

13. *Me*

First take the log out of your own eye!

Matthew 7:1-12

Me first

The time in which we live has been termed the me-generation.

Humanistic faith in man ends up as the individualism of the single person. Having pushed out God, humanity stands defenseless over against the tyranny of the individual: every ME demand his own space and freedom.

The reverse side of this is limitless toleration. Who am I to dare to intervene in the life of another person: isn't he or she just as free as I am? Toleration for everyone is the mirror image of the preference for myself. People give each other the freedom to do as they please in a pluralistic society in order to be able to make their own choices as well.

The Sermon on the Mount contains a phrase which appears to be grist for the mill for this modern toleration. It is short and to the point: "Do not judge." In the church Jesus' statement has been eagerly employed more than once in order to cast a shadow over efforts to keep both doctrine and life in the congregation pure. Are we allowed to condemn a pastor having a few strange ideas? In the same way people protect their life-style from instructions or admonitions of others. We aren't supposed to judge one another, are we?

In reality this represents a misuse of a quote from the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus isn't aiming at our neighbor to forbid him to be concerned about us. He is aiming at us. Neither does He do it to stand up for the freedom of our neighbor. Rather He is concerned for our future. The reason for the commandment lies in His fear that we might one day become the victims of our own judgment. Verse 1 says in its entirety: "Do not judge, or you too will be judged." Thereby Jesus is thinking about God's judgment. A judgment is certainly coming with a verdict concerning our words and deeds. Everyone must first examine himself because we will all be judged by God. Not in order to

experience our own freedom and to guarantee it for others, but primarily to escape our own judgment before God.

The explanation contained in verses 2 to 4 shows again that the background to Jesus' speaking is God's judgment and not human freedom. The last judgment is coming: "For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you." There are measures and norms for judgment: life is neither value free nor to be filled in according to individual choice. Jesus does not intend to keep us from judging because there is nothing to be condemned, but rather because we have to begin with ourselves. "Why do you look at the speck of saw-dust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?" My neighbor ought to remove the speck out of his eye. His life too must be subjected to God's law. But I am the first one in line: let me first give some attention to the misuse of my freedom before I start looking for the mistakes of another. We cannot ever justify ourselves before God by condemning someone else. The church will not be accepted in grace because it can criticize the world. A man cannot enter the kingdom of heaven by pointing to the sins of his neighbor.

Jesus teaches us the proper sequence: "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." Me first. Not in the sense of: I get to do what I want first. But in the sense of: first my conversion. Only after that will I be humble enough to help someone else rather than condemn him. In the me-generation the other person disappears in a haze of apathy. By taking the road to conversion our neighbor resurfaces out of that mist becoming the object of our brotherly love. Whoever first learns to live by grace, can be graceful in dealing with the faults of another.

My measures

A word in Jesus' instruction now follows connecting up to this. Here too He warns against thoughtless conduct that turns itself against us: "Do not give dogs what is sacred, do not throw away your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet and then turn and tear you to pieces." Taking this puzzling verse out of its context makes the passage very difficult to explain. The history of exegesis demonstrates that it could

mean almost anything. We must, however, explain it in conjunction with the preceding verses. Using different images the text once again discusses the danger of holding something up in front of others (or animals) which may eventually lead to our own ruin.

The particular power of the images employed here must have immediately struck the first listeners. To them Jesus' words probably sounded extreme and absurd. After all, sacred things are for the priests. Everything which the Israelites dedicated to the Lord and did not burn on the altar, was designated for them. Only the priests are allowed to eat this sacred food at a sacred place. It's not for anybody else. Naturally there were borderline cases. Determining who could be reckoned to the family of a priest required a great deal of effort. However, it would never occur to anyone to heedlessly toss sacred food, the first fruits of the Lord, onto the garbage heaps outside for the stray dogs. It was inconceivable! Why? Because sacred food is for the priests alone: it is their privilege. The second example also leads to something absurd. Pigs were not raised in Israel and they were certainly not fed precious pearls. Perish the thought that a woman would throw her pearls (in those days *real* pearls) in the trough. Expensive jewelry is intended to be worn. Both images have the same flip-side: it is self-evident that the priest keeps the sacred things for himself and that a woman wears her own pearls.

