

# Genuine Relationships

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Well, can I welcome everybody to this Lunchtime Bible Talk. It's good to see you, whether you're here for the first time or a regular attender. It's good to see you all. We're continuing our study in the Sermon on the Mount under the title Christ's Radical Kingdom.

And we're going to begin by reading our passage, which is on page 812. We're beginning chapter 7 of the sermon, and we're going to read verses 1 to 14.

Chapter 7, verse 1, Jesus said, Judge not, that you be not judged. With the judgment you pronounce, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.

Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the beam that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, let me take the speck out of your eye, when there is a log in your own eye?

You hypocrite. First take the log out of your own eye. Then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye. Do not give dogs what is holy, and do not throw your perils before pigs, lest they trample them underfoot and turn to attack you.

[ 1 : 1 7 ] Ask, and it will be given to you. Seek, and you will find. Knock, and it will be opened to you. But everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened.

Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then were evil, know how to give good gifts to your children.

How much more will your Father, who is in heaven, give good things to those who ask him? So, whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them.

For this is the law and the prophets. Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide, and the way is easy. It leads to destruction.

And those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow, and the way is hard. It leads to life. And those who find it are few. Amen.

[ 2 : 2 1 ] That is the word of the Lord. May he bless it to our hearts. Now, let's have a moment of prayer as we begin. Lord God, we thank you for these powerful and penetrating words.

These words spoken by our Lord Jesus Christ long ago to a group of people, and now spoken in every generation, including our own.

And we pray that those words may indeed come to us powerfully. The written words, the spoken words, so fully and faithfully point to the living word himself.

And we pray that as we are met for those moments, as we come aside from the good things and the bad things, that we will indeed open our hearts and listen, open our minds, and have a clear vision of the way you want us to go.

And we ask this in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Amen. Amen. So, to Matthew 7 then, and our title today is Genuine Relationships.

[ 3 : 3 5 ] A day or two ago, I spent a couple of nights in a hotel, and one thing that pleased me there was to discover a Gideon Bible in the bedroom. It used to be that Gideon Bibles were universal in hotels, but in those days of political correctness, you very often don't find them.

Now, the reason I'm mentioning this was because in the early days of Gideon Bibles, there were simply the Bible. And in more recent years, they've decided to give little helps at the beginning.

If you're depressed, read such and such a passage, if you're struggling with temptation, if you have a decision to make. Because, after all, somebody picking up a Bible in a hotel room, never having come across it before, wouldn't necessarily know where to go.

But anyway, one of the things they have is the most popular and best loved verse in the Bible, which many of you will realize is John 3.16, God so loved the world that he gave his only son.

Now, I suspect in those days of biblical ignorance, very few people know that verse. I also suspect that in many circles, this verse that we've just read, chapter 7, verse 1, has become more popular and superseded John 3.16, Judge not that you be not judged.

[ 4 : 57 ] Sounds kind and generous, doesn't it? Don't ever judge anyone. Don't ever have any strong opinions. Don't ever make yourself awkward and disagree.

And probably, as I say, this verse has overtaken it, at least in certain circles, as the best loved verse in the Bible. Now, what does Jesus mean?

And I think there's two things I want to say to begin with. Jesus is saying, don't be censorious and judgmental. Don't go around picking faults. Don't go around always reading the worst into people's behavior.

Don't go around with a disapproving frown and a disapproving attitude. I think that's the first meaning of it. Don't pick faults.

But secondly, and more significantly, Jesus is saying, don't behave as if you were the judge who on the last day will pronounce the verdict.

[ 5 : 56 ] In other words, don't assume that you can look at somebody's life and say what the Lord Jesus Christ, the judge, will himself say on the last day. And I think that begins to give us a way into this passage.

All through the sermon, we've seen this already in chapters 5 and 6, the emphasis is on integrity.

The emphasis is on openness. The emphasis is on, you know, what you see is what you get.

Now, this sermon is probably all delivered at one time, but also it's probably a summary of messages that Jesus would give at different places, at different times.

For example, the account in Luke is rather different. Like any itinerant preacher, Jesus would preach roughly the same sermon at different places.

That's a dangerous business. When I first went to Durham, before I became minister of a church of my own, I used to preach regularly in the Methodist circuit.

