

Sunday 7th August 2022
Matthew 7:1-12
Mr.Donald Meek
Brightons Parish Church

Sermon keypoints:



Just a brief prayer now, as we come to think about God's word in the passage that Norma read so beautifully to us:

Heavenly Father, we ask that, as we listen to the exposition of Your word now, nothing will destroy our peace. It's so easy, as we said already, for all sorts of things to come in and worry us and, as we reflect on this passage in a complicated world, we ask that Your Spirit will give us great wisdom. Give it to the preacher as well, to the people, because it is a searching passage and few of us pass the test on this one. Father, be very gracious to us now as we think about Your Word, in Jesus; name we ask these things. Amen,

If you were here when I last spoke in January you will probably remember what I spoke about

I spoke about my glasses and I spoke about eyesight to the young people. And, if you watched me coming in here, what did I do? I cleaned my glasses first and foremost, constantly looking for the speck on the glass and trying to make my vision as clear as possible. And here we are today again, and the eyes have it once more, if I can borrow a well-known phrase. The eyes are back. Vision and discernment are at the very heart of the passage we are looking at. The human eye is central to the passage that we've read. It explains the passage and without it, the passage falls flat.

Did you ever think, do you ever think that Jesus has a sense of humor? I think He does. When I was preparing and thinking about the eye I thought, how interesting that I'm being asked to speak about a passage about eyes when I'm so obsessed with eyes. First point. But then, Jesus is using humor in this passage today. He's full of wit which is gently slipped in. So gently that we perhaps, don't notice it or we've become so familiar with the passage that we don't think about it or we've lost the context. And we'll look at that in due course.

Before, however, this passage, if we were here last week, we would have noticed that Jesus does have a lot to say about the eye. He points out to us that the eye is extremely important and it is the lamp of the body. In chapter 6 verse 22 'The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are good, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eyes are bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness.' And then he comes back to the eye again here 'Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye.' Now then, just imagine trying to find a speck in someone's eye when there's a plank in your own. You get that wee joke?

Now, have you ever tried to find a speck in somebody's eye? When I was a boy in Tiree, I knew a lot about what we in Scotland call 'stoor' or what our English friends might call just 'dust'. But I think the Scottish word, the Scots word 'stoor' has something about it

and Gaelic it's 'stour' and that's even worse I can assure you. On a croft or on a farm where I was brought up, stoor was an occupational hazard. It arose quite literally from just about everything. A gust of wind would lift tiny particles of sand from a sandy surface and before you knew it you had a particle in your eye. Or when we would be thrashing corn what would happen? Particles would rise and we could get something in our eye. Or when we were sawing a wee speck of sawdust would come and lodge in the eye and what trouble that little speck would cause. My father had particularly sensitive eyes. Very, very sensitive indeed and he battled with eyes that seemed to catch every speck that was going. So, you can imagine what happened - he would summon me and say 'Can you see the speck in my eye?' and I would have to open my dad's eye like this and look in and see if I could detect the speck. And sometimes he would have to do it for me. How did we get it out? Well sometimes we didn't get it out and the eye would water and water, but if we did see the speck we would find something like a match, one of these and put a wee bit of cotton wool on the end and try hard to lift it out and many of you can identify with that. I'm sure you did it. Nowadays we're protected probably from it because we can go to a hospital but in Tiree you didn't have that. It wasn't easy so you had to do everything yourself. And what if you didn't find it? You would have a go with an eyeglass. Do you remember the eyeglasses? They looked like little egg cups with a special bit in them so that you could cover the surface of the eye. We would have a go with that and try to bathe the eye to see if we could clear the speck. But what a job it was trying to find that speck and what trouble the speck caused. And I used to see my father reduced literally to tears by the speck in his eye and he couldn't do the work. We were stopped. Now imagine if that were a plank, a railway sleeper. Yes, and it's in your eye and you then go off to see if you can see the speck in somebody else's eye. Well clever you if you can do that. You certainly are somebody in a million, probably 10 million and more. And that's the joke, right at the heart of this passage.

