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## The Gospel of Matthew 7—Commentary Notes\*

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### A. Introduction

This lesson continues our study in Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount, namely, the fourth and fifth segments. These conclude the sermon. In the first three segments, Jesus taught the Beatitudes (5:1-16) and expounded upon the difference between His standard of righteousness and that of the Pharisees in terms of essence and motives (5:17–6:18). He also promised God’s provision for the material needs of all who wholeheartedly trust in Him (6:19-34). Now, as we dive into chapter 7, Jesus reminds Christians of their words and deeds and their relationship with others. He then concludes His sermon with a warning concerning false prophets.

### B. Outline

- I. 7:1-12 The Lord teaches His disciples not to judge others but to persevere in prayer.
- II. 7:13-29 The Lord teaches His disciples how to recognize false prophets and how to practice the truth.

### C. Content

#### I. 7:1-12 The Lord teaches His disciples not to judge others but to persevere in prayer.

The Lord Jesus gave four commands in this section concerning a Christian’s relationship with others and about praying to God.

1. First Command: Do Not Judge. “Do not judge, or you too will be judged” (7:1). “Do not judge” means “not to condemn” (or to pass judgement). The word, *judge*, also carries the meaning of habitual criticism in Greek. This certainly does not mean that Jesus wants us to remain silent in the presence of sinful behavior or to refrain from appropriately exhorting or encouraging our brothers when we witness a fault in them. Furthermore, He definitely does not speak against judges in a judiciary system who are there to administer justice. We know this is true because the passage that immediately follows concerns guarding against false prophets and recognizing them by their fruit (7:20). The apostles also instruct us to discern truth from heresy by considering them carefully (Gal 1:8-9), by exhorting weak brothers (Gal 6:1), by pointing out their offenses (Matt 18:15-18), to maintain church discipline (1 Cor 3–6), to contend for the faith (1 Tim 6:12; Jude 1:3), and to point out the sins of this world so that people will return to God (John 8:24; Acts 2:36–38; 7:51-53).<sup>1</sup> Regardless, one must not underestimate the seriousness of a critical spirit, for it can truly be the manifestation of the hidden evil in one’s inner life.

The self-righteousness and jealousy hidden deep within our hearts tend to cause us to only see the “speck” in others’ eyes and not the “plank” in our own eye. Perhaps we judge because we do not appreciate the strengths of others or because we fail to understand their circumstances and struggles. Perhaps we are simply too subjective and quick to condemn without first acquiring full knowledge of the whole truth. The fact is, judging is God’s privilege, and only God

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\* Translator Note: These Commentary Notes were originally compiled in Chinese and translated into English for use by Chinese Christian Fellowship International’s (CCF International’s) English classes. All sources listed in the table (only listed in English when applicable) at the end of these notes were used and consulted in the original Chinese compilation. Please refer to the table for the references of each numbered annotation. For more information on the sources consulted, please contact CCF International. All biblical references are taken from The Holy Bible, New International Version® NIV® Copyright © 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

is qualified to judge men because He is the perfect God who knows every man's inmost being completely. We, on the other hand, are mere humans, who are not perfect like God. Therefore, we often make wrong assumptions about others. This is why the Lord warns us "not to judge others!"<sup>2</sup>

7:2-5 – The Two Consequences of Not Obeying This Command: "For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged...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." Here, the Lord Jesus tells us two reasons why we ought not to judge others or carry a judgmental and critical spirit.

- 1) Those who judge will be judged themselves. We will certainly find it reciprocated to us if we judge others. Judging is treating others with an unforgiving heart. This displeases God, and He will "measure" (i.e., judge) to us with the same "measure" we have used on others!<sup>3</sup> If we can acknowledge this consequence, then we will not so readily rebuke the faults of others.
- 2) Those who judge tend to be oblivious to their own faults. When we pass judgement on others, our spiritual eyes are blocked (as if we have a plank in our eyes—a hyperbole) and we are no longer able to help others to remove the "speck" from their eyes. A plank is a rather large piece of wood much like a tree branch in comparison to a speck which is but a tiny sawdust. Those who judge others appear to have their eyes blocked by a "plank" of loving only themselves and not others. They self-righteously regard all they do as after God's heart while other people are despicable or worthless. They go out of their way to find the "speck" in others—faults for which they can criticize or attack. This attitude has no benefit in helping others resolve their issues. One who lacks a loving heart is useless in removing the "specks" of others. Only when we get rid of such unkind and critical spirits (i.e. the plank) can we be filled with the love of Christ and know how to carefully treat the specks of others. Only correction from a loving heart can cause others to be willing to receive the help they need in removing their "speck."

