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Matthew 7:6



Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

Steve Gregg discusses the biblical verse Matthew 7:6 and suggests that Jesus is using metaphorical language rather than intending for it to be taken literally. The verse urges people not to give holy dogs or cast pearls before swine, implying that those with no interest in spiritual truth should not be given valuable things. Gregg suggests that this could refer to the gospel itself and encourages those who value truth to sacrifice anything for it.

Transcript

Today we're turning to Matthew 7, excuse me, and verse 6, where Jesus said, Do not give what is holy to the dogs, nor cast your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you in pieces. What a strange expression that is. Don't give that which is holy to dogs.

Probably the imagery here is of taking that food which has been sacrificed to God at the temple, and which rightly belongs to the priests, and throwing it to the dogs instead of giving it to the priests, which would be as inappropriate as another thing Jesus talked about, where he said it's not right to take the children's bread and to cast it to the dogs. He said that on another occasion to a Gentile woman who was asking for a favor, and he was indeed sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel at that point, and he said so. But he had the imagery of taking food that belonged to children, and throwing it to the dogs instead of to the children.

And here, giving that which is holy to dogs, almost certainly he means holy food, and holy food would be that which really belongs to the priests and the Levites to eat, not to ordinary people, and much less to dogs. So that would be quite an inappropriate thing to take that food and give it to the dogs. He says, and don't cast your pearls before swine.

They could hardly appreciate them, and they would just trample upon them and then turn on you as well. Now, obviously Jesus is trying to communicate something, but he's using metaphorical language, because it's not really talking about... I don't think anyone's ever really had a serious problem with having a habit of taking pearls and

throwing them at pigs, or that anyone really is in the position to take holy bread and give it to dogs. That's not a practice that has ever been known to occur, and it's hard to imagine a situation in which that would occur.

So it's not likely that Jesus intends to be taken absolutely literally in that sense, but he's using metaphorical language. And of course, when he speaks of dogs, when he speaks of pigs, he's not talking about pigs and dogs really, he's talking about people. Now, we realize that in the Bible, at least we should realize that in the Bible, sometimes animals stand for people in some of the laws and the illustrations of Scripture.

For example, in the Old Testament, it says that you should not muzzle the ox as it treads out the grain. It's talking about an ox that is used to turn the millstone to crush grain into flour. It is not to be muzzled or prevented from eating while it's working.

Now, the Apostle Paul quoted that law over in 1 Corinthians chapter 9, and after he quoted the law, he said, it is written, you should not muzzle the ox as it treads out the grain. He then said, now does God care for oxen, or did he say it all together for our sakes? And he goes on to affirm that what God was really saying there is that people who are serving God should not be prevented from receiving their proper support. And so Paul saw this law about oxen as applying to people.

And it was a lesson about people in which an oxen was used as the imagery. Likewise, in the Old Testament, there's a law in Deuteronomy that says that you shall not plow with an ox and an ass together. Now, an ox to the Jews was what we call a clean animal, and an ass was an unclean animal.

And they were forbidden to plow with both of them together. That would require that they put a yoke over the neck of both animals and try to get these animals to cooperate with each other to pull the plow. Well, the Apostle Paul also seemed to see some imagery there that had to do with people because Paul said over in 2 Corinthians 6, Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers.

Obviously, the idea of putting an unbeliever and a believer under the same yoke, in Paul's mind, was just as inappropriate as putting an ox and an ass under the yoke, a clean and an unclean thing under the same yoke. Well, we won't take the time right now to discuss the meaning of those statements that Paul made or his teaching he was given on those occasions. But that simply shows that in the Old Testament, sometimes animals were used to specify people.

And in particular, unclean animals were there to specify unclean people or ungodly people, whereas clean animals often represented God's people. In the Old Testament, it was not uncommon for God, through the prophets or even through the Psalms, to speak of God's people, Israel, as sheep or sometimes as goats or sometimes as calves. Now, one reason for this is that Israel was God's people and all of those creatures are clean

animals.

But there are times in the Old Testament when Gentiles, who were not God's people, were compared with unclean animals, as in the case of Daniel's vision in Daniel 7, where he saw four Gentile nations arise and they were, in his vision, symbolized as a lion and as a bear and as a leopard and as some other kind of carnivore that is not fully identified. But in all these cases, these would be unclean animals and they represent Gentile nations. So, there is a very clear pattern in the Scripture of speaking of animals, and in certain contexts, making a lesson about people.