[ 7 : 01 ] The danger when you do that is you tout the same sermon around. One Sunday I preached on the parable of the talents. The next Sunday, after a very busy week, I thought I'll preach on that again.

And at the end of the service, somebody came up to me and said, I heard you last week and I thought I'd come back and hear you again. It's dangerous if you tout the same sermon around, because people get the idea that's not a sample, that's your whole stock.

But in any case, Jesus, as an itinerant preacher, is emphasizing many of the same things. And in particular, I think, in this chapter, it's about relationships. First of all, relationships with other Christians in verses 1 to 6.

Why do you see the speck that's in your brother and your sister's eye? Because in the New Testament, brother and sister usually refers to the Christian family, to the members of God's family. And of course, as in other families, people rub each other up the wrong way. There are defects. And as in any other family, these can sometimes be seen very clearly.

[ 8 : 10 ] It was Bernard Shaw who said, God, give us our friends to make up for our families. Now, Bernard Shaw was a cynic. But I'm sure there have been moments, perhaps at the Christmas dinner and so on, where you begin to understand the point.

And this is what Jesus is saying here. When you meet the members of your family, don't be judgmental. Judgmental. And indeed, I think in these verses, Jesus is presenting two different dangers.

One is the danger of being judgmental too quickly. That's really in verses 3 to 5. Taking the place of God. Verse 2. You will be judged.

Now, that's just an absolute statement. We will all be judged. All of us will stand before the Lord. All of us, and Paul says, writing to the Christians in Corinth, we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ.

And this is illustrated in verses 3 to 5, which carries on the idea of hypocrites. Three times in chapter 6, verse 2, verse 5, and verse 16, Jesus has warned against hypocrisy.

[ 9 : 23 ] A small speck of dust or the like in your eye. And that's so blinding our vision that we cannot see a small speck of dust in someone else's eye.

So blinding our vision, we can't see the huge plank that's sticking out of our own eye. Now, that's a caricature, of course. But caricatures can be very, very effective.

I don't know how many of you remember the program Spitting Images that was on in the 1980s. And the puppets of people prominent at the time, Mrs. Thatcher, Neil Kinnock, John Major, and so on.

And John Major never got over the grey man image of the puppet there. And, of course, Mrs. Thatcher's powerful personality came across.

There was one, I remember, where she and the cabinet, all males apart from herself, were sitting down to a meal. And the waiter said, Mrs. Thatcher, what would you like? And she said, I'll have steak.

[10:22] And he said, what about the vegetables? Oh, they'll have steak as well. And I don't think the Iron Lady ever quite got over that. So, although this is a caricature, it's pointing out very, very powerfully that we can be overcritical about others and undercritical of ourselves.

It's well known, isn't it, that we criticize most fiercely the things that we are most conscious of in ourselves. So, Jesus says, don't be judgmental too quickly.

Of course, your brothers and sisters have faults. Of course, the mote of dust or whatever it is in the eye needs to be removed. But don't you imagine that you've no faults.

Now, verse 6 seems to me to be making the opposite and necessary point. Don't abdicate judgment. You see, some people think judge not, let you be not judge.

On the extreme left wing, people like Tolstoy said this meant you could never have law courts and so on. Now, in the kind of world we are living in, think how foolish and dangerous that would be.

[11:29] If we say don't judge, we're apt to lapse into sentimentality, aren't we, to sweep things under the carpet. Do not give dogs what is holy.

Do not throw your perils before pigs. Well, you've got to judge whether you're dealing with a dog and a pig, lest they trample them underfoot. Now, I think what's being talked about here, I think we are still in what appears to be the Christian family.

I think it's rather like those people the author of Hebrews warns against. People who deliberately and persistently turn away from the gospel. People who appear to be interested and then turn away from.

The author of Hebrews warns about that. People who have tasted of the heavenly calling and been in the sphere of the Holy Spirit and so on. Where there is contempt and hostility to the gospel, we need to judge that.

And we need to remember that some people are not going to be persuaded. Normally, we need to be patient. We need to persevere as God does with us.

[12:39] But we mustn't imagine this is always going to work. You see, there are two dangerous attitudes, aren't we? There's the stern frown of the legalist, who is continually disapproving, continually telling us we're getting it wrong and we're never going to make it.