Jesus says these things in connection with his insistence to first apply God's norms and revelation to our own lives. The images employed fit into this. Having been given God's revelation in His Holy Word we are intended to live from it. More than once the books of Proverbs compares God's wisdom for the whole of life to a necklace which we are supposed to wear ourselves. Whenever we adorn ourselves with faith and good works, the sacred can come into its own.

In Israel many held the law up to others without bowing to it themselves. Expressions like "This mob that knows nothing of the law" and "the Gentiles who do not have the law" were common. Israel firmly held the handle of the mirror and let others stare into it. Condemning others while justifying themselves. Like a Pharisee who is thankful for not being like a disreputable tax collector. Jesus turns against this misuse of God's Word. It will eventually lead to their own destruction. In the end God allowed Israel to be trampled under by the pagan Romans. By running

a deficit in sanctification a Christian church more than once became the victim of Mohammedism to which it had once proudly held up the gospel.

The man who wants to cultivate himself finds the finest attire in God's commandments. They adorn a man. They bring out the best in him again as a creation of God. The true me-culture finds its norms with God.

My Father

In verses 7 to 11 Jesus speaks about prayer. He already spoke about this in chapter 6. Nevertheless, this is no tired repetition. Jesus now brings prayer into the discussion by joining it to His insistence to first live according to God's commandments *yourself* and to first remove the speck out of your own eye. That is difficult for us. In and of ourselves we are unprepared to do "good things" and to persevere in them. We are quicker to harness our lives to selfishness and egotism than to respect for God and love of our neighbor. We are faster to condemn what is wrong with our brother than to show what is good in our own lives. We can see here how important it is that Jesus makes us hesitant to judge. By doing it correctly, we will end up at ourselves.

There is only one way out here: through prayer to our heavenly Father. He will give good gifts (literally: the good things) to those who pray to Him for them (verse 11). No speck will disappear from our eyes without prayer to God. Commandments will not become pearls around our necks without help from our heavenly Father.

For that reason Jesus teaches us to go to God when we take a look at ourselves: "Ask and it will be given to you, seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened to you." Earthly fathers, who are sinners, already know how to care for their children. They may not always get what they want, but no father will ever give stones or a snake instead of bread or fish. A child trusts that. How much more are we allowed to trust that our heavenly Father will never give us evil instead of good. He might give us something other than what we asked for, or at another time, but then it is always better and never worse for us.

Jesus has a purpose in moving the prayer in the direction of searching and knocking. It concerns arriving at and entering the kingdom of heaven. God's Word and His commandments are given for underway. We must learn to live from these command-

ments as a means of entering into God's kingdom by faith. The Bible shows us the door but prayer hands over the key. Whoever wants to preserve the treasure of the gospel, must call in the help of His Father. Just like the ex-Pharisee Paul has taught: "So I find this law at work: 'When I want to do good, evil is there with me. What a wretched man I am. Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!'"

My fellowman

It should be clear now why verse 12 can function as a concluding sentence. "In everything do to others what you would have them do to you. For this sums up the law and the prophets." Although He will one day judge us, God is now graciously giving us the time to look, knock and find. In this way we also have to help our fellow man in patience and love. Not condemning, but caring. Not as judges but as brothers. Just as our Judge wants to be our Father.

The whole Bible (the law and the prophets) is summed up here. The law and the prophets have not been given to us in order that we might deal harshly with one another, but to first find the road to God's grace ourselves and then to help our neighbor on his way. God's Bible wants to save before the judgment comes. In the same way we are called to promote our neighbor's interests like our own rather than to promote our own interests against our neighbor. God's me-culture creates a humane society in which love graciously exiles selfishness.