

Sermon Notes of Rev Dr Ivor J.W.Oakley (3-9-2000 Guisborough Evangelical Church)

### **Matthew 7 v 1-6**

Additional Reading Matthew 18:15-20

## **Judging and Discerning**

### Introduction

Matthew 7 does not follow on from the last chapter. It contains a number of self-contained paragraphs. We feel all sorts of emotions as we read this. Feel condemned and puzzled. How does this apply? What does it mean? No more law courts? Never sit on jury? Never tell someone they are wrong? Never write honest and truthful testimonial reference? Close eyes to everything? Whitewash everybody? We will ask three questions as we look at this passage. What does this passage not mean? What is its real meaning? What practical steps are to be taken?

### What does this passage not mean?

Firstly lets be clear there is no reference to law courts, magistrates, jury service, serving in police. There is a place for upholding law and order and justice, and we find it throughout the Word of God. A judge has to assess evidence and deliver justice. This is a means whereby God restrains evil in the world.

It does not exclude use of church discipline (which together with the preaching of the Word and the administering of the sacrament is the mark of the true church according to our Protestant forefathers [writing unclear].) There is clear teaching about discipline of wayward church members in the teaching of our Lord and in New Testament epistles. Too readily when faced with problems in the life of the church, people resort to “We must not judge”, “Let sleeping dogs lie” – to avoid difficulty and challenge which needs to be dealt with. We want to avoid reality, and we don’t want to rock the boat or upset people.

Nor does this passage mean avoiding doctrinal issues and the need to work against doctrinal errors. The Lord spoke of false prophets (Matthew 7:15). Paul spoke of false teachers and heresies that needed to be laid bare (1 Cor 15, 2 Thess 3:6). John, the apostle of love, said that we are not to believe every spirit, but test the spirits. People holding ecclesiastical errors are not to be received into house or welcomed (2 John 10). The strongest statement of all is that anyone preaching another gospel should be eternally condemned (Galatians 1:8). Rarely heard in these ecumenical days, would be regarded as unloving and judgmental today. Even evangelicals are quick to say we must not judge.

This teaching does not forbid us from using our critical faculties to assess people’s characters. **Do not give dogs what is sacred, do not throw your pearls to pigs** (Matthew 7:6). Assess people’s characters and if they defiantly reject the message, fly into temper and blaspheme, do not persist beyond certain point (Matthew 10:14, Acts 13:44ff). Go on to other people instead (Acts 18:6). Do not waste time on those who

ridicule, despise and spit on the message. (N.B. A common question in Ethics papers – Can you reconcile Matthew 7:1 with Matthew 7:6?)

We are not to turn a blind eye to faults. Not to refuse to discern true situation. Not be gullible and swallow pathetically thin excuses. Not refuse ever to criticise. Spurgeon once said “God’s people are not to be judges, nor are they to be simpletons”. Not to close eyes and pretend all is well. I once received a phone message thanking me for my honest opinion of students applying to a missionary society. They said “Normally references lead us to expect the archangel Gabriel is applying to join our ranks”.

So “judge not” does not exclude using our critical faculties, facing reality. Need to study two books: The Word of God, and human nature. When we whitewash and close eyes to wrongdoing, we can mislead about the truth, and do enormous damage to the Word of God. Even though our cowardice makes us prefer to keep silent, love requires us to speak up, God’s honour requires us to protest. When we read through the Sermon on the Mount we cannot fail to use critical faculties if we are to avoid the conduct of some, and live the way God wants.

#### True Meaning of the Lord’s Words

Whilst we are right to use our critical faculties, we receive a warning against being hyper critical, having a spirit of censoriousness, carping faultfinding, and destructive looking for faults and failures. We must be careful not to come to hasty judgements without bothering to find out all facts. Nor must we make issues over unimportant matters, or take pleasure in exposing people’s failings. How sad it is when people feel pleased to hear of times when others fall, and put the worst interpretation on every move and every word. How sad when issue is made over little things, and when people rub hands with glee at being able to point out someone’s mistake. You maybe can think of people who, at the mention of a person’s name, at once speak of something wrong with him. Mention a certain church, and at once be informed they have nothing but one trouble after another. Mention a society, and they tell you at once how they treated one of their workers 10 years ago. The moment they open their mouth, someone will get it, some scheme will have cold water poured over it, and some action will be sneered at.

Spurgeon humorously, but alarmingly accurately, described how, “at tea meetings, Dorcas meetings and other gatherings, they practise vivisection on the characters of their neighbours, and of course they are eager to try their knives upon the minister, the minister’s wife, the minister’s children, the minister’s wife’s bonnet, the dress of the minister’s daughter, and how many new ribbons she has worn for the last six months and so on ad infinitum. There are also certain persons who are never so happy as when they are grieved to the heart to have to tell the minister that Mr A is a snake in the grass, that he is quite mistaken in thinking well of Messrs B & C, and that they have heard quite promiscuously that Mr D and his wife are badly matched. Then follows a long string about Mrs E who says that she and Mrs F overheard Mrs G say to Mrs H that Mrs J should say that Mr K and Miss L were going to move from the chapel and hear Mr M, and all because of what old N said to young O about that Miss P. Assure them that you are obliged to have the facts definitely before you, that your memory is not very tenacious, that you have many things to think of, that you are always afraid of making any mistake in such matters, and that if they would be good

enough to write down what they have to say, the case would be more fully before you and you could give more time to its consideration. Mrs Grundy will not do that; she has a great objection to making clear and definite statements; she prefers talking at random”.