On the other hand, there's the shrugged shoulder of the liberal, who says, It doesn't really matter. We'll push it under the carpet. You see how that sounds kind and nice, but ultimately nothing is solved.

No problems are solved. No, nothing is ever dealt with. So, Jesus is saying our relationship with others in the Christian family, avoid being judgmental.

But on the other hand, don't abdicate judgment. That's why we have to take the scriptures always as a whole. After all, the Bible talks about discipline in the family.

There has to be discipline in the human family. There has to be discipline in God's family. Now, secondly, I think he's talking in verses 7 to 11 about our relationship with God.

[13:45] And notice verse 11, Your Father who is in heaven. That is picking up the opening of the Lord's Prayer from the previous chapter. And you can see the connection.

Prayer is the way of keeping in touch with God and avoiding the twin errors of harsh judgment and no judgment. I think he's saying two things here.

First of all, we need to be persistent. Ask, seek, knock. Keep on asking. Keep on seeking. Keep on knocking. No genuine relationship is simply one which blows hot and cold.

There will be many strains in any genuine relationship. Many problems. But if we're going to have a genuine relationship, we have to be persistent. Now, this does not mean that God's giving depends on our asking.

That would be a very bad mistake to make. It's rather like that verse in Philippians where Paul says, In everything with prayer and thanksgiving, make your requests known to God.

[14:54] Now, at first sight, that seems that God wouldn't know what we wanted or needed unless we told him. Or at the very least, he needs to be continually reminded. I think the point both of this verse and of that verse in Philippians is that we often don't know.

We often are unclear about what we are asking for. And we need in the relationship with our heavenly Father to come to him and in the light of his presence, in the light of his word, discover what it is we really need.

In verse 8, Now, is that a blanket statement? I ask the Lord for a million pounds.

I'm going to get it if I ask persistently enough. I ask the Lord for a Mercedes Benz, a ridiculous commercial a few years ago.

Will I get it? Now, clearly, that is not what's being said. What is being said here, surely, is that as we continue in our relationship with God, as our relationship develops, we know more and more what he wants.

[16:06] And more and more becomes what we want, or never perfectly. And remember another thing that's very important. We must avoid extremes here as well.

We mustn't assume that the will of God is going to be unpleasant. Too many people assume this. I look for the hardest, most difficult thing, and that must be the will of God.

The other extreme, of course, is imagining it can only be the will of God if I'm going to enjoy it. Now, the truth of the matter is that neither of these things are true. Sometimes God gives us great blessings, great happiness in our lives.

Sometimes he sends us sorrow and tragedy. If we recognize them both as coming from him, then we'll be able to cope with both.

Take it to the Lord in prayer. Now, some people will approach this by saying this makes prayer unnecessary. If God knows what we want, if God is willing to give us what we need, why do we need to pray at all?

[17:15] Now, think about that for a minute. If that were the case, we wouldn't only not need to pray, we'd never need to do anything. Suppose you're anxious about a particular job.

Suppose you want to get a particular job. Does that mean you don't have to apply for it? If you want to marry somebody, does that mean you don't have to ask them? You see what I'm getting at?

Prayer is not a magical switch that makes things happen. Prayer is a relationship with God whereby talking with him, listening to his word, reading his word, we begin to learn what his will for us is.

It's closely related, as I say, to understanding what he is saying to us. So we need to be persistent. And also we need to remember to whom we are praying.

We are praying to our Father who is in heaven. We're praying to a loving Father. We're not praying to somebody who is reluctant to give. We are praying to someone who loves to give and who loves us.

[18:24] And Jesus says, if you, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, you won't give a stone, you won't give a serpent. Now, those of us who are parents know very well we often get it wrong.

Sometimes we're far too soft. Other times we're far too strict. You know the kind of thing. You indulge your children and then one day they spill their juice and you say, oh right, you're grounded for a week.

You know the kind of excessive reaction. Now, God is not like that. God is consistently loving, consistently caring. He knows us better than any earthly parent ever can.

And he never makes mistakes. So you see, prayer is not magic. Prayer is about our relationship with God. As I've often said before, it's not true to say that prayer changes things.