It's so easy to see the speck in someone else's eye, is it? And yet, some people are experts at it. If we move the metaphor to the way that we judge others, we're not a minute finding the speck in somebody else's eye but for some reason we can't see the plank in our own. The plank allows us to see through. I ponder this passage as I say. It's humorous, it's clever and it's absolutely true to life. This was the supreme teacher at work and sometimes folks, a wee bit of humor helps the teaching to stick.

Now, if we're foolish enough to take this passage just at face value, and remember Jesus was taking people to another level as He taught, He was turning the world upside down, He was forcing them to think just a little beyond the surface of things. Now, if we take it as it comes 'Do not judge or you too will be judged. For in the same way as you judge others, you will be judged.' you might think that Jesus is saying stop judging, never ever judge anything, nothing at all. Don't, because all too often you are simply not capable of doing it or the way you judge is below the quality that would be expected. And the image that's behind this is of measuring out something. Remember the old days when you had scales on a shop counter and the grocer or whoever would put a weight in one and he would put your particular item on the other and try to get a balance. Yes, well that's the picture about the measure, of the measure here. And sometimes our judgment falls short. And the point is, if we're giving judgments that are short measure

then somebody says, Jesus will measure it back that way to us. So, we've got to be careful. But the point here is that we have to judge anyway. There are certain judgments we can never get away from. We've got to use this thing up here and we've got to try to reach some sort of judgment as to what we do. I've heard people say 'Oh, I mustn't judge.' so that excuses them from saying anything in a particular context. You've heard that and I've heard also 'Oh, I mustn't judge.' But and then you get an avalanche of criticism about the person concerned. So, we use this. We can be a bit equivocal in the way we use such passages and a bit two-faced and we excuse ourselves and so on but the point is, judgment is essential. It's the kind of judgment we do that can be the problem. We have to reason. We have to think through.

Think of doctors. 'Oh, I can't judge possibly judge to do a diagnosis.' Think of lecturers, teachers, lawyers, captains of ships. Hear that one often, Caledonian McBrayne blaming the captain because he's had to make a judgment about the weather. And we think we know better than the captain. Oh, this passage is very subtle. How often I've done that. I think 'Why has he not sailed today? I would have sailed if I was in that bridge.' And so, it goes on. Would I? They have to make decisions and they have to judge. Aircraft pilots, when to land, when to try to land, when to take off. Ministers have to make judgments too. Our minister here, Reverend Scott Burton has to make judgments. And Kirk Sessions, yes, there's been a big judgment here about the manse and the grounds and so on they've had to do that. We all have to judge at one point or another. And the great question is how we do it? That's what this passage is about. What's your spirit when you judge something or someone? Is it censorious? Is that the way it's done. And do you have roast preachers for dinner because you could have done better? And really it's because the preacher has said something that's got you. That's the problem. Very often it's a problem, that's the problem. It's a warning, this passage about rushing to judgment without being aware of our own faults and failings. Otherwise, as this passage puts before us very simply, we are hypocrites. 'You hypocrite? First take the plank out of your own eye and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.' Oh, just so!

So, who does this? Who's the number one culprit? I am, let me tell you! Like me, I'm sure you all love tailbacks. I'm sure you just glory in them and when you see red lights ahead you say 'Ah yummy!' I know you don't. I was going down old Redding Road the other day and there was some work being done on the bridge parapet and there was a system there, single lane system and a notice that said when the red light shows what does it say - wait here. And, as usual, I turned up when there was a lot of cars ahead of me and I thought, by the time that one is through its cycle, I'll be stuck again. So, I was ready and off I went keeping my eye fixed on the light and, of course, when I got there, when the cars had moved it was just about going to red again so I thought 'Oh no bother, I'll just jump in behind the previous one' and off I went. That was fine and through I went and I thought 'Oh, terrific!' and I was glad to get through. But then I looked behind me and three or four other cars were doing exactly the same thing. And what did I say. I said 'What drivers they really are! Terrible, terrible! Oh, do they never read the Highway Code? Do they never think about the driver in front.' And then when I reached Spinkill something happened inside my own mind and a wee voice said to me

'You hypocrite! If you had stopped at that light, you would have saved three or four others from breaking the law in the way you did, going through a red light.' It's just so easy to start judging others and forget about your own failings. I'm culprit number one. How often have you done things like that and then blamed the person behind you?

