

Understanding Discernment
Matthew 7:6
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The Gospel of Matthew opens with a series of proofs that Jesus is the Christ, the King of the Jews. This led to the calling of His disciples and His instruction to them through the Sermon on the Mount in chapters 5-7. These chapters are the first of five long discourses by Jesus that Matthew recorded in his Gospel. After correcting the traditional teaching of the Jewish leaders (Matthew 5:21-48), and after rebuking the self-serving religious practices of the Jewish leaders (Matthew 6:1-18), Jesus addresses the importance of faith in God rather than in money. We should seek His kingdom and He will provide our needs so there is no reason to worry (Matthew 6:25-34).

Matthew 7:1-5 is a transition from how to think about our own life to how to think about the lives of others. This chapter of Matthew begins with the command to not judge. This is forbidding unrighteous judgment since Jesus in John 7:24 called us to righteous judgment.

Matthew 7:6 is the natural follow-up to Matthew 7:1-5 since it replaces unrighteous judgment with a proper evaluation of others. Righteous judgment requires discernment regarding how and when to minister the word of God to the lives of those whom we encounter. This practice of making a righteous judgment on the lives and conduct of others lies at the heart of Matthew 7:6 and requires an analysis of what type of judgment is valid according to God's word.

The structure

Matthew 7:6 is stated in a chiastic structure:

Do not give what is holy to dogs
 Do not throw your pearls before swine
 Or they will trample them under their feet
And turn and tear you to pieces

This inverted parallelism is evident because dogs, not swine, tear things to pieces and swine, not dogs, trample things under their feet. As true for a chiasm, there is an emphasis upon the middle section, in this case our pearls that are trampled under foot by the swine. The middle section guides this command.

The terms

Dogs were not domesticated pets in first century Palestine. They roamed in packs and could be dangerous to humans. They were scavengers and unwelcomed creatures.

Swine were the classic unclean animal in the Old Testament Law (Leviticus 11:7; Deuteronomy 14:8). Obviously Jesus is using a metaphor to refer to certain people, not actual animals. The Old Testament refers to evil people as dogs (Deuteronomy 23:18; Psalm 22:16) and the New Testament does as well (Philippians 3:2; Revelation 22:15).

The Jews referred to Gentiles, and particularly the Romans as swine. To refer to someone as a dog or as a swine would be very derogatory.

Pearls were the most expensive item in the world up until diamonds surpassed them in the 18th century. The historian Pliny the Elder (c. 79) noted that pearls were more valuable than any other precious jewel, particularly pearls from the Red Sea. It is evident that pearls were used by Jesus as a reference to something highly valuable that was given to someone oblivious to its worth. Swine trample pearls under their feet because they have no sense of their value as they cannot be consumed.

What is "holy" is distinguished from pearls in the sense that something "holy" has great religious value whereas a pearl would be only of value economically. What is holy is therefore what is associated with God. This would be something that could be given, unlike salvation or holiness.

Roman Catholic scholars associate "what is holy" with the Eucharist and argue that the Eucharist must be withheld from unbelievers. This rests upon a wrong view of the Lord's Supper and the role of the priest. Nor is there a reason to limit the application to the Lord's Supper.

It is best to understand the terms "what is holy" and "pearls" to involve the communication of God's word. The Scripture is both holy and of great value. God's revelation is the treasure that we have been entrusted with and what we can impart to others.

The command

The directive is clear. Our ministry to certain people must cease. This seems counter to the love that we should show all people and therefore requires some analysis.

First, we must look to our Lord who at times withdrew His ministry from certain people. Jesus spoke in parables in part to conceal knowledge from the Pharisees. *“Therefore I speak to them in parables; because while seeing they do not see, and while hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand”* (Matthew 13:13).

In addition there is the instruction by Jesus to His disciples upon sending the twelve out in Matthew 10: *“Whoever does not receive you, nor heed your words, as you go out of that house or that city, shake the dust off your feet”* (Matthew 10:14). Shaking the dust off one’s feet was an expression of disdain and Jesus told them to leave the house if their words were not listened to. Jesus’ instruction to them corresponded to His words in Matthew 7:6.

We find Paul conducting himself in the same way when he was not received by those he sought to minister to. He retreated from such people both in Pisidian Antioch with Baranbas (Acts 13:51) and in Corinth with Silas and Timothy (Acts 18:6). His example is the application of Matthew 7:6. To withdraw from certain people is consistent with Christ’s ministry, Christ’s instruction to His disciples, and the practice of the apostles.

The reason

The reason for the command is given is because of the response of certain people. There are two types of responses: (1) Trampling and (2) Tearing to pieces.

When God’s word is not valued it is treated as swine treat pearls—trampled under foot. Something very valuable becomes an object of complete indifference. In this sense it is trampled upon as swine do not observe the value of pearls. It is treated as entirely meaningless and therefore is not considered. The hearer then gains no benefit from the word of God. There is then no reason to continue to offer ministry of the word to those who are so completely uninterested.

When God’s word is opposed it is treated as dogs act toward those that threaten them. Those who deliver the word of God are sometimes attacked, verbally or even physically. Hence “tearing you to pieces” is being attacked by the hearer of God’s word.

Therefore, the reason why we must refrain from ministering the word of God to certain people is because it will have no response and will be unfruitful. Furthermore, those who bring the word will be attacked. These are two compelling reasons to move us to listen to the words of Jesus in Matthew 7:6.