And Jesus is doing the same thing here when he says, Do not give what is holy to dogs and don't cast your pearls before swine. Now, swine and dogs are both what we call unclean animals. To the Jew, if an animal was to be categorized as clean, it had to meet two qualifications.

First, it had to be what we call a ruminant. As the older English says, it had to chew the cud. A ruminant is a kind of mammal that has multiple stomachs.

They'd chew their food and swallow it into one of their stomachs, and they'd regurgitate it to chew it some more and swallow it again, and this food would move around through these various stomachs in the process of digestion. Now, most animals don't do that, but there are some that do. A cow would be an example of an animal that's a ruminant.

A sheep or a goat or a deer would be another example. Now, the animals that were clean had to not only be ruminants, but they also had to have what the Bible calls a cloven hoof, a split hoof. Now, cows and sheep and goats have that too, but an animal had to have that quality and the other.

They had to be ruminants with a cloven hoof. For that reason, of course, a dog would not be a clean animal because it did not have a hoof at all, and it is not a ruminant. Also, a pig was an unclean animal because although a pig does have a cloven hoof, it is not a ruminant.

So, failing to meet both conditions of being a ruminant and having a cloven hoof, an animal would therefore be relegated to the class of unclean. Now, an unclean animal to the Jews was one that could be not eaten, and it could not be offered as sacrifice to God. And a clean animal was one that could be offered as sacrifice to God and could be eaten.

And the majority of clean animals that the Jews ate and offered as sacrifice were sheep and bulls and calves and occasionally goats. So, these would be animals that were ruminants that also had a cloven hoof and they were clean. But dogs and pigs were among the many, many kinds of animals that were not clean.

Now, the Jews themselves had already come to adopt the term dog to refer to persons who were not clean as a sort of a metaphorical use. In the mind of many Jews, all Jews

were clean and all Gentiles were unclean. And this is because the Gentiles not only did not belong to the chosen people, but also because the Gentiles had religious practices that were offensive.

Before the time that Christianity made a tremendous impact on Gentile culture, in other words, in the time of Christ and before, Gentiles always were worshippers of idols. Every Gentile society had idols they worshipped, and this was very offensive to God, and it was offensive to the Jews in their more pious moments. The Jews, on occasions, resorted to worshipping idols as well.

But for the most part, the more pious Jews found it repugnant. And in the time of Christ, because the Jews were not worshipping idols at that time in their history, and the Gentiles were, they had tremendous disdain for the Gentiles, and it was common to refer to a Gentile as a dog. As I said, even Jesus used that term in referring to a Gentile lady when she was seeking help from him at a time when it was not time for him to go to the Gentiles yet.

And he said it's not right to take the children's food and give it to the dogs. He was basically saying that the things that God had sent him to give to the Jewish people should not be given at this point to the Gentiles. And the woman was not offended by that, and she said, well, even the dogs receive the crumbs that fall from the children's table.

And Jesus was so impressed with her answer that he went ahead and helped her anyway, even though she was a Gentile. But the point is that the use of the term dog to designate unclean people, particularly Gentiles, was common among the Jews. And the use of the term swine may well have been also.

In any case, when Jesus spoke about dogs and swine, in this case, he was certainly talking about people. He was not talking about animals. So what is the lesson he's teaching? Obviously, he is acknowledging that some people differ from others in terms of whether they are clean or not.

But what is it he's instructing his disciples to do about this here? Well, he says, do not give what is holy to dogs, and do not cast pearls before swine. What is this lesson really about? What are pearls? I mean, if dogs are symbolic, and if pigs are symbolic, then no doubt the pearls and the holy things are also metaphors for something. Well, that is a hard call.

It's not all that easy to say exactly what he's referring to. In many cases, it is applied by Christians in their thinking to the sharing of the gospel. There are those who believe that what Jesus is saying, that there are certain types of people that you should not share the gospel with, or that after you've shared it with them, you should not persist in doing so because they show themselves to be non-receptive to the gospel.