In my own job I judged all the time. I was a lecturer, a teacher. I had to reach conclusions about students work. But there was a wider judgment as well of other people, colleagues, folk around and quite often when somebody new came as a boss that was difficult and people would talk and I would talk about the qualities of that person. What a bossy, bossy person that was and then, occasionally, it would dawn who really likes to be boss. I had a wee phrase which I used to use when the managers annoyed me and it was 'I was trained to fly solo.' and the fault that I was seeing in others was one that I had myself see. It's such a subtle, subtle, subtle thing this, and you don't notice it. And even as I preach to you, I think to myself I have any real right to be here. You know, it gets to each and every one of us, right through into us, this passage, and we have to be so careful.

I have a friend, Dr Michael Haiken, who works in one of the colleges in the United States and I keep up with his posts because he is a man with considerable discernment. And just a couple of weeks back, when I started to prepare this and think through what I was going to say, a post from Michael appeared and it showed another aspect of this problem. This was what Michael wrote:

'Years ago I knew Christian brother more than double my age who helped me enormously in some areas of doctrine but as I spent time with him I noticed that his speech was invariably very critical of others indeed, he was biting in his criticism. I found that after I was with him for a while, I felt polluted in mind and heart.' Now imagine that. 'I am not sure how to even express how I felt. I just knew that it was not good for my soul to be with him so, over time, I allowed our friendship to die. I did confront him about one issue but to no avail.'

See, he didn't see the plank in his own eye and quite often in matters theological I've seen people falling out about trivia and then dismissing people wholly because of that one point of difference and quite often they don't see that they have a real problem in the way they're criticizing others.

Now, if we move on in this passage, there is some salutary teaching about how and when we should apply judgment. 'Do not give dogs what is sacred. Do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet and then turn and tear you to pieces.' When we're passing judgment on people, we need to be aware that we need discernment and to be aware of context. There are times, places, contexts in which judgment or a word in season, is timely, required and right, but there are other occasions when it is not appropriate to start lecturing others about their faults or whatever they do. Various commentators have discussed the pearls here. Some relate it to the preaching of the Gospel that there are certain contexts in which you don't go, if you're being mocked and so on. I don't really take that one. I think that what is being said here is that we have, if we have good things to say to people, wise things, things

that will steer them through their problems, then there are places and times when it is appropriate to say them. Times when it's not. If you've got pearls, use them wisely.

Pearls and pigs? Well, I was brought up with pigs and I knew a lot about pigs and many a time I prepared their food in a great big boiler. They liked potatoes, they liked oatmeal, they liked whatever you could give them. And you brought it along to them and as soon as they got it they would rush to get it and put their foot down like that to keep the other pig out. One would keep the other, elbowing all the time, and they absolutely loved their foot. But imagine coming to them with a bucket full of pearls? I don't think the pigs would have been at all happy and this is what the passage here is about, if I see, if I understand it correctly, and I may not. If you throw your pearls to pigs, they may trample them under their feet. And you have to be aware that dogs don't want them either, from time to time. Be very careful with dogs. So, there are warnings here.

And we live in a world today where we have to be extremely wise about how we handle people. Never has there been more in the way of sensitivity. My mother used to talk about people who had, who had hides like a rhinoceros and you couldn't get through to them. She wasn't talking about me I know that. But nowadays the problem is that we're all thin-skinned, or quite a lot of us are, and we are very sensitive to criticism. It's a difficult world. And also the ethical and moral dilemmas with which we have to deal are very, very sensitive and hard. Never has it been harder. There was a time when black was black, white was white but now, we live in a very, very much in a grey area and we have to find our way through in a God honoring, God glorifying manner so that we are effective. Sometimes, if we are not wise, what we get back is (a punch) and we have to watch it, be very, very careful. And discernment's at the heart of this. We've got to know who the dogs are. We've got to know when, or in the context of pigs, we've got to be able to distinguish them from pink unicorns or whatever. I've got to use this and be very, very wise, with God's grace and God's help. A hard-hadt world.