The evaluation

One of the most difficult issues is to identify who might be classified as dogs or swine. The obvious reference would be to unbelievers. But certainly many unbelievers are those who we ought to be relating with for the sake of the gospel. This cannot be a statement to call for the withdrawal of ministry from unbelievers in general since these are those who we are called to go to (Matthew 28:19-20). Matthew emphasizes the receptivity of the kingdom of heaven by those who are Gentiles (Matthew 8:5-13; 15:21-28; 27:54).

Another challenge is those who identify themselves with Christ but are not truly of Him. We find this explained later in this chapter, *"Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter"* (Matthew 7:21). People will call Jesus "Lord" but are not part of the kingdom.

Furthermore, Jesus warned His disciples to *"Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves"* (Matthew 7:15). People present themselves in sheep's clothing, or as followers of Christ, when in reality they are actually apt to attack the followers of Christ. That we must "beware" calls us to be alert to the reality that some people are not what they appear to be.

How do we discern if someone is a ravenous wolf, able to turn and tear us to pieces? Matthew 7:20 makes it clear, *"So then, you will know them by their fruits."* By observing behavior we are able to discern who the people are that should not receive further instruction from us from God's word. They can be identified by their evil practices (Matthew 7:23).

Many people whom we seek to serve in the name of Christ will have various moral difficulties. Simple selfish indulgence does not necessitate an end to ministry. There are two clear and evident practices that are specifically used to describe those who we must refrain from continuing to engage with God's truth.

1. Those who disrespect the word of God

This is not just someone who is slow to hear (Hebrews 5:11-14) for these require patience. *"We urge you, brethren, admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with everyone"* (1 Thessalonians 5:14). It was common for the disciples of Jesus to not understand (Matthew 16:11), to grow weary (Matthew 26:40), and to doubt and lack faith (Matthew 14:11).

Those to whom we should withhold our ministry of the Scripture are those who consistently refuse to listen to the word of God. They may or may not give profession to God and even His word, but in reality they are unresponsive to its teaching. Matthew 7:13-27 expands upon these people who are unresponsive to the word of God but “come to you in sheep’s clothing” (7:15) and say “Lord, Lord” (7:21).

Among those who are unresponsive to the word exists a subset who treat the word of God with such indifference that they trample upon it. In other words, there is an element of disrespectfulness for the word of God. To continue to act to such people as if the word of God is meaningful when they disrespect the clear teaching of it is when Matthew 7:6 is relevant.

2. Those who attack us

If those who do not listen to the word are sufficiently provoked, they will go beyond apathy to antagonism. This is seen when we give what is holy to dogs and they turn and tear us to pieces. Examples of this exist in the New Testament. *“Alexander the coppersmith did me much harm; the Lord will repay him according to his deeds. Be on guard against him yourself, for he vigorously opposed our teaching”* (2 Timothy 4:14-15).

Therefore, the way we evaluate whether Matthew 7:6 applies to an individual is whether they are open to listening to the word of God in some fashion and whether they are prone to go on the attack.

The application

Since Jesus calls us to not continue to engage with people who consistently reject the word of God and who will attack us, how do we determine when a person falls into this category?

Our normal approach to ministry ought to be to accept people with the hope that they are responsive to the Scripture. Also, we are called to patiently forbear with one another. *“So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you”* (Colossians 3:12-13).

As we seek to serve others with the ministry of the word, we will encounter those who are unresponsive. Our challenge is to evaluate when their unresponsiveness becomes disrespectful. While we may be long-suffering in arriving at this evaluation, to ignore the command of Matthew 7:6 is both unrighteous and brings us unnecessary difficulties.

So then, what determines whether a person falls into the category of the dog or swine of Matthew 7:6 is how they respond to the revelation of God. This understanding helps us to refrain from talking to people about the gospel when they clearly are not interested in such a conversation. We do not have to push God's word down the throats of those who have no desire to listen. To do so is based in a prideful belief that our efforts are somehow determinative in regard to the destiny of another person. We must simply offer people the opportunity to hear in order to be faithful to the word.

This understanding also helps us to be protected from those who "*come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves*" (Matthew 7:15). If we do not heed Jesus' words of Matthew 7:6 and 7:15 then ravenous wolves will attack us. When we undergo unnecessary attack because we continue to press on with ministry to those who are opposed to it, we will become greatly distracted from the more fruitful opportunities for the ministry of the word of God.

Conclusion

Some may find the imperative to not continue to give what is holy to dogs to be so counter to their preconceptions that it is hard to receive. To simply say love "*bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things*" (1 Corinthians 13:7) to argue that we should always allow for the possibility of God working in a person's life should not be used to negate the ministry of Matthew 7:6. We do not know the future but this must not stop us from making righteous judgments regarding our ministry choices.

While some may think it is unloving to cease our efforts in the ministry of the word to a person, it is truly a command of our Lord. It rests upon us to apply these words wisely, yielding our understanding to God's understanding. To extend ourselves in the face of continued disrespect for the word of God is a violation of Matthew 7:6.

There are a finite number of ministry opportunities that we encounter and to press those who are not receiving us (Matthew 10:14) is unfruitful. This does not mean that we should be disrespectful ourselves (cf. 1 Peter 2:17) but we must exercise appropriate discernment in ministry. In the words of Jesus, "*behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves; so be shrewd as serpents and innocent as doves*" (Matthew 10:16).