

“MISSING MATTHEW”

March 30, 2011

Matthew 7:1-20, 21-29

Lent Wednesday 4

“Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. ²For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. ³Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? ⁴Or how can you say to your neighbor, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ while the log is in your own eye? ⁵You 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. ⁸For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. ⁹Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? ¹⁰Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake?

¹¹If 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. ¹⁴For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it.

¹⁵“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. ¹⁶You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? ¹⁷In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. ¹⁸A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. ¹⁹Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰Thus you will know them by their fruits.

²¹“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. ²²On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?’ ²³Then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers.’

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. ²⁵The 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. ²⁶And 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. ²⁷The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell — and great was its fall!”

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

Matthew 7:1-20 does not appear at all in Year A. These words of Jesus appear, at least sometimes, in Year C, in Luke’s telling of the gospel story, in Jesus’ “Sermon on the Plain”. But, if and when they appear it’s only on Epiphany 7 and Epiphany 8, which rarely happen, especially Epiphany 8. For my 34 years of ministry, I have 2 sermons for Epiphany 7 C and no sermons for Epiphany 8 C. So, what’s Matthew 7:1-20?

Matthew 7:21-29 is included in the lectionary: Time after Pentecost – Lectionary 9 A. But it can “fall between the cracks.” Some years the calendar works so that we get the text, other years we do not get the text. This time around, in Year A of the three-year lectionary cycle, we will not have this reading. Looking back, I see that in the Common Lectionary, before it was revised, this reading always showed up in Year A, on the Second Sunday after Pentecost. But that’s no longer the way the system works. So, I preached on this reading in 2002. Before that, it was 1993. You get the idea. There was a nine-year gap instead of a three-year gap.

MATTHEW 7:1-6

Many, many people, those who grew up in the church and those who witness church people from outside the fellowship, think or believe that a hallmark of being Christian is being judgmental. Christians judge. Christians find fault, especially in others, others not like themselves. It would seem that Jesus must have told us Christians to hone our skills for judging others, putting others down, criticizing, and condemning. Jesus, in fact, says something very different: “Do not judge.” What’s the good of being religious if we can’t condemn others? What’s the good of being holy if we can’t find fault? Ah, but Jesus says that it’s the not judging that is most holy. “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. . . . For I tell you, unless your justice and righteousness exceeds that of the Pharisees, you are not a child of God’s reign. . . . Therefore, fulfill your purpose, be complete and true even as your heavenly Father is.” Luke says it this way, “Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.”

Remember all that stuff about “loving enemies” and “praying for those who persecute you”? In humble response to God’s overwhelming mercy, we renounce the habit of judging others. Think, for example, of Jesus’ parable about the unforgiving debtor, in Matthew 18. Think of the Lord’s Prayer. We forgive others even as God forgives us. We are kind and generous in our judgment of others because God is kind and generous with us.

Is this admonition – “Judge not, lest you be judged” – an absolute prohibition? Just a little later, in this same chapter 7 of Matthew, Jesus warns us: “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but truly are ravenous wolves.” We can’t beware of them without making some judgments about their message and behavior. In the same way, we need to distinguish good fruit from bad fruit: “You will know them by their fruits, by their deeds, how they treat people. Every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit.” Consider also, verse 6: “Do not give what is holy to dogs; and do not throw your pearls before swine.” So, clearly there is some value to making wise judgments. How does this work?

I suggest that Jesus is not saying that we wink at sin, injustice, oppression and evil. We are here to counteract or overcome evil by doing good. Ah, there’s the rub. We are not God. We are not the judge. We, like everyone, are under God’s judgment. We look to God, particularly God in Christ, to see how to live, to help us discern and distinguish good from evil. We do so in all humility. We stand under God’s judgment. We stand before the holy presence of God. We live by grace. Were it not for God’s grace, we could not stand.

Surely, Jesus is warning us about hypocrisy. “How can you notice the speck in your neighbor’s eye when you’ve got a huge log in your own?” It’s about the eye again, isn’t it? How are we looking at people, with a generous eye or with an evil eye? “You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, then, in all humility, only then you might see clearly enough to take the speck from your neighbor’s eye.”

Jesus levels his judgment eye against hypocrisy—pretense, sham, show, lack of integrity. That seems to be why he is so hard on the Pharisees and others of the religious elite.

