

“Do Not Give Your Years to the Merciless”

Scripture Text: Matthew 7:6-11

December 4, 2022 – 6:00pm Evening Service

Faith Presbyterian Church, Tacoma, WA

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The Reading of the Word

Matt. 5:17 “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. 18 For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. 19 Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. 20 For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Matt. 7:6 “Do not give dogs what is holy, and do not throw your pearls before pigs, lest they trample them underfoot and turn to attack you. 7 “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. 8 For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. 9 Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? 10 Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? 11 If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!”

This is the Word of the Lord. *Thanks be to God.*

As one commentator writes, “We have now arrived at the verse that is the most puzzling, mysterious, and indeed baffling of all in the sermon: 7:6.” [Stassen, 289]

Other scholars argue that it does not fit...[and] conclude that it lacks context and therefore lacks discernible meaning. [Stassen, 289]

In other words, what they are saying is, “this verse doesn’t make any sense.”

Tonight, I want to begin a little differently than normal. I believe it would be helpful for us to spend a moment focusing on this verse as it plays a pivotal role in the interpretation of the verses we have before us this evening.

I’d like to take you briefly through ways this verse has been interpreted, and then show you how I believe this passage should be understood and interpreted, and then go on to

expound it from there. So, stick with me, as I hope to show you what might be a different way to interpret this commonly applied passage.

A Puzzling Proverb

What is the main verse in question? The main verse I would like us to consider is Matthew 7:6. It is a proverb of sorts:

“Do not give dogs what is holy, and do not throw your pearls before pigs, lest they trample them underfoot and turn to attack you. [Matthew 7:6]

Perhaps the most common interpretation of the verse, “do not throw your pearls before swine” is to connect this teaching to the wisdom of the book of Proverbs, where in chapter 23:9, we read, “Do not speak in the hearing of a fool, for he will despise the good sense of your words.”

Some would paraphrase that to mean, don’t waste your time with people who refuse to listen. If you throw the gospel before people who refuse to listen, you are wasting your time and throwing out the gospel to be trampled upon.

Even Meriam Websters has this listed as a cultural idiom and defines it this way:

“to give or offer something valuable to someone who does not understand its value”

And even though this is the most common interpretation, most commentators actually find this interpretation unsatisfying.

They particularly find it troublesome as that interpretation appears to contradict what Jesus has just taught against judging one another in the section before (see verses 1-5), To go from teaching us not to judge, to all of a sudden teaching that we **should** actually judge one another seems contradictory. [Stassen, 289]

No doubt, this is a difficult verse for us. It doesn’t immediately make sense to us, and it doesn’t seem to fit with the verses prior, nor with the verses following at first glance. But that is in large part, due to the widespread interpretation we give it, which I believe is in some ways too narrow.

When I was discussing the difficulty of this verse with Pastor Nicoletti, he told me that he had read a helpful article on this by an author by the name of Glen H. Stassen. When I asked him for the reference, I realized that he had already sent it to me before for other difficult passages on the Sermon on the Mount. In fact, I think this was the third time that Pastor Nicoletti had recommended this excellent resource to me. Well, I’m grateful for his patience and perseverance and thankful I finally listened. Especially because I think Stassen got it right.

You see, in his article [“The Fourteen Triads of the Sermon on the Mount”] Stassen explains how Jesus’ teachings in the Sermon on the Mount follows a pattern.

It is a little technical, but also straightforward. I hope it makes some sense. Here is what he argues. The basic gist is that when Jesus is teaching on the sermon on the mount, he teaches using a series of triads. Here is what I mean:

- 1) First, he gives a traditional negative teaching,
- 2) then Jesus shows how destructive it is, and
- 3) then third, he offers a transformative teaching.

So, in this passage we would have the traditional negative teaching:

“Do not give dogs what is holy, and do not throw your pearls before pigs.”

Then from there Jesus shows the consequence of the destructive teaching:

lest they trample them underfoot and turn to attack you. [Matthew 7:6]

Finally, Jesus gives the transformative teaching:

Turn to the Father, ask him, seek him and knock on his door (the rest of the passage).

