

February 10, 2019
Every Habit Like a Beam
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Matthew 7:1-14, 24-29

⁷ “Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. ² For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. ³ Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? ⁴ Or how can you say to your neighbor, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ while the log is in your own eye? ⁵ You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor’s eye.

⁶ “Do not give what is holy to dogs, and do not throw your pearls before swine, or they will trample them under foot and turn and maul you.

⁷ “Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. ⁸ For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. ⁹ Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? ¹⁰ Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? ¹¹ If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!

¹² “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.

¹³ “Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. ¹⁴ For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it.

[Hearers and Doers]

²⁴ “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. ²⁵ The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. ²⁶ And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. ²⁷ The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall!”

²⁸ Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, ²⁹ for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.

*Every thought is like a timber,
Every habit like a beam,
Every imagination like a window
In this house which we are building
Called a life.*

These lines pushed up like poetry from the pages of a heavy book of commentary – though, that I know of, George Buttrick was not a poet. Still, it works, poetically and exegetically from the Sermon on the Mount: thoughts, habits, and dreams as the girders and trusses of a life built either on stone or shifting sand; what we think and do and dream as the essential framework from which our plans and projects sally forth; what just one chapter back Jesus called our *heart* and that which he wants to be – our treasure, inasmuch as we are his.

Half of following Jesus through the Sermon on the Mount is shifting with his metaphors for faith, wishing he'd speak plainly, then getting sassy when he does. Chapter 7 is loaded – with metaphors, that is. I want to pick through them. But first, let's pray.

The word is aimed at us again, O God, loaded with invitation. An invitation to be made new, made free, made lighter than air. OR, to stay the same: heavy-burdened with judgment – ours of others, others' of us. Trampled and mauled, but stubbornly sure of our position. Still the invitation stands from you, the poet, the author, and the authority of it all. May we have hearts to hear – and to respond. Amen.

The log in my own eye and the splinter in my neighbor's was always a favorite in Bible charades, back in my youth group days. The hypocrisy rampant in church has not been nearly so much fun since. The #churchtoo movement is gaining traction – #metoo, #churchtoo: so many progressive preachers, so publicly supportive of gender equality in the ministry, yet so privately predatory in their relationships with women colleagues. At least the fundamentalist preachers never pretended to respect us professionally at all.

The tension of course being that, in talking to me about sin, Jesus is talking to me about the beam inside my own eye – not the splinter in my neighbor's, however hateful my neighbor's splinter surely is. His discipleship (my neighbor's), much as I may wish it so, is not between Jesus and me. Not what Jesus wants to talk about with me. Grrr!

Do not judge, the verse does technically say. But “*judge*” is bothersome here. *Judge* in New Testament common Greek meant *condemn*, as in “*condemn to hell.*” *Do not condemn*

to hell. In 21st-century English, “judge” means lots of things, *The Great British Bake Off* being one – where everything is judged, but not even the flattest scones of all are condemned to hell! *Don't condemn to hell. By such measure you shall condemn yourself.* See Jesus sketching out the framework of my house? Not divine retribution so much as explaining me to myself.

To condemn to hell is to build a reality wherein I control the forces of grace, of mercy. Really? I take upon myself powers that rest only with God? Grace as mine to distribute or withhold? Meaning I myself never have need of any, since it all belongs to me? Really? Never? Meaning I myself am therefore ever content, ever at ease, ever full of all hope and faith? Needing nothing from outside myself? I don't find Jesus so much harsh in this scenario, as curious. Like Dr. Phil: *how's that working for ya? Being your own god?*

For Valentine's Day a zoo in El Paso, Texas will let you name a cockroach after your ex and then feed it to a meerkat. If Jesus were teaching this now, verse six might say “don't give what is holy to cockroaches” instead of dogs, which were considered mangy, garbage-eating beasts; unclean, like pigs and gentiles; incapable of appreciating the holy, the valuable. Jesus admonishes those who would be his disciples to *use good judgment* in offering what is holy and valuable.

I spent no small amount of time this week thinking on what Jesus is referring to here: the holy? the pearls? What is the “it” of verse 7? The thoughts, habits and dreams? The mysterious treasure from chapter 6? The good gifts of verse 11? What is God giving us, the way good fathers give bread to their children? The answer, I decided, is yes. Any of that. All of that. And more. Anything and everything in our lives that is useful, beautiful and good. *Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise. . . . [Philippians 4:8]*

All that is within range of our judgment and contained in our care, Jesus gives us permission – more than permission, he **admonishes** us – to treat as valuable, as worthy of honor. It seems to me, therefore, there must be no end to the list of the holy, the pearls involved, nor to our need of this word, for I can find no end to the inclination among church people to treat ourselves, and others, as worth less than Jesus did. To treat with contempt what God has gone well out of God's way to redeem.

When I think about it, I realize I have been both the holy and the dog. To myself and to others. Jesus offers the remedy – here, in fact. Jesus says, “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you.” Others had said the same before him – rabbis and philosophers. Except they’d nearly always put it in the negative: *don't do unto others what you don't want them to do to you*. Cumbersome, first of all. A life made of NOT doing. Jesus commends construction of the good. Still, the point in both cases: we choose. The point of the entire Sermon on the Mount. Jesus invites, we choose. Salvation is *bestowed*. Discipleship is a choice, a chosen way of life. Following Jesus is a choice. Choosing not to follow Jesus is a choice. We live inside the choices that we make. Our thoughts, habits, and dreams are made of the choices we choose or choose not to make.

Alongside is the terrible reality of how incredibly difficult choosing is – because everything around us begs us to stay the same. Homeostasis: the absence of tension or resistance, of the slightest conflict, mental, emotional, physical. Every effort toward change is met with greater energy against it, without moral consideration. We stay addicted. We stay all kinds of ways that are bad for us. Every good intention is met with resistance two, three, four, five, ten times as strong as the good intention. Or, said poetically, wide is the gate and easy the road to destruction. Narrow the gate and hard all the way is the road that leads to life.

We can kick our feet till the cows come home, and after that the choice will still be ours to make, the invitation of Jesus still there to answer: upon what shall we build these lives of ours? stone or shifting sands? on wisdom or on folly? The folks who first heard Jesus say this were astonished. May our own hearts be so finely tuned.

Would you pray with me?