And that may be what Jesus has in mind. We can say this much, that the illustration Jesus gives of the dogs and the pigs here tells us probably his main idea, and that is that pigs, for example, when you cast them pearls, are not going to respect pearls. Now, human beings value pearls because they understand them to be a rare commodity, just like other kinds of gems and so forth.

You know, the valuing of a rare thing, of a gem or a jewel, is something that only human beings can do. An animal is not likely to value it in the same way. A raven may indeed be attracted to a shiny object, but it doesn't know the difference between a tin can lid and a silver coin.

It's just an animal that's attracted to shiny things. People, on the other hand, can appreciate the value of a thing on the basis of its rarity or something else. We are more sophisticated than the animals.

And so, if you would take a pearl and give it to a person, in all likelihood it would be appreciated. It would probably be cherished and received happily and thankfully. But if you throw that pearl into a pig pen, and the pigs, you know, they don't quite understand what's going on.

They think you're throwing things at them. They might turn on you and trample the pearls and go for you. That's what Jesus said they'd do.

And of course, the reason they'd do so is because they don't know what a pearl is. To them, it's no different than a pebble. And therefore, a pig would seem to stand here for that kind of person who cannot appreciate the value of what you're giving them.

Now, very clearly, he's not talking about financial gifts. He's not saying don't give money and don't give valuable items to people who are unthankful. He is talking about something spiritual.

And he talks about holy things. Don't give what is holy to the dogs. And very possibly, what he is referring to is the gospel itself.

It's not entirely clear. There might be other holy things he has in mind. But he is clearly saying you should not give the things that have real value, that is spiritual value, to persons who seem incapable of appreciating their value.

There are people who, when they hear the word of God, their immediate response is to recognize it as the word of God and to rejoice in it. And to say, wow, thank God that this has been given to me and I've had a chance to receive it. And Paul, sometimes in writing to various churches that he wrote to, sometimes has acknowledged that this was the way that his listeners received the gospel from him.

For example, in 1 Thessalonians 2, verse 13, Paul says, For this reason we thank God

without ceasing, because when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you welcomed it, not as the word of men, but as it is in truth the word of God, which also effectively works in you who believe. Paul said he rejoiced in what he saw in the Thessalonians because they were able to recognize immediately that when he preached the gospel to them, that was the word of God, and they received it as such with great reverence. Now, there are other people who, when you preach the gospel to them, they don't receive it as the word of God.

And they might not even care whether it's the word of God. I mean, if you throw a pearl at a pig and the pig shows no interest in it, and you could convince that pig that that's not an ordinary stone, that's a pearl, that's of great value, the pig would still show no interest in it. It simply doesn't have the capacity to appreciate that thing's value.

And there are people who are in such a state of mind that they have no capacity to appreciate the value of spiritual things. Any more than a dog can appreciate holy bread, or that a pig can appreciate a valuable gem. They simply don't have the capacity to recognize the value of it.

And therefore, not only will not appreciate it, but will not appreciate you. In the illustration Jesus gives, if you throw a pearl at a pig, he may take it as a hostile act, ignore the pearl or trample it and go after you. Now, how does this translate into dealing with people? Well, I'm going to go on the assumption that most people do, that the pearls of which Jesus speaks are the things of God, the truths of Scripture, the truths of the Gospel.

There are people who simply cannot be trusted with the truth. It does not mean that they should be lied to, it just means that they will abuse truth, and therefore you don't want to give them more than they can appreciate. Now, I believe that we should preach the Gospel to every creature.

Jesus Himself said that in Mark chapter 16, He says, Preach the Gospel to every creature. And I believe that everyone should hear the Gospel. But there comes a time when someone has heard the Gospel, and their response to it makes it very clear that they have no appreciation for it.

In fact, they seem very clearly to be the kind of person who could never appreciate it, even if they really understood it to be a word from God. They care nothing about God, they care nothing about holy things. And to continue hammering these people, in hoping to get a conversion out of them in such circumstances, would not be wise, because they will simply resent you.

It's an interesting thing that Christians, or people who have a heart for God, have a very different value system from people who do not. For example, it says many times in the book of Proverbs, that a wise man will love reproof. He'll love to be correction.

His ear seeks correction. But a fool hates correction. And when you think about it, if you are doing something that is wrong, do you want somebody to point it out to you, or do you not? Well, the answer to that question will tell whether you're a fool or a wise person, spiritually speaking.

