



Pearls before Swine by Ron Julian

Do not give what is holy to dogs, and do not throw your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you to pieces. (Matthew 7:6)

This verse in the Sermon on the Mount is one of the strangest things Jesus ever said. Are we really supposed to decide which people are “dogs” and “swine,” and then refuse to give them our “pearls”? That seems to be a very common way of taking this verse. The holy things and the pearls represent the things of God, perhaps the gospel itself. The dogs and pigs represent hostile, unworthy people. And so the statement translates into something like this: Do not preach the things of God to hostile, unworthy people.

This interpretation is often presented as a sort of counterbalance to the previous verses where Jesus warns against judging others. Take, for example, this explanation I found on the internet (the first one I came upon):

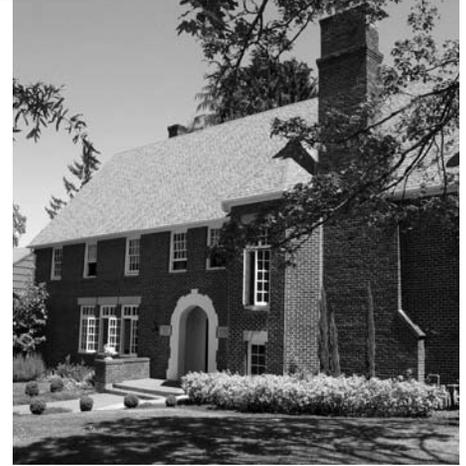
In context, Jesus just taught his disciples not to judge in Matthew 7:1-5. The kind of judgment Jesus meant is the judgment of a critical and censorious spirit... On the other hand, there are times when Christians are to use good judgment, particularly since they have a mandate to preach the gospel and make disciples. Times come, however, when the audience to our witnessing to the truth in Christ Jesus will confront us with hostility, hatred, and even occasionally violence. In situations such as those, Jesus does not expect us to continue being his witnesses to such hostile audiences.

Interpretations like this are almost universal among the commentaries I looked at. Some of the commentators, it is true, seem to feel a little uneasy. They admit that the verse is difficult, and they seem a little apologetic about their interpretation, but they don't have a better one to suggest. Well, I think I have a better one to suggest.

For me, the key to understanding Matthew 7:6 is found in a bit of Old Testament background. In Exodus 22, Moses is giving the law to Israel. Many of those laws are about keeping themselves religiously holy. They are to eat a certain way. They are to dress a certain way. These practices are an outward, ritualistic expression of an inner commitment to holiness and righteousness. One of those laws is found in Exodus 22:31:

And you shall be holy men to Me, therefore you shall not eat any flesh torn to pieces in the field; you shall throw it to the dogs.

Moses is writing into a very human situation. People need food to live, and people have to work hard to get that food. To get meat, they have to raise animals or go hunting. Given this situation, “roadkill” would seem like a real find to most people. They didn't have to work to obtain this animal; another animal killed it for them. It would be tempting to think, “Great, let's take it and eat it.” But God gave Israel a religious restriction against eating that meat, a restriction that makes a certain amount of sense. We all recognize



something is a little unsavory about roadkill. It has been violently killed—in Moses' time, usually by another animal. It has been lying on the ground for who knows how long. The flies are all over it. And so God forbids Israel to eat roadkill because He wants their eating habits to be a symbolic picture of their commitment to cleanness, holiness. God knows the people need food, but what is more important to Him is that their entire lives symbolize a concern for holy and appropriate living.

Therefore, God says through Moses, “Don't take the meat; instead, throw it to the dogs.” These are wild dogs that prowled outside their camps, not pets. To throw the meat to the dogs is a way of saying, “This is not for you; get rid of it.” There is plenty of meat that a holy person can eat. You can eat the animals you raise. You can eat animals you hunt. That meat is holy; it has an appropriate place in the life of a person committed to God. But according to the religious symbolism by which God wants them to live, roadkill is not holy. It has no place in a holy life, so throw it to the dogs.

This little command in Exodus gives us very important background information for reading our verse in Matthew. What do we do with unholy meat? We throw it to the dogs. To throw meat to the dogs is to say, “This is unholy; this is not for us.” But what then do we do with *holy* meat? We keep it; we eat it. What kind of foolish, perverse people would we be to throw the *holy* meat to the dogs? That holy meat is a gift from God to sustain our lives. Throwing what is holy and



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good to the dogs shows that we are fools, that what God has called good and holy we have treated as garbage.

