



# Judgement Calls

Matthew 7:1-6

This week's passage contains two of the most memorable images given by Jesus to his disciples in the Sermon on the Mount. Even those who have never attended church might be familiar with expressions such as 'looking at the plank in your own eye' or 'casting pearls before swine.'

The subject addressed in these opening verses of Matthew 7 is that of judgement, described by one commentator as addressing 'the very down-to-earth issue of unfairly critical attitudes to others, which, combined with a naïve lack of self-criticism, threaten to disrupt a close-knit community such as that of Jesus' first disciples.'<sup>1</sup> Jesus begins with teaching in verse 1, which is followed up by a warning in verse 2: 'For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.' It is not made explicitly clear who is doing the judging in this situation. The obvious implication is that Jesus is speaking of the judgement of God, but could there be another dimension to this verse? Might Jesus be warning us that those of us who show no leniency with regard to our judgement of others then find others are less inclined to give us the benefit of the doubt?

Jesus presses his point with a memorable illustration in verses 3 to 5, the comically absurd image of someone so preoccupied with removing specks of sawdust from someone's eye whilst apparently unaware of the plank of wood they have in their own. The picture painted is amusing but a serious point is being made by it, a reminder of the tendency we all have to be annoyed and frustrated when other people display the faults we have.

In verse 6 we find a final piece of advice which seems to qualify that which has gone before it, a warning not to give what is sacred to dogs or to throw pearls before swine which would have been particularly forceful for the first audience of the sermon, Jews who regarded dogs and pigs as unclean animals. While there are obvious spiritual dangers to those who are unduly critical, Jesus acknowledges that 'there may nonetheless be times and situations when a responsible assessment of the likely response requires the disciple's instinctive generosity to be limited, so that holy things are not brought into contempt.'<sup>2</sup>

The issues addressed here by Jesus may seem relatively mundane, but as the American writer Mike Yaconelli reminds us, petty and critical attitudes can be incredibly destructive:

'Petty people are ugly people. They are people who have lost their vision. They are people who have turned their eyes away from what matters and focused, instead, on what doesn't matter. The result is that the rest of us are immobilized by their

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<sup>1</sup> RT France, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: Matthew*, 2007, 273-274

<sup>2</sup> RT France, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: Matthew*, 2007, 277

obsession with the insignificant. It is time to rid the church of pettiness. It is time the church refused to be victimized by petty people. It is time the church stopped ignoring pettiness. It is time the church quit pretending that pettiness doesn't matter. Pettiness has become a serious disease in the Church of Jesus Christ – a disease which continues to result in terminal cases of discord, disruption, and destruction. Petty people are dangerous people because they appear to be only a nuisance instead of what they really are – a health hazard.<sup>3</sup>

### **For discussion**

1. Writing on this passage, Gerard Kelly has suggested that it closely related to the teaching on anxiety which is found at the end of chapter 6. 'In worry, it is our own growth and development we will not leave to God: in judgement it is the growth and development of others. Unwilling to allow God to be sovereign over the lives of those around us, we impose our own sovereignty and standards and insist that they measure up to us.'<sup>4</sup> Do you agree? Do you think we would judge less if we trusted God more?
2. Are there particular behaviours or situations which you come across and which make you more inclined to be judgemental? Why do you think you react in this way with regard to these matters?
3. It was suggested during Sunday's sermon that this teaching of Jesus is not a 'blanket ban' on judgement, that there will still be some situations when we need to make an evaluation of how someone is behaving. How do we know when we're crossing a line from an appropriate assessment of someone's conduct to the sort of judgementalism which Jesus seems to be condemning here?
4. In v6, Jesus appears to be offering one qualification to his advice concerning judgement, famously warning his disciples to 'not throw your pearls before swine.' Can you think of any occasions when you deliberately decided not to offer advice to someone, or even not to share the gospel with them? On what basis did you take this decision?
5. In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul addresses the issue of church discipline with regard to incest taking place in the Corinth congregation. He describes himself in verse 3 as passing judgement on the guilty party within the church, but in v12 he asks, 'What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside?' How does Paul's advice inform your understanding of Matthew 7:1-6?

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Gerard Kelly, *Humanifesto: A Rough Guide to the Sermon on the Mount*, 2001, 76

<sup>4</sup> Gerard Kelly, *Humanifesto: A Rough Guide to the Sermon on the Mount*, 2001, 76