And just imagine if you threw the law about in a bullying way. Suddenly you pulled something out of the law book and said Stop! How would people react? In a very, very difficult world, such wisdom is needed. God-given. And I think particularly of lawyers who work to maintain Christian values in the kind of society that we live in today. They've got to judge. They can't leave it, and the judges and the courts have to judge and the society we live in is just so difficult.

We have to be light to folks, but we also have to be salt, and we have to know what context we need the salt. We can't just throw the salt in wherever. No! That doesn't work. That leaves bitterness. It leaves a bad taste. But if we know when to drop in a little particle or two of salt as required, it helps and sometimes, later down the line, we discover that that particle has indeed gone in and it has begun to do its transforming work. People, you think, weren't listening, completely closed to your advice, they come back and say to you 'I was very grateful for that word.' A word in season, in the right place, at the right time. And so, discernment goes through this passage all the way. When you look at this passage - I'm not going to go into all of it today, I don't have the time, and I was very grateful to Judith Norton for taking on the theme of asking, seeking,

knocking again, - you see the wisdom here, the question of discernment, even when we ask God for something do we know what we're asking for. We've got to be persistent. Ask, seek and then knock. That we have to know what we're asking for. We struggle with what I sometimes call and others call, the age of entitlement. When people think they should have everything. We get infected by the spirit of the age. As I was saying earlier, it affects judgment, it affects how we do things, but this sense of entitlement that lots of people are and then they go to God and suddenly their prayers they realize the prayer wasn't answered, they pick a quarrel with God. It's very easy to do it, very easy to do it. How many of us have not done it and said God 'Why didn't you give me this, that and the next thing' and this passage warns us about that sort of attitude. 'If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly father give good gifts to those who ask him?' This spirit of discernment, we need it when we're judging, we need it when we're praying for ourselves, we need it in every aspect of life and we should be people who are distinguished for clear judgment, words in season, prayers that are appropriate for ourselves and for others.

And in all of that we're asked to persevere, even in our judgments. I think we should, if we're wise enough, and we know when to put in the salt, we know when to apply the word in season, then we should persevere in that. We shouldn't just say 'Oh, nobody's listening. God's not listening.' No, that's not the way it works and that's not what this passage is saying.

It's a sobering passage my friends, and few of us really measure up. The number of times I've judged others and I'm just as bad myself. I stand condemned by this passage. How do we solve the problem?

Well, we do so by removing the plank to give us greater wisdom as we judge and as we pray. And how do we remove the plank? Well, the answer is to go to God and ask Him to remove it.

A good friend of mine the Reverend Dr. Don Carson has written this 'The kingdom of heaven requires poverty of spirit, purity of heart, truth, compassion and non-retaliatory spirit. A life of integrity. And we lack all of these things then, let us ask for them. Such asking, when sincere and humble, is already a step of repentance and faith. For it is an acknowledgement that the virtues the Kingdom requires you do not possess and that these same virtues, only God can give.' I'm sure Don could have added, clarity of spiritual vision, to the list and I think he could also have added the plank. We all need a plank removed somewhere along the line and when we remove it, and when we act like this, we behave as members of the kingdom. The golden rule of not doing to others what you wouldn't like them to do to you, it's not because you want them to,, you know scratch your back because you've scratched theirs, no ,it's because you are living within the rules of the Kingdom of God and Jesus says in this passage that such an ethical code fulfills the law and the prophets and that's what He said He was doing in the Sermon on the Mount and what He Himself was doing.

It's a searching passage, my friends. It applies to me first and foremost and I leave you to think about it yourself. Not comfortable, but God give us, in this age in which we live, a responsible, sensitive awareness of when we can say things, judge correctly, apply the judgment and help others so that, they too, when they see us operating, will seek the Kingdom of God,

Amen.