The most likely meaning of “Don’t throw what is holy to the dogs,” then, is “Don’t treat what is holy and godly as being common and profane.” Unholy things are thrown to the dogs; holy things are meant to be kept and treasured. Notice how different this is than the common understanding of verse six. The typical, common understanding might be paraphrased as this:

You have holy things (such as the gospel, the message of the Scriptures) that you must give to others. Don't think, however, that you can give them to everyone. Some are like the dogs and the swine; they are hostile and unworthy, so don't give your "pearls" to them.

But if I am right, the expanded paraphrase is more like this:

There are holy things that must be kept and treasured, and there are unholy things that must be thrown away. Do not, however, treat the holy things as if they were unholy. Only a fool would treat what is holy and sacred as if it were common and profane.

This verse, then, is not about the dogs. It is about the fool who would treat what is holy as worthless. Jesus is not saying, “Figure out who the hostile, unworthy people are and don’t preach to them.” Instead, he is saying, “Don’t take what is holy and precious and treat it as worthless.” The verse is not about judging other people’s values; the verse is about getting our *own* values straight.

Likewise, that is the significance of throwing pearls to swine. Pearls are beautiful, and pearls are valuable. They are meant to bring wealth and adornment to a person’s life. So what kind of foolish, perverse person would throw them to the pigs? Again, to do so is to say, “These are not valuable enough to keep. Maybe these pigs can find a use for them.” Jesus is not saying, “Figure out which people are like pigs, and don’t cast your pearls of wisdom before them.” Rather, he is saying, “Don’t be the kind of fool who throws away what is beautiful and precious.”

At this point, a very natural question arises: What about the rest of the verse? That is, do not give what is holy to dogs nor throw pearls to swine “lest they trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you to pieces.” There are two questions that need to be answered:

- 1) Who exactly is doing the trampling and tearing to pieces?
- 2) What, if anything, do these words add to the basic idea of the verse?

As far as who is doing the trampling and tearing, a straightforward way of reading the verse would be:

- Do not give what is holy to dogs,
- And do not throw your pearls before swine, lest the swine trample them under their feet and then turn and tear you to pieces.

But many propose that another possibility is to see this verse in an A-B-B-A pattern: Dogs-pigs-pigs-dogs. Then the clause would read like this:

- Do not give what is holy to dogs (lest they turn and tear you to pieces),
- And do not throw your pearls before swine lest they trample them under foot.

I used to lean toward the second option, with the dogs doing the tearing and the swine doing the trampling. I think I am now leaning toward the first. That is, we have one simple statement about not giving holy things to dogs. And then we have a similar statement about giving pearls to swine, with the added warning that it will turn out badly for us if we do. It is hard to be sure exactly what these words about trampling and tearing mean, but I think the general picture is reasonably clear. The fool in this verse has thrown away what is holy and precious. Perhaps he thought there would be some mundane benefit from it: maybe it will keep the animals happy, and they will leave him alone. But instead, his action backfires, and things turn out worse for him than he intended. He loses the valuable thing he had, and instead of being left alone, he is attacked. If these words do indeed add to the power of Jesus’ message in this verse, they warn us

that such perversity is not going to serve us well in the end.

Now that we have explored the basic argument Jesus is making in Matthew 7:6, two points emerge that I would like to discuss, a minor point and a major one.

The minor point is a philosophical one concerning biblical interpretation. The common interpretation of this verse treated it as a symbolic statement to be decoded. The first step was to ask questions such as, “What do the pearls and the holy things represent?” and “Who do the dogs and swine represent?” So, the common interpretation decodes a statement like “Don’t **give** what is **holy** to the **dogs**” to mean something like this: “Don’t **preach** the **gospel** to **those** who are hostile and unworthy.”

If, however, my argument is correct, we can see that the verse is not really a symbolic code at all. The dogs and swine don’t symbolize anything. We are not supposed to be asking ourselves, “Which of my acquaintances are dogs and swine, unworthy of my pearls?” Rather, the entire statement paints an overall metaphorical picture. Unholy meat, which is not for you, should be thrown to the wild dogs. But what kind of perverse person would throw the holy meat to the wild dogs? Dogs don’t symbolize particular kinds of people; they are just part of an overall background expression “throwing unholy meat to dogs.” If I said, “Don’t flush your first-edition manuscripts down the toilet,” I don’t intend you to ask what the toilet symbolizes. The whole statement is just an expression for treating something valuable as if it were not.