A wise person wants to do what is right, and if they're doing what is wrong, they want to be corrected. That doesn't mean it isn't embarrassing to them to be corrected. You know, if you're walking around with egg on your face, and you don't know it, do you want someone to tell you or not? Well, obviously, if they do tell you, it's a little embarrassing.

But don't you want them to tell you? Wouldn't you rather be embarrassed, so you can get that cleaned up, and not have to have everybody noticing it, and no one telling you? Same thing in truth. If you're walking around with your zipper down, sometimes people have that problem, and no one wants to say anything. You know, it's embarrassing to be told.

But listen, some things that are embarrassing to be told are of value to the person who needs to hear it, and can be appreciated by them. A person who loves truth, and who loves the things of God, and wants to be right with God, may find it uncomfortable and embarrassing to be told that they're doing the wrong thing, or what they're doing is sin, but they will still embrace it, because they love the truth. But there are people who are of a totally different mind than that.

They want nothing to embarrass them, or to bring shame to them. They don't care anything about the truth, as much as they just care about being happy, and have no one criticize them, and so forth. And the Bible says that the person who hates correction is a fool.

A person who loves correction is a wise man. It's true of spiritual things generally. That the person who hears the gospel, and may well be embarrassed of his own sin, and ashamed of his sin by hearing it, that person will either embrace it, and say, well, this is the Word of God.

It's a great pearl of great price. It's a tremendous thing of value. I will embrace it, no matter how much it embarrasses me.

To admit my sin, I will still embrace it, because it is truth, and I value truth. But there are plenty of other people out there who simply are uncomfortable with the truth. The truth is unflattering.

The truth pops their bubbles about their own sense of personal goodness and virtue in themselves, and they don't like that. And so they will reject it, and they will want to trample on the messenger too. And so there comes a point, Jesus says, when you can discern that a person that you're sharing truth with is not really interested in that truth.

And if that is true, that is, if they really aren't interested in the truth, then in all likelihood they are that person that Jesus describes as being like a dog or like a pig. They're unclean. Like a pig cannot appreciate the value of a pearl thrown to it, a person of a certain type cannot appreciate the truth given to it.

And that person, once you've discovered that that's what that person is, should not be given any more of the truth, lest they abuse it and abuse you. Now Jesus, when he talked to the multitudes of strangers, he always spoke with parables. And in Matthew 13, when the disciples said, why do you speak to these people in parables? He said, it is because to you, meaning to you disciples, it is given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God, but to them it is not given.

Now what he meant by that is that those disciples who had already shown a commitment to follow him and an interest in the truth of God, he wanted them to know all his secrets. He told them plainly and explained the mysteries of the kingdom of God in their presence. But to the crowds out there who had given no such evidence of commitment or of love for the truth, he didn't trust them with all the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven.

He concealed them in stories that were, we call, parables. This is how Jesus himself seemed to practice not casting his pearls before a swine. Now if a person in the crowds wanted to know more about what Jesus meant, they could come and commit themselves to him and follow him and be disciples and show themselves to be lovers of truth.

And if that were the case, then they would also be given the mysteries of the kingdom of God because Jesus expounded all things privately to his disciples. And this is how Jesus himself models this teaching. And I think it pretty much is instructive to us as well.

We should be prepared to preach the gospel to everyone. But when we find someone to be obstinate and unwilling to appreciate the truth, then we should not bother them with more. They are showing themselves to be of that class that Paul talks about in 2 Corinthians 2, who do not receive the love of the truth.

And therefore God does not give them any more truth. In fact, Paul says God will send them strong delusion that they might believe the lie. God's truth is for those who have the capacity to appreciate it and embrace it.

I believe all people fall into two classes. One is those who love the truth and will sacrifice anything for the truth, even their reputation, even their popularity, even their comforts. But there are others who love something more than truth.

And they are the ones that God does not entitle to a full disclosure of truth. And that is what I think he's saying to his disciples. These are those who cannot see the value of truth, and therefore don't bother them with it because they'll simply be hostile toward

you.

And that, I believe, is the meaning of Jesus' statement here in Matthew 7, 6. We'll continue our study in the Sermon on the Mount next time.