This makes a lot of sense. See, the transforming teaching is clear. He explains, you are to “give your trust, your loyalty, and your prayers, to your Father in Heaven.” He is merciful, caring and knows how to give good gifts. God deserves our trust and loyalty more than the ‘dogs’ and ‘pigs’ do.” [Stassen, 287]

If Stassen is right, then what can we conclude about these verses? Well, we can conclude that we are not to give our trust and our loyalty to the dogs and pigs of this world, instead we are to entrust all that we are to God. And this is completely in line with Jesus’ teaching earlier in this sermon that teaches us to put our trust and loyalty in God rather than in treasures on earth, in mammon or in prestige before others. [Stassen, 287-288]

See, up until this point, we have been given repeated warnings on the sermon on the mount that we are not to seek after the approval of man. We are not to pray for public consumption, we are not to give to the needy in view of others. When we fast, it is not to impress others. Rather, Jesus teaches that our giving should be for him only. Our prayers and our fasting are for God’s glory, not for our reputation before man.

See, the pearls and that which is holy (or set apart) is not a teaching, but all of who we are. Our lives, our time, and our resources. Our lives as God’s children.

And this section continues that thread *and* develops it further. Jesus shows us that there is no benefit, no return on investment when we trust and live for the loyalty of the world. The world will turn on us, and devour us.

Stassen is also helpful in describing what is meant here by pigs.

He finds that it is very likely that passages referring to pigs, could have been references to the Roman military occupation of Palestine. It was common knowledge that pigs were often sacrificed to Roman gods, and evidently “no Roman tomb was legally protected without a pig being sacrificed....” [Stassen, 292]

He helpfully explains:

“The temptation to give loyalty and trust to the Roman Empire, in search of prestige, power, and wealth, was real in the first century, as was the outcome of being trampled underfoot (Matt 7:6) and torn in pieces by the Roman troops by Matthew’s time. Being “trampled underfoot” is the fate salt deserves when it has lost its distinctiveness by compromising with the world (Matt 5:13). [Stassen, 292]

See, this makes a lot of sense. We know what it is like to live in a world where we are not the dominant culture. Much like the Jews and Christians of Jesus’ day, the temptation to give their loyalty over to the worldly Roman Empire, must have been real. How tempting it would have been to gain status, financial security, and even protection for their families by cozying up to the Roman Empire and putting their trust in it.

And no doubt, when they were no longer useful to the Roman Empire, they would easily be betrayed and trampled underfoot.

So, in summary, the interpretation of this passage, therefore, shows us that Jesus is teaching that our lives, our loyalty, and our security, cannot be tied up in worldly securities.

The world does not care for us and is not loyal to us. And make no mistake, it can and will turn on us when it pleases. There are negative consequences to trusting in the world.

Do not give your life – your years - to the world. For it will be merciless with us.

And Jesus is teaching this, because it is so easy to trust and rest in what we can see. It is easy to trust in what we see in the short run, but it ends up costing us more than we realize. So, Jesus calls us to put our lives, our years, and our resources into what we cannot see. Into the service of our heavenly Father.

Where We Invest Matters

In the year 2000, Netflix, at that time a mail-in movie lending company, offered Blockbuster Video the opportunity to buy them out for \$50 million. Blockbuster rejected the offer and 10 years later, filed for bankruptcy, while watching Netflix soar to its current multi-billion-dollar status.

Similarly in 1999, Google Inc., offered to sell their company to a company called Excite for \$750,000. Instead, Excite chose to purchase AskJeeves.com. This decision kept them from owning the \$253 billion company that Google is today, with its over 1 trillion dollar valuation.

As we think of the tremendous loss these people and companies took by missing these opportunities, we can imagine the regret that they must have. Hindsight might be 20/20, but who can know the future? Had they known for certain that they had the opportunity of a lifetime, they never would have passed it up.

We are all given opportunities throughout our lives. We make choices all the time, from the financial investments we make, to the jobs that we take, to the schools we choose. Sometimes our decisions pay dividends for the rest of our lives, and other times we suffer the consequences of our poor decisions. How can we avoid making poor decisions?

In our passage this evening, Jesus shows us that when we put our loyalty in him, we always receive good gifts. And conversely, when we look to the things in this world for our hope, the world will ultimately leave us devastated.

The question is, where is your loyalty? Do we “put all our eggs in one basket” of God’s kingdom, so to speak, or do we spread our loyalty in the world as well so we can be safe if something in life doesn’t go our way?

Each of us have been given different giftings and responsibilities, where we invest our time, our resources, and our lives, reveal where our trust is. So how are you stewarding God’s gifts?

The Father’s Gift of Stewardship

If you recall the parable of the talents, in Luke 19 & Matthew 25, Jesus describes the nature of the Kingdom of Heaven, and illustrates the fact that we have all been given different responsibilities. Some of us here this evening are given several talents, others only a few and still others only one. And that parable ends with some servants investing improperly and others investing well.

