as it were? It could just refer to verses 7 to 11 or 1 to 11 or it could refer to all that Jesus has said since he finished his introduction to the sermon in Matthew 5.17.

So in your Bibles, flip back to Matthew 5.17. I think it's this option that Jesus refers to. Have a look at Matthew 5.17 and do you notice that Jesus says that he's not come to abolish the law or the prophets?

Did you hear the word law and prophets? Well, here again in chapter 7 he's speaking about the law and the prophets and I think they're sort of little bookends as it were. I think what he has in mind is this whole section of his sermon.

Second, we need to understand that the golden rule is actually not unique to Jesus and nor is he the first person to express the sentiment. Others express it negatively. I want to give you some examples.

[17 : 30] Rabbi Hillel was a Pharisaic leader in the late first century before Christ. So before Jesus in other words. And it was said that when he was quizzed about a quick summary of the law, he said, listen to this, it's wonderful.

It's different to Jesus but notice how it's different. What is hateful to you do not do to your neighbour. I don't think it's as powerful as the positive one, is it? But it works.

What is hateful for you don't do to your neighbour. And that's the whole Torah, he says. Well, the rest is commentary thereon. So go and learn it. Elsewhere, the same man, Rabbi Hillel, also said when asked about a rule that summarised the whole law, he said, thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.

He then clarified it by quoting another rabbi who is said to have commented that this is the greatest principle in the law. So it wasn't new to Jesus but Jesus quite rightly along with many others said this is a great summary of the first five books of the Old Testament.

That is the law, the Torah. There's a first thing to notice, that's the first, sorry, the next thing to notice about the golden rule and the third thing is that it follows on from verses 7 to 11.

[18 : 41] In other words, what it does is it follows this description of God the Father and him having this great and loving response to the needs of his children. So what have you just heard when you hear this?

You've heard God's loving and generous and kind. Such benevolence, such generosity is actually to be seen in his disciples who will do unto others as they want done to themselves.

That is, they are to do unto others as they themselves would ask, seek and knock at God's door for and ask him to do for them. God's readiness for his children is to be matched by the readiness of his children to do good to others.

They are to be generous as their father is generous. They are to be full of goodness to those around them. They are to be marked by the love of their father in their relationships and their actions with each other. So now let's go back to my proposal at the beginning.

Do you remember what I said? I said that the link between these verses and those that we looked at last week is twofold. First, our verses for this week follow from what Jesus said about being God-centered.

[19 : 49] Second, these verses also flow from what Jesus taught about God's character and disposition to be generous. but there's a little difference. Last week, focus fell on possessions and money.

This week, focus falls on relationships. So what have we found as Jesus has looked at relationships amongst Christians? Is our proposal, is my proposal, borne out?

Well, I think it is, isn't it? The verses about judging in one to five are about being God-centered and people-centered, aren't they? Let God be the judge and you make sure you're taking planks out of your own eye so that you can help your brother or sister.

And making judgments about others puts us at the center. We're to avoid that. We're to see God as the one true judge. And then there's the stuff about dogs and pigs.

And as we saw, it's about being totally centered on God and the things that are his and not taking things that are God's, i.e. ourselves and just putting them before things we shouldn't.

[20 : 49] Compared to God, every other cause or object a person might have is a metaphorical pig or dog. The things that belong to God belong to God and we should give him and his righteousness priority.

We're to be centered on God and the things of God. Now look at verses 7-11. Oh, then we looked at them and we saw the emphasis fell on God as generous. And it was linked with seeking his kingdom and righteousness.

And we saw that God's will be generous in his answer to the prayer of the saints when they ask, seek or knock at his door after good things of the kingdom and righteousness. When they are so centered on him and his priorities, how will we find God?

Well, we'll find him to have a hand, hands filled with good things. He will give them all good things that their hearts cry out, but particularly his kingdom and his righteousness. And finally, there's verse 12.

We saw Jesus urging his disciples to do unto others as they would have them do unto them. In other words, in their relationships, they are to be full of generosity.

[21 : 53] They clear, that same generosity they've clearly sought from God and would like to have from other human beings. They're to be marked by their love of the Father in their relationships, their actions toward each other.

Let me just wrap this up by saying this. We, friends, if we are Christians, have been loved with a very, very great love. The love of God displayed toward us in the death of his Son for us springs from the heart of a very generous and loving God.

Now, I know you agree with this. Friends, if this is so, then I want to urge you to respond to this even more. I want to urge you to prove your love of God by your love of others and particularly your love for your fellow Christians.

and the love you have should not just be something that you do in here or even just in your heart as it were. It shouldn't just be a feeling, it should be a love that acts just as God's love toward us acted.

It should affect our actions toward other people. Friends, I want to ask you today, will you choose again this day to be Christians in your actions? when you think to speak out in judgment of others, will you look first to God your judge?

[23 : 16] And will you look at how he viewed you and then acted towards you when he forgave you in Christ? And will you then look at your own failings? And will you take the bit of four by two out of your own eye before presuming to judge others?

Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. So if you see a brother or a sister in need, friends, open your heart, open your home, open your wallet and open your hand and fill it with good things even as God does.

Do whatever you can to help. If they want cheering and comfort, well give them cheer and comfort. If they weep, then weep with them. If they need either physical, financial, emotional, or any other help, then be like God toward them.

If they're old and frail, respect them, help them, visit them, aid them. If they're young and struggling with the burden of children and mortgages and so on, offer help.

Think of what you would have liked someone to do when you were in that situation and then do it for them. Love self-sacrificially, love generously, do for them and what you would have someone do for you.

[24 : 37] Friends, I pray for our church here. There is so much love of God here and so much love of God's word. And I see so much evidence of love of God's people as well.

It's great to see, but I want to urge you to excel even more. May outsiders say of us, look at how these Christians at Holy Trinity love each other. and may they see in us the generous love of our brothers and sisters.

So sisters and brothers, let us love one another for love is of God and he has loved us with an exceedingly great love. Let us therefore put him at the centre of our lives and let us seek first his kingdom and his righteousness and let it be seen first in our relationships and may God help us to do this for Christ's sake.

Amen. And let's pray. Father, we know that love is from you and that you have loved us with an exceedingly great love in your son.

Please help us to therefore put you at the centre of our lives and to seek first your kingdom and your righteousness and may that be seen here at Holy Trinity first in our relationships. May you help us in this?

[25 : 54] We pray for Christ's sake and in his name. Amen.