What is true to say is that prayer puts us in touch with God who changes things and changes people. Relationship with the family of God. Relationship with the father of the family, if you like.

[19:28] And finally, relations with everyone in verses 12 to 14. So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them.

For this is the law and the prophets. And once again here, I think there are two balancing truths. And the first one is in verse 12. Don't have a different standard for treating Christians and treating people who are not Christians.

Don't be generous, kind, warm to the Christian family and cold and hard and unforgiving to those who are not members of the family.

And this is the so-called golden rule. Whatever the wish that others would do to you, do also to them. Give to them generosity and non-judgmentalism.

Remember that we are all fallen, sinful people. So don't be over-critical and over-harsh on the people we meet who are not Christians.

[ 20 : 30 ] Apart from anything else, we're hardly likely to win them for the gospel if we treat them in that kind of way. For this is the law and the prophets.

The law and the prophets, of course, the summary phrase for the Old Testament, the Scriptures. At that time, the New Testament had not been written. Well, if this is the law and the prophets, why do we have a book of over a thousand pages?

Why don't we have just this little card that says on one side, whatever you wish that others would do, do also to them. On the other side, love God and love your neighbor. Because that's also said as summing up the law and the prophets.

Now, I assume the problem is that if we simply had these two sentences, we would identify love with niceness and vague feelings. Love for God would become vague feelings, vague feelings of the other, vague feelings of someone out there, vague feelings which we cannot understand and which we cannot apply to our lives.

And applied to our neighbors, this would simply become a general niceness. That's why we need the whole of the Scriptures, to put content into these. And so often you get this in Scripture, a summary phrase, which you need the rest of Scripture to understand.

[ 21 : 48 ] So, treat the human family, if you like, in the way you treat the Christian family. I mean, it's a dangerous thing to say. But anyway, don't have two standards.

Don't behave as if you were superior. Don't turn our nose up at people. That's the first thing. The second thing, and I think the point of putting verses 13 and 14 in parallel with verse 12, that's true. We don't treat people differently. Nevertheless, there is a radical difference between those who belong to the family and those who don't. Some choose life and some choose death.

That's deeply rooted in the Old Testament. Moses says, I set before you life and death, blessing and cursing. Choose life. And in Psalm 1, there are the two ways. The one who grows like a tree by the rivers of water.

The other who disappears like dust. And there are two ways to go. One is narrow. Not narrow in the sense of negative, but narrow in the sense that it will cost.

[ 23 : 01 ] Jesus is to say, whoever comes after me, let them take up their cross and follow me. It's narrow. It's difficult. It's hard. And the broad way, the wide way, is easy because you go with the flow.

Don't rock the boat. Follow the crowd. There is a choice to be made. Enter by the narrow gate and avoid the way that leads to destruction.

The way is easy. The way is gentle. The way is popular that leads to destruction. Once again, drawing from the book of Proverbs is a way that seems right to people.

At the end of that way is the ways of death. So you see, as you look through these verses, you see how Jesus is presenting us with balancing truths.

Not that we have to be somewhere in a vague middle, but that we realize that we realize not to be judgmental and censorious, and yet to have real judgment.

[ 24 : 08 ] Judge with genuine judgment. In our relationships with God, we need to be persistent. We're not persistent because he is harsh and unloving, but persistent because he wants truly to know us.

And thirdly, in our relationship with everyone, make sure we treat everyone with love and concern and generosity. And part of that concern and love and generosity is pointing out to others that there is a choice to be made.

There's a difficult choice, but it will lead to life. There's an easy choice, but it will lead to death. So the Lord Jesus Christ is calling for wholeheartedness and openness in all our relationships, including our relationship with God.

And he's calling us to be involved in that relationship that will keep on growing until the perfect day. Amen. Let's pray. Lord God, we know how difficult it is to make these kind of choices.

How easy it is for us to be very judgmental and censorious, or on the other hand, a kind of sloppy indulgence. We know that prayer is difficult, and we know that it is so hard to treat people the way that you treat us.

[ 25 : 29 ] We need your grace. We need vision. We need help. And we ask that in the days to come, these words will become part of our lives and part of our discipleship.

In Jesus' name, amen.