Always pleased to hear of failures. Ever ready to pass on tit bit of gossip. Wrong motives are always imputed. Ears are closed to explanation and reason. Last word in everything because they know. In effect, playing God. Taking his place. Never concern to help or give benefit of doubt in uncertain cases. Attitude of mind which tells us more about the critic than the criticised. Its source – one of many manifested of flesh (of self). One of ways ugly self expresses itself. Varies from person to person. Springs from jealousy and envy. Or from sense of superiority. And as we put others down, we rise up in our own and, hopefully, other people’s estimation. Sometimes rivalry is at the bottom. Someone has crossed our path and must be put down as much as possible to get our own back.

Sense of insecurity, others are a threat. They are more respected, loved and admired than we are. What a commentary on works of flesh, or the sinful nature. Not only adultery, fornication, uncleanness, idolatry, sorcery, drunkenness and murder, but also hatred, contentions, jealousies, wrath, selfish ambition, dissensions and envy (Galatians 5:19-21).

#### Practical step to take

There are practical steps to be taken when tempted to assert self in this destructive, superior, wanton, selfish, hypocritical and censorious way. Have to face certain things about the situation. Maybe not qualified to be censorious and destructive because not always know all the facts about person and his circumstances. Pre 1939 sermon illustration: A man was once criticised because sometimes, depending on which pavement he was walking on and the direction he was going, he let his wife walk on the outside of the pavement. He was described as “ill-mannered”, “boorish”, “Not a gentleman”, “uncouth”. But critics would not have said that if they had known he was deaf in one ear. If his wife wanted to talk to him, she had to be on the outside.

People can be regarded as standoffish, cold, aloof, of thinking they are better than others, of looking down on people because they have smaller salary and no car, when in fact their aloofness is because they are really shy and timid. When break the ice and know them well, they are actually far from cold and can be very good friends. How easily we can make grave misjudgements. All in turn have suffered from misjudgements by others. If we knew all facts and circumstances and motives, we would have more sympathy and understanding. More ready to give benefit of the doubt.

Then need to be aware of own failings and need to face and deal with them first. **In the same way as you judge others, you will be judged** (Matthew 7:2). The yardstick we apply to others will be the yardstick applied to us. Is your own record clean? Do we do and say the very things we accuse others of? Every time we point the finger at another, we have three pointing at ourselves. Philip Brooks (who wrote “O Little Town of Bethlehem”) said “Whenever you see fault in another man or another church, look for it in yourself and in your own church”. Classic Old Testament example –

King David whose anger blazed against rich man taking poor man's lamb, but conveniently forgot he himself had taken another man's wife. From my time in Northern Ireland, I recall the Orangeman putting brick through the window of Roman Catholic shop with its images, holy pictures and candles, with the comment that he couldn't stand this bigotry! How ridiculous we make ourselves in the eyes of others in condemning the very things we do ourselves. We may be blind to it, but others are not.

Then need to take steps about ourselves. **First take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye** (Matthew 7:5). Our serious fault to be dealt with before someone else's peccadilloes. How often we exaggerate other's faults and minimize our own. Jaundiced view of others and rosy view of selves. How hard it is to be objective and impartial. But then it is often forgotten that we are then to take action about the speck in our brother's eye. Still have responsibility to him. Jesus later taught that if brother sins against us, our first duty is to speak to him about this. Right to reprove and correct brother – as long as first deal with own failures. When dealt with own sin, we shall see clearly to help him with his. It would not be brotherly to leave the speck in brother's eye; instead we should help him to get rid of it. So Jesus is not condemning criticism if it is justified. But we have got to begin with ourselves first of all. As loving brother, we are to rescue and restore. But be as generous to others as to ourselves.

### Conclusion

This whole passage reminds us how difficult the Christian life is. Delicate balance throughout. Not be gullible or fooled or blind. Use critical faculties and weigh up situations and people. But not to be hypercritical, censorious and carping and constantly faultfinding. Never to assume position of God himself – who is all wise, all knowing and all righteous.

When we walk by faith we are always walking on a knife-edge. How important to take whole of Scripture as our guide in the difficult and controversial matters. Most problems and heresies in the church are the result of failure to see Scripture as a whole. So we become lopsided.

We have profound and searching teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. It finds us out, and brings us into the light of God. Condemns us for carelessness and cowardice, lack of zeal for God and his cause and his church when we misuse and pervert this teaching. Yet on the other hand it shows up our crooked heart, malicious tongues, our jealousy and envy and vindictiveness. **A time to be silent and a time to speak** (Ecclesiastes 3:7). **Lead me, O Lord, in your righteousness. Make straight your way before me** (Psalm 5:8). Have the frame of mind to tread carefully through this minefield. **He guides the humble in what is right, and teaches them his way** (Psalm 25:9). **The Lord confides in those who fear him** (Psalm 25:14).