

- Spend a moment in prayer, naming your anxiety before God. Ask him to remind you how much he delights in you and that he will provide for you. And let him have your worry.

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Matthew 7

Read verses 1-6. Today's reading is perfect material for a comic strip. It's such a clever word picture. Consider what Jesus is saying:

- ❖ Don't expect to see others clearly if you are not in the regular habit of reflecting on and confessing your own mess.

- ❖ We cannot be close and connected to those we are judging, without genuine humility. To see anything in your own eye, what do you need? A mirror. Who do you have in your life who loves you enough to be honest about the log poking out of your eye?

This passage is more about learning how to see ourselves and each other clearly. And it all begins with working out our own stuff.

What about the pigs and dogs and pearls part? Tough to figure out but try Eugene Peterson's translation in *The Message: Don't be flip with the sacred. Banter and silliness give no honor to God. Don't reduce holy mysteries to slogans. In trying to be relevant, you're only being cute and inviting sacrilege.*

This is an exhortation to uphold the power of the gospel: don't minimize, customize or relativize it in order to make it more palatable for those who don't yet believe. That will actually end up hurting you (and the gospel) in the long run. As Jesus said, "What good is salt if it loses its saltiness?"

Questions:

- What things do you tend to judge in others? Why do you think that's what you pay attention to?
- Who are the mirrors in your lives? How can you invite them to help you see your log more clearly?
- Who has been hurt by your judgment? What can you do this week to repair that relationship?
- How are you tempted to water down the message of Jesus to avoid offending those who don't yet believe? What could happen if we followed Jesus without compromise or apology?

Read verses 7-11; Jesus is inviting us to ask God for what we really want. It's not a guarantee that we'll get it, custom-made, delivered to our doorstep, Amazon style. But there's something honest and powerful about naming our desires and asking God to provide.

“What if we ask for the wrong thing?” Jesus doesn’t seem too concerned about that. Just because we ask doesn’t mean God will give. Think back to something you begged your parents for that would have been bad for you. Just because we asked doesn’t mean they said yes. Same with God.

*If you then, who are 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?*

Sometimes our desires are shaped in the process of asking. When we ask, we are pushed to consider what it is we really want. We may even learn to ask for better things. I love this quote from C.S. Lewis: *It would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.*

It would be misleading to end here, and just say, “Ask and it shall be given to you, as long as you learn to ask for the right things.” That’s not true. There are some requests God does not grant that leave us devastated and wracked with doubt: prayers for healing, deliverance, or provision.

It can years to realize that our disappointment sometimes leads us to stop asking altogether. We disengaged in prayer because we couldn’t handle feeling let down.

No one can fully explain the mind of God, why He grants some requests and not others. But it’s better to ask and grieve the disappointment than to wall off and stop asking at all.

Questions:

- What are you asking God for right now?
- Is there anything beneath the ask? What is it you are really asking for?
- Have you ever been disappointed in prayer? How did that affect your conversation with God?
- What happens when you stop asking God for what you want?

Read verses 12-14. Go slowly, and read it several times.

So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.

Many of the religious folk around Jesus were so focused on obedience to the individual laws that they missed the whole point of the Law. Here, Jesus helps us zoom out and refocus the lens—all of those commands about what to eat, observing the Sabbath, how to marry/remarry/divorce, etc, everything was about creating a community of care.

Take a moment to run through the challenging moments of your day. Consider: How would I want someone to treat me in this circumstance? Try to respond accordingly.

Then there's this: *Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.*

When Jesus spoke these words, his hearers could call to mind the actual gates surrounding the city of Jerusalem. Some were wide, some narrow. He's making an object lesson.

Most people choose the wide gate. Why? It's less hassle. (You don't have to dismount your camel or donkey to get through.) You can go with the flow and blend in, since most folks are headed through that gate anyway.

To choose the narrow gate requires intentionality. You may have to leave the mass of people, endure the quiet or scrutiny of walking through a gate without the comfort and reassurance of your friends. (You might even have to leave your donkey or camel outside the wall.)

I've often heard this passage used to support the idea that Jesus is exclusive, and only those who believe certain doctrine or live a certain way are allowed in. Jesus is simply describing an observable trend: Nobody drifts into the kingdom of God. If you live on autopilot, the current of our culture will not usher you into a more loving, joyful, peaceful, patient way of being. That's just not the direction of the masses.

It's way easier to squander our time, wreck relationships through our selfishness, indulge in food that isn't helpful to our bodies—the way is easy that leads to destruction!

Here's a thought: Thinking of the "wide gate," we usually picture debauchery and secularism. Is it possible our Christian subculture has carved out a wide gate of its own? One that, if we're not careful, can lead us away from the kingdom and toward destruction too?

We're presented with a choice: Both gates are open to us. Which will we walk through? Are you willing to leave the group to walk through the narrow gate, even if it costs you your camel?

Questions:

- Take a moment to reflect on a challenging moment from your day. Consider: How would I want to have been treated in this circumstance? What would it look like for me to have responded accordingly?
- What wide gate are you most naturally drawn toward? What is appealing about that gate?
- What would it look like to walk through the narrow gate, in the way of Jesus?

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Read verses 15-20. In a nutshell: be very discerning about who you follow.

We don't talk about prophets much today, but consider these the "ancient influencers." They are the ones who speak (on behalf of God) about how we should live.

Jesus warns us that there are many who will present as the real deal, people to be believed, imitated, and obeyed; but don't be fooled. Look at the deeper, lasting fruit of a person before you champion their message.

NT Wright puts it this way: *Look at the life of the person who is offering you advice. Think of it like a tree. Can you see healthy, tasty fruit on this tree? Can you see other people being genuinely nourished by it? Or is it, in fact, producing a crop of lies, immorality, and greed?*

Eugene Peterson writes, "A genuine leader will never exploit your emotions or your pocketbook."

So how do we spot false prophets? The obvious examples are the religious leaders whose ministries have crumbled because of moral failure. Think Ravi Zacharias, Jerry Falwell Jr., and Carl Lentz. But it's