Some might think that this illustration means that those who are guilty of a greater offense (a plank in their eyes) are not qualified to rebuke those who are guilty of lesser ones (a speck) without first righting their own offenses. Only then can they guide others to the right path. No matter how we interpret this passage, we must always first examine ourselves before pointing out the offense in others so that we see our own shortcomings and need for forgiveness and loving care from others. By so doing, we will be kind in our choice of words when we correct others and will not be complacent or harsh in rebuking them.<sup>4</sup>

The act and attitude of judging others come from our corrupt nature. The lack of mercy in our hearts causes us to easily criticize others without first acquiring a full understanding of the individual or the situation. We need to ask God to remind us how God extended His mercy to us as sinners and forgave our sins so that we will treat others similarly, with mercy and a heart of forgiveness.

2. Second Command: Do Not Throw Sacred Things to Dogs. "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 turn and tear you to pieces" (7:6). This verse actually explains the teaching that precedes it. In addition to "do not judge" and be nitpicky and critical, we also need wisdom and discernment in speaking appropriately to others lest they become unappreciative and even trample our good intentions. "Sacred things" and "pearls" signify precious spiritual truths while "dogs" and "pigs" are used to describe those who reject the truth. The Jews regarded pigs as unclean (Lev 11:7) while "dogs" represented those who are outside of the kingdom of God. This was why Paul said to "watch out" for the dogs (Phil 3:2) who appear to receive the Lord yet are unwilling to accept His Word. Peter also quoted from Proverbs, "'A dog returns to its vomit', and, 'a sow that is washed returns to her wallowing in the mud'" (2 Pet 2:22; Prov 26:11). A dog will not treasure the sacred things given to it and will therefore forsake it. Likewise, a pig will not appreciate the value of a pearl. It

will trample and trash it and even turn around and tear us to pieces (i.e., to persecute and hurt us). The Bible teaches us to share the gospel with all nations (Matt 28:19-20; 2 Tim 4:2), yet we should be prudent in evaluating the situation. We must obey the Lord's command and leading in choosing an appropriate time and means as well as an audience for witnessing. For example: when the Jews refused the gospel and determined to reject it, the apostles then turned to the Gentiles (Acts 13:45-46). There are other similar examples. The Lord Jesus Himself declined to answer Herod (Luke 23:8-9), and Paul refused to debate with those who rejected the gospel so as not to waste time with those who insisted on rejecting the Word of God (Acts 13:44-49; 18:6; 19:9).<sup>5</sup>

In summary, the Lord Jesus teaches us to exercise wisdom and discernment in conducting matters and engaging others in the best way possible. On the one hand, we must treat others with a kind heart and assume the best about them. On the other hand, we also need spiritual wisdom to be "shrewd as snakes," so that we can see through the heart and discern what the attitude and reception will be towards the truth and our spiritual experiences. In this way, we may know how best to communicate God's holy Word and utilize our God-given gifts.<sup>6</sup>

3. Third Command: Pray. "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you" (7:7-8) What is noteworthy from this passage is that the Lord Jesus placed prayer after the first two commands in order to show us that we can obtain wisdom from God to help with us evaluate people and gain spiritual discernment only through prayer (7:1-6). Furthermore, prayer helps us to follow the Golden Rule—to treat others with love (7:12).