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! You tithe mint, dill and cummin, but have neglected the weightier matters of the law (הַרְ; /T - torah): justice (הַקְ; ד; x] - ,sedaqah – justice-righteousness, ‘way it should be’), mercy (דַּס, j , - ,hesed – steadfast love) and faith (עֲמ, a - emet_h – integrity, truth, fidelity). These you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel! Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup, so that the outside also may become clean. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are full of the bones of the dead and uncleanness. So you also on the outside look righteous to others, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness. ” – Mt. 23:23-28

MATTHEW 7:7-11

Perhaps these verses says something that appears to be exceedingly naïve. Is Jesus really saying that we can get whatever we pray for, just as long as we pray with sufficient tenacity and intensity? Radio and TV “evangelists” assure us that our prayers can achieve “success,” that as long as we “cooperate with the Lord” we can pray successfully for a million dollars, or whatever. “Name it and claim it” of the “Word of Faith” movement loves these verse. So do the preachers of the so-called “prosperity gospel.”

Perhaps to realize what Jesus means we need to keep these verses in their “Sermon on the Mount” context. Jesus has been calling us to a new and radical way of living: loving enemies; eschewing anger, vengeance and retaliation; forgiving abundantly; sharing generously, overcoming greed, and trusting God to provide what we need. How can we practice this way of living, this “perfect righteousness” and “purity of heart” without prayer, prayer, prayer? By persistently asking, seeking, knocking we will discover that God is changing us to become more just and righteous citizens of his kingdom. By tenacious dependence on God’s grace we also can deal graciously with others.

MATTHEW 7:12

The “Golden Rule” is not unique to Jesus. Something like it, usually expressed in the negative, is in a variety of teachings, certainly in Judaism. Hillel, a contemporary of Jesus, is reported to have said to a Gentile inquirer: “What is hateful to you do not do to your neighbor—that is the whole Torah, while the rest is commentary thereon; go and learn it” (*Shabbath*, 31a). Our ethics, i.e., our behavior toward others relates to and derives from how we would have others treat us. “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev. 19:18).

Still, the Golden Rule is susceptible to distortion. E.g., “Don’t report illegal behavior if you don’t want anyone to report your illegal behavior.” The Golden Rule is “golden” only when interpreted in the light and context of the law and the prophets and the holiness of God. E.g., Luke places the Golden Rule—“Do to others as you would have them do to you”—right before these words:

If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be

children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. – Luke 6:32-36

The Golden Rule is not a calculation of self-interest. If so, then we miss the point! If it's about reciprocity, *quid pro quo* and tit-for-tat, then it's not golden but leaden. Luke's concluding verse—"Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful"—sets the context for understanding. In Matthew's "Sermon on the Mount" the Golden Rule serves as summary of all the prior sayings about love of enemies, non-retaliation and the other ethical teachings. Perhaps that's why Matthew adds these words: "for this is the law and the prophets." We thus are taken back to 5:17—"Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill."

MATTHEW 7:13-27

These warnings function to exhort Jesus' followers to take seriously the "Sermon on the Mount" teachings. The Greek verb ποιεῖν - *poieō* ("do" or "make") occurs nine times. Not thinking, feeling or believing, but *doing* is the point. Following Jesus is a Way of living, walking, doing, behaving. This Way of Jesus is not easy. The gate is "narrow", i.e., beset with difficulty. The way or road is "hard", i.e., one of affliction and distress. Those who strive to do what is right, instead of opting for the lowest-common-denominator morality, must not expect to receive popular acclaim. They will face controversy and conflict.

Let us beware of those who talk a good game, the "false prophets" who look / sound religious, but whose behavior is not good and holy. They appear in "sheep's clothing" as if they were members of Christ's flock, but the discordance between their profession and their practice reveals that they are really "ravenous wolves". Whose belly are these prophets filling? Whose flag are they flying? What sort of fruit are they bearing?

The Way of Jesus addresses our behavior, our *being* and *doing*, more than our doctrines of belief. The teaching is important, but focuses on the teaching of behavior, i.e., a way of living — "Go therefore and make disciples of all peoples: baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you." Vv. 21-23 address this issue in an eschatological context. When we stand before the judgment seat of our Lord, how we have lived will be more crucial than what we believed (cf. 25:31-46). Those who may invoke Jesus as "Lord" and even prophesy and heal in his name are castigated for their failure to do the will of the Father in heaven, i.e., to follow the narrow way and produce the ethical fruits of true commitment to and discipleship of Jesus. So says Paul: "If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing" – 1 Corinthians 13:1-2. All will be judged not for their religiousness but for what they have done and left undone.

So, how do we build upon our faith? What sort of following Jesus is true and faithful? Are we building upon sand or rock? Meaning what? It's easier to build on loose, sandy soil, right? It takes more effort to build on solid rock. In other words, this little parable seems to underscore the point of vv. 13-14.

When Jesus finished, the listeners were deeply struck, "astounded". They were taken aback, not only by the teaching of Jesus but even more so by his teaching with power and *authority*. The theme of authority will recur, until we finally reach the declaration of Christ's Great Commission: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me . . ." (28:18).