Matthew 7:6, therefore, confronts us with an issue that we find in many places in the Bible. How should figurative language be interpreted? Some people, for example, tend to treat Jesus’ parables as if they were symbolic codes to be deciphered. We face the same issue with the imagery used by the prophets. This is a bigger topic than can be explored here; my point is merely that we should not assume that all figurative language is filled with symbols waiting to be decoded. For example, when we read the parable of the prodigal son, we would be unwise to ask, “What do the pigs represent?” Likewise, it turns out that this is the wrong question to ask about Matthew 7:6 as well.

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My final and major point concerns the overall message of this verse. In particular, what role does it play in the overall message of the Sermon on the Mount in which it is found? As we have seen so far, the general sense of this verse concerns not perversely treating what is holy as something common and worthless. The question is not: Who are the pigs? The question is: What do you value? Cling to what is precious. If you are going to throw things to the dogs, throw the *unholy* things, not the holy things. How, then, does this general theme relate to what Jesus has said in the rest of the Sermon, and what should we do about it?

I can't help thinking of the contrast in the Sermon on the Mount between the genuine believers and the Pharisees, whom Jesus calls hypocrites. The believers long for eternal life in the kingdom of God. The believers will put up with persecution to gain that life. The believers store up the *true* treasure, the treasure in heaven. But the Pharisees use their religion to promote worldly gain and self-righteousness. They pray and fast and give alms so that other people will see them and applaud them. They use the law as a means of demonstrating how righteous they are. They see their religion as a way of making their lives better now, in this world. And yet they have lost sight of what is truly valuable.

Our little verse, therefore, fits right into the context of the Sermon on the Mount. Cling to the holy and precious things of God—His promises, His commandments. Value them above all else. Do not be like the Pharisees, who devalue the things of God by using them for worthless, worldly goals. Do not throw meat that is holy to the dogs; instead, keep it, be nourished by it. It is for you, to give you life. Do not throw your pearls before swine. Instead, cling to the valuable and beautiful things of God. They are your treasure; don't throw them away. If you do not keep and treasure them, it will not turn out well for you in the end.

Ron Julian is a tutor at Gutenberg College, the author of *Righteous Sinners*, and a co-author of *The Language of God: A Commonsense Approach to Understanding and Applying the Bible*.

New Tutor

Gutenberg welcomes **Chris Alderman** to the faculty this fall. Chris will teach writing to freshman and sophomore students and German to the juniors. Chris earned his B.A. in English from Washington and Lee University in Virginia, taught English conversation in Japan, returned to the States to earn an M.A. in Language and Literature from the University of Chicago, and pursued a Ph.D. in comparative literature for two years at the University of Michigan, where he taught English composition to freshmen and did graduate coursework in German literature.



Dissatisfied with the intellectual constraints of a thoroughly secular institution, he quit the program and returned to his home town of Eugene, where he was part of the Gutenberg College Residence Program, worked to pay off his student loans, and met Abby Watt, whom he married about a year later. When approached about the possibility of teaching at Gutenberg, Chris says he “figuratively jumped for joy.”



New House Managers

Gutenberg also welcomes **Stefan and Carina Crabtree** as the new Residence Program house managers this fall. Stefan and Carina bring a lot of knowledge and experience to their new roles. Both graduated from Gutenberg—Stefan in 2008, and Carina in 2010—and they both lived at Gutenberg when they attended the college. After earning his master's degree in German at Middlebury

College in Vermont, Stefan came back to Gutenberg as its German tutor for three years.

Stefan and Carina were married in 2011. They have two daughters, Opal (5) and Eva (1 1/2), who will no doubt bring some liveliness to the Residence Program.

For more information on Gutenberg's Residence Program, visit the “Student Life and Housing” section of our website, www.gutenberg.edu.

Thank You!

Gutenberg wants to thank **Toby and Larissa Swanson** (left), who have served Gutenberg as Residence Program house managers for the past two years. Thanks also to **Nigel and Sally Makela** (right), who served as part of the Residence Program team this past year. The staff and faculty appreciate the valuable contribution you all made to Gutenberg, and we wish you well in your future endeavors.



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