The Lord often used different words to repeat the same message in order to more deeply impress the truth upon His listeners. This is what He did here through repetition. However, the promise in this passage does not mean that any casual asking will be immediately answered. There are conditions for answers to prayer (Ps 66:18; John 9:31; Jas 4:2). Asking, seeking, and knocking all refer to prayer. They are different verbs that evoke different word pictures in order to emphasize God's delight when we pray to Him. "Ask" has the meaning of begging with words or body language. This word in Greek is in the present imperative, which implies continual asking. This signifies that the Lord Jesus wants us to persist in prayer as a test to see if we truly desire what we ask and believe that it will become a reality. A casual prayer means that one who asks does not care very much about what is asked. "Seek" is when one is unclear about future directions or about God's will concerning a matter. It implies earnestness and the willingness to pay the price for seeking. This means that asking alone is not enough. We need to "seek" God through prayer and His Word. We cannot force God to answer us according to what we want. Instead, we are to ask according to His will for us. "Knock" means that we patiently wait for things to come to fruition after we have asked, sought God, and received a vision or prompting from Him (Luke 11:5-8; Jas 5:7-8).<sup>7</sup>

7:9-11 – "Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!" Why should we make such an effort in praying that we ask, seek, and knock? It is because our heavenly Father delights in giving good gifts to those who are persistent in prayer. No father will give his son a stone for bread (the kind that appears to look like a stone), nor will he give his son a snake in place of fish. If an earthly father with a sinful nature and evil desires is still willing to give good gifts to his son, what about our heavenly Father who loves us? Would He not want to give good gifts to us even more? Luke emphasized that the Father is willing to give His Holy Spirit to those who seek Him (Luke 11:13)!<sup>8</sup> What gift can be better than the Holy Spirit? Let us give thanks to the Father for His wonderful and good grace!<sup>9</sup>

4. Fourth Command: The Golden Rule. "So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets." In this passage, the Lord Jesus very clearly points out the correlation between our relationship with God that is established through

prayer (7:7-11) and our other interpersonal relationships. He condensed the Law (i.e., the Ten Commandments) and the Prophets into one sentence: “do to others what you would have them do to you” and gave it to us as our guiding principle in treating others. This command has been generally known as the Golden Rule. Matthew 22:37-40 speaks of how love for God and love for man sum up the Law and the Prophets. When we love others as ourselves, we demonstrate that we truly love God. However, we ourselves are not able to persistently live out this principle unless we receive the Lord Jesus and rely on the power of His Holy Spirit.

## II. 7:13-29 The Lord teaches His disciples how to recognize false prophets and how to practice the truth.

The last segment of the Sermon on the Mount warns us against any illusions, falsehood, or hypocrisy. Jesus warned His audience against a common illusion: that if something is followed by the majority, then it must be right (such is the wide gate). He further instructed them on what is right and not to follow the crowd (i.e., to enter through the small gate, 7:13-14). In addition, Jesus also gave another warning to watch out for false prophets who profess to be Christians, but are not so in God’s eyes (7:15-23). Lastly, the Lord talked about building houses on two different foundations and the end for those who are merely hearers of the Word and not doers.

1. The Wrong Gate (7:13-14). The Lord Jesus warns us that the majority live their lives in vain, which is most grievous to God and most pathetic for humankind. There are only two roads to choose in life: one that leads to destruction and the other that leads to eternal life. There is no middle ground. To help us in making the right choice, the Lord Jesus further explained the consequence of choosing each:

a. The Way of Destruction: Wide Is the Gate and Broad Is the Road. Our human nature will always delight in living life our own way. We grow tired of moral constraints and dislike the restrictions that truth brings. Therefore, the lifestyle of a broad road that leads to the wide gate is naturally welcomed by all “sojourners” of life. Likewise, because most choose to travel on this way, others perceive it to be the right way, not knowing that it leads to destruction (Prov 14:12). Life is thus lived in vain, and what is more, such a person will be condemned in eternity and will perish forever.

b. The Way of Eternal Life: Small Is the Gate and Narrow Is the Road. The Lord Jesus clearly points out that this way is abhorred by human nature because there are many trials and hardships, but it leads to eternal life. Unfortunately, those who find it are few, and not many choose to walk in it. The Lord Jesus Himself is this small gate and the narrow way (John 10:9; 14:6). Indeed, those who follow Him will suffer and be persecuted (John 15:19-20; 2 Tim 3:12), but there is no other way or gate that leads to eternal life. Anyone who desires to enter must repent and receive Jesus as Savior. Apart from Him, there is no other way.<sup>10</sup>

2. False Prophets or False Teachers (7:15-23).

The exhortation of the last passage for men to trust the Lord and to enter through the small gate is followed by a warning here to those who seek the Lord. Watch out for the devil’s schemes. He often entices men with falsehood in order to cause them to detour from the right path.