As Pastor Nicoletti helpfully illustrated a few weeks ago, God intentionally “distributed his blessings to people unevenly and then in a variety of ways he called on us to be his stewards – his servants – distributing those blessings to others as they had need.” [From Steven Nicoletti’s sermon from 11/6/22 on Deuteronomy 5:6, 19 entitled “The Eighth Commandment”]

Whether we are called to fill a little space or large place in the Kingdom of heaven, regardless of size, we are all given the wonderful responsibility to be part of God's kingdom! And to use what we have been given – big or small - for his glory, for the good of the church and for our good.

God gives us the privilege of being stewards of what he has given us. He has given us a place in his kingdom to serve. And when we use what we have, when we give our lives for his purposes, we see that he blesses our ways beyond what we would expect.

And remarkably, God not only gives us a place in his kingdom work, but he gives us a tremendous amount of flexibility in how we use what he has given us. He does not confine us all to the same path, nor does he give all of us the same abilities and resources, nor does he give us equal portions.

Some are called to serve God primarily through their prayers. Lifting up his people and his mission. Others are called to give primarily of their time to serve those who are homebound. Some care for those who cannot care for themselves. Still others are called to steward what God has given them financially, educationally. Others with their profession in the legal, medical, educational spheres. There are many other ways of course, and all these are to be used for God's glory.

Our Lord gives us gifts in unbalanced ways so that we might bless one another as they have need. And in addition to being blessed in these ways, we are given all of the earth to develop and sow what God has given us. We can invest in many different ways, *and* in many different places.

Think of that for a moment. While God could have provided for every individual's specific needs directly, immediately and unilaterally, while he could have told us exactly how he wanted us all to conform to one specific and "right" way of doing things, he chose to make us participants of his kingdom in this glorious way. He gave us wisdom and creativity to develop the gifts that he gave us to contribute to his kingdom and delight in the life-bearing work of the Kingdom of heaven!

And if you know the Parable of the Talents, you know that to the servant who invested wisely, he was blessed with even more. Blessing upon blessing. He gives us responsibility and then blesses us as we use it rightly.

Our all-powerful God calls us to join him in his kingdom work, and he blesses us in it when we do. And while we cannot know the future, or always see the fruit of our investment in God's kingdom, God tells us that our labors in the Lord are never in vain. [1 Corinthians 15:58]

And on the other hand of that parable, as I mentioned earlier, there are consequences for those who invest unwisely. And as Jesus points out here, the world is not loyal to us.

And yet the emphasis of this passage is not so much focused on the consequences as it is on the positive reasoning that we should be loyal. The Father is teaching us wisdom. He is teaching us his love and his goodness. He rains down good gifts.

The Father's Instruction

This past Wednesday and Thursday, massive snowflakes came falling down all over Tacoma. When the news broke that there was a snow day and that school had been cancelled, there was much rejoicing. I imagine many kids were thinking about sledding down hills and building snowmen. Sadly, for my children, that was not the case as there was very little snow near our home!

So, rather than sit around with nothing to do, nor snow to play in, I did what any good parent would do. I gave them a chore! But in my opinion, it was a fun chore. I gave them a writing project. If they wrote a story, depending on the length, I would give them some spending money. They immediately took out some paper and pencils and went to work. Instead of being frustrated that they couldn't be with friends at school all day they made the most of their time and wrote beautiful and hilarious stories that they shared at the dinner table.

While my wife and I thoroughly enjoyed hearing these stories, expressed through the personalities of our children, I explained to my children that the primary reason I asked them to write these stories was for their own good. The purpose of asking them to write a fun story was so that they could use their free time for creative writing and exercise their imaginations in developing a story. And at the same time, these stories are incredibly valuable to me, for my children authored them.

And this illustrates, perhaps poorly, what God does in a much more magnificent way. See, our heavenly Father guides us in the use of our lives, our time, and the gifting he has entrusted to us.

He knows what is in our best interests, and what will benefit us. And so, he teaches us, by his word, how we ought to use these gifts. So that we might grow to be more and more like him.

And if we look to our passage this evening, we can pick up on the several instances in which we see that Jesus uses the Father/Son dynamic to remind us of our relationship to God, and his relationship to us. Beginning in verse 9 we read,

“Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? 10 Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? 11 If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!” [Matthew 7:9-11]

Here, Jesus is specifically demonstrating the dynamic of the Father/Son relationship in order to highlight the powerful bond that exists in a relationship that we all can understand.

Jesus shows that earthly fathers know how to bless us and care for us. They know not to give us a snake or a stone when we ask for food. They meet our needs in the appropriate manner, even though they are sinners. They give us good things when we need them.