7:15a – False Prophets. “Watch out for the false prophets.” They existed long ago since the days of the Old Testament (Deut 13:1-5; 1 Kgs 22:5-36). The false prophets that the Lord Jesus speaks against here are messengers of the devil inside the church (2 Cor 11:4-15). They are also referred to as false brothers in other passages (2 Cor 11:26; Gal 2:4), or false teachers (2 Pet 2:1), false prophets (2 Pet 2:1; 1 John 4:1), and false apostles (2 Cor 11:13; Rev 2:2). Even though they are referred to in different terms, they all come from the same source, that is, the spirit of the Antichrist (1 John 4:3). They intermix within the church in order to spread heresy, to entice others to go astray, and to stir up distrust and dissension.

7:15b-18 – Recognizing False Prophets. According to Jesus, it is not easy to discern who are false prophets because they appear to be like shepherds. In Jesus’s time, shepherds often wore garments made of sheepskin. False prophets, however, are not shepherds of God at all. They are wolves in sheepskin. The Lord tells us that the way to recognize them is through their fruit, by which every pretense will be exposed. He illustrates it with two kinds of trees. If they are thistles, how can they bear figs? Or if they are bad trees, how can they grow good fruit? Even though they may produce some “false fruit,” the “fruit” will not last long, and the truth about them will eventually be revealed.<sup>11</sup> As for true prophets and shepherds, they teach biblical truth and preach the gospel of Christ. Their teaching is full of power that is able to draw others to Christ. Their fruit is genuine life transformation that overcomes the bondage of sin. Such fruit is pure and holy (Rom 6:22), comes from Christ, is brought forth by the indwelling Holy Spirit, and lasts unto eternity (John 15:16).

7:19-23 – The End for False Prophets. The end of a false prophet is like a bad tree that is cut down and thrown into the fire to be destroyed (7:19). This verse is similar to the warning to the Jews in Matthew 3:10 about how trees that do not bear good fruit will surely receive God’s judgment that is to come. 7:21-23 speaks of those who talk the talk, but are unable to walk the talk. Their lips are sweet, but their hearts are evil. They might temporarily deceive men while on earth, but on the day of judgment, they will not be able to escape. Furthermore, all the “false gifts” of “false prophets” do not come from the Holy Spirit but instead, from the spirit of the Antichrist. Even though they preach in the name of the Lord, cast out demons, and perform all kinds of miracles, the Lord Jesus will say to them, “I never knew you,” and this is because their motives were impure (Gal 4:17). The Bible has prophesied about the coming of the Antichrist and false prophets in the end times. They will perform all sorts of wonders and signs (Matt 24:24; 2 Thess 2:9; Rev 13:13-14) by the evil spirit of Satan (Eph 2:2). Undoubtedly, these are the people which this passage refers to. The many heresies in the church and false teachers belong to this group of people (1 John 2:18). The Lord will say He never knew them, for they never truly put their trust in Jesus Christ, nor did they follow the will of the Father. Therefore, they are not true Christians.<sup>12</sup>

The way to recognize false prophets is to carefully observe the manifestation of the life of Christ (or lack thereof) in them and whether their Christlike life is consistent inside and out. False prophets wearing sheepskin are those who imitate external displays of a true disciple, such as attending church gatherings, praying, and using spiritual jargon. Let us not judge them by what they appear to be, by their eloquent speech or positions held in church. If they do not have the true life of Christ within, they will manifest a lack of spiritual understanding and a discrepancy and inconsistency in their walk compared to what they say. The Scriptures issue many warnings concerning such people. The following are some marks of false prophets:

- 1) Greed (1 Tim 6:5; 2 Pet 2:1-3, 13-15; Jude 1:11).
- 2) Lust or lechery (1 Tim 3:6; 2 Pet 2:2,10,14; Jude 1:4,7,8).
- 3) Lies and hypocrisy (1 Tim 4:2; 2 Tim 3:13; 2 Pet 2:3,18; Jude 1:16). Their lying is not an occasional weakness, but public slander and the bearing of false witness without feeling any guilt.

There are many in our churches who love the Lord. They are spiritually rich, but even they have also been deceived by false prophets. They taste the “sweetness” (of the supernatural) and mistake it to be the work of the Holy Spirit. Not all signs and miracles are the work of the false prophets. God still performs signs and miracles today. However, these manifestations are God’s sovereign acts only. It would be a mistake for men to seek such supernatural phenomena as proof of God’s presence. We must avoid this. The Spirit of truth will enlighten us and bring us out of deception to return to the way of the cross, and to serve God with truth, holiness, and righteousness. Furthermore, it is even more important that we are deeply rooted in the truth of God’s Word so that we will not be deceived by false prophets and teachers lest our work is not able to withstand the test of fire, and we are deprived of the rewards God intends for us (1 Cor 3:13-15).

3. The Wrong Foundation (7:24-27). Jesus provided His audience with two choices in response to the teaching they have heard: they can choose to build on the foundations of “rock” or “sand.” Likewise, their foundation will determine their end. The “rock” represents the Lord Jesus Himself and the truth He declares. “Sand,” on the other hand, represents the righteousness of the Pharisees who are well known to people. Many place their hope on such righteousness of their own. When the storm comes, rock provides stability, while sand brings destruction. Therefore, one who hears the Word of the Lord and puts it into practice is prudent because he builds his faith on the unshakable Word of God—the solid rock. However, the one who does not practice what he hears is foolish. The important point about these two foundations is that the one who has Christ as his foundation and builds his work on Him lives a life of submission and commitment. Yet, the one whose foundation is “sand” is one who pretends to live like a Christian with church attendance, Bible reading, and prayer. Furthermore, what is hidden behind the façade is the lack of a true personal relationship with the Lord and submission to Christ. Such a person is unwilling to pay the price to listen and obey the commands of the Lord. When severe trial comes, he is then unable to withstand the test. We must respond in faith and choose between these two roads and gates, two trees and fruit, and two foundations. We must choose which builder we want to be.<sup>13</sup>

7:28-29 – “When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at His teaching, because He taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law.” The Lord Jesus taught with heavenly authority and the power of the Holy Spirit. He far surpassed the teachers of the law who only held legalistic authority. Therefore, the crowd, who heard Jesus, were much amazed. Today, we not only want to evaluate spiritual teachers against their scriptural knowledge, but even more so, we want to observe their manifestations of the life of Jesus—whether they exhibit God-given authority.

After recording the account of Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount, Matthew wrote: “When Jesus had finished saying these things.” This phrase is used five times in the entire Gospel, and it always follows the teachings of Jesus (Matt 7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1). Thus, this phrase introduces turning points or a structural change within the content of Matthew’s Gospel.

## D. Conclusion

The Lord Jesus clearly pointed out the flaws and dangers of the religious systems of the Pharisees. One cannot enter the kingdom of God by mere outward righteous sayings or acts. Only when one trusts and obeys the Lord Jesus, who transforms life from the inside out, can one enter into the kingdom of God.

The Lord Jesus Himself is the Word lived out or Word incarnate. He exemplified all that He taught about the kingdom of heaven through His words and life. He not only wanted the people to listen to His teachings, but to go beyond hearing and to trust Him as their only foundation in life (John 5:39-40). This is the only way for them to receive power to live out the teachings of the Lord in their lives.<sup>14</sup>

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## List of Sources Consulted

Sources Consulted	Series/Publisher	Annotations
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#4. 天道研經導讀	天道	4:#7.p81
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#6. 摩根解經—馬太福音	活泉	6:#1.p185–186
#7. 認識你的王	播道	7:#1.p187
#8. 漁夫查經系列—天國子民	更新	8:#17.p23
#9. 馬太福音研經材料	校園	9:#2.p183
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