Anyone can see this. It is obvious! A parent wants to provide everything they possibly can for their children. They want to help them, they want to bless them, they want them to live full lives in the grace and nurture of the Lord.

And if earthly parents can want that, can want good things for their child, how much more will our **holy** and **heavenly** Father want that for us? The God who loves us far more intensely than any one of us could possibly love another human being...the God who gave us his own son, how will he not with him also give us all good things?

God, our heavenly Father, longs to provide for his children. He is a loving and perfect Father who loves to give good gifts to all who ask him. To all who seek him, he will be found. To those who knock, he will open the door.

The Father wants his children *to delight in him* and his kingdom. He does not want them to suffer the consequences of a ruthless world that seeks to destroy his beloved children.

Blessings and Consequences

As I studied this evening’s Scripture passage, I couldn’t help but see parallels in the Father/Son dynamic from Proverbs. Listen to these verses from Proverbs 4 & 5, and as you hear these proverbs, pay attention to the blessings promised to those who follow the father’s instructions.

The chapter begins with these words:

Prov. 4:1 Hear, O sons, a father’s instruction,
 and be attentive, **that you may gain insight,**
2 for I give you good precepts;
 do not forsake my teaching.
3 When I was a son with my father,

tender, the only one in the sight of my mother,
4 he taught me and said to me,
“Let your heart hold fast my words;
keep my commandments, and live.
5 Get wisdom; get insight;
do not forget, and do not turn away from the words of my mouth.
6 Do not forsake her, and **she will keep you;**
love her, and **she will guard you.**
7 The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom,
and whatever you get, get insight.

Prov. 4:10 Hear, my son, and accept my words,
that the years of your life may be many.

13 Keep hold of instruction; do not let go;
guard her, **for she is your life.**

That is the positive instruction on wisdom. And much like Jesus’ instruction in the Sermon on the Mount, there are also the negative consequences that follow those who choose the path of evil.

Hear these verses from Prov. 5 in the Father/Son relationship

[My Son.....]

3bthe lips of a **forbidden woman drip honey,**
and her speech is smoother than oil,
4 but in the end she is **bitter as wormwood,**
sharp as **a two-edged sword.**
5 Her feet go down to **death;**
her steps follow the **path to Sheol;**
6 she does not ponder the path of life;
her ways wander, and she does not know it.

Prov. 5:7 And now, O sons, listen to me,
and do not depart from the words of my mouth.
8 Keep your way far from her,
and do not go near the door of her house,
9 **lest you give your honor to others**
and your years to the merciless,
10 **lest strangers take their fill of your strength,**
and your labors go to the house of a foreigner,
11 and at the end of your life you **groan,**
when your **flesh and body are consumed,**

12 and you say, "***How I hated discipline,
and my heart despised reproof!***"

I don't know if you can tell, feel it, but you can almost feel the love of God in these proverbs. You can feel the love of a Father who genuinely loves his son. Of a God who wants the best for his children. Who doesn't want our years, our talents, our lives wasted on the false securities of this world. A God who wants our lives to be fulfilled and joyful in Him.

The out workings of this passage are many for us to consider. How have we trusted in the securities of the world with what God has given us? Where do we have one foot in the world and one foot in the Kingdom of heaven?

God calls us. He calls us to put our trust in him. To seek him. To ask him. To knock on his door. For he does not trample on us, he does not turn to attack us. He doesn't give us a snake when we ask for food, nor toss us a stone when we ask for bread. He knows what we need, and he wants us to come to him for it, not to the world.

The Father of a Prodigal Son

Brothers and sisters, we have a loving and merciful God. But in our sin and our blindness, we fail. We lose trust in the God we cannot see. We see the waves, we see the wind, and we lose faith, and we turn to the securities of what we can see. We give ourselves, our time, our talents over to that which we ought not, and we are devoured by the world. It chews us up and spits us out.

But I want to remind you that Jesus' teaching here isn't designed to rub our sin and its consequences in our faces. Jesus isn't here to say, "I told you so." Our God is a just God, and he is a loving God. His mercies are new every morning.

And he gives us the story of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15, so that we might remember that the same God who gives us a rich inheritance, and at times watches us squander it on the fleeting passions of this world (and its pigs and its troughs) is the very same God who brings us to repentance when we hit rock bottom....and when we are at rock bottom, he shows us that he is full of compassion and love. He is unlike the world. He is quick to come to us and to embrace us and kiss us as the father did to the prodigal son. And in the same way, at his own cost, he clothes us with his righteousness, and celebrates with us, receiving us into the inheritance of his son.

What a glorious Savior. Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

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