Commentary on Matthew 7:1-29
by Dr. Knox Chamblin

VIII. EXERCISING JUDGMENT. 7:1-12.

A. Sinful Judgment. 7:1-5.

1. The context of the judgment: relationships within the Christian community. The "others" of v. 2 are fellow disciples: note the three references to "brother" (adelphos) in vv. 3-5. This already qualifies the application of the imperative of v. 1.

2. The condition of the judge: self-righteousness. Jesus asks in 7:3 (using hyperbole), "Why do you [singular] look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?" Not only is the plank much larger than the speck of sawdust; the presence of the plank makes it impossible to see and remove the speck of sawdust (cf. vv. 4-5). Yet the would-be judge "pays no attention" to the plank, but only to the speck of sawdust. This figure means not simply that the judge's quantity of sin exceeds that of the brother. Rather, Jesus warns against a certain attitude - namely, the presumption that one is righteous in contrast to another's sinfulness. "It is judging a fellow disciple out of self-righteousness, i.e., in a way that shows failure to surpass the ostentatious righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees" (Gundry, 121; cf. 5:20). That very posture of self-righteousness is the greatest of sins (compared to other sins, it is as a "plank" to a "speck of sawdust"), a conviction shared by Paul (Rom. 10:3; Phil 3:2-11). The effect of this attitude is that one puts himself above the other (cf. the posture of the hypocrites according to 6:1-18), from which lofty position he presumes to address his brother's sin. But the self-righteous person is not able to deal effectively with a brother's sin. Something must first happen to him. Let him first face and seek to deal with his own sin. Cf. C. S. Lewis, "The Trouble with 'X'," in God in the Dock; and see B. below.

3. The consequences for the judge.

a. Judgment from God. V. 2, with its two future verbs ("you will be judged," "it will be measured to you"), speaks not of the disciple's being judged by other disciples (in a manner corresponding to the way he himself has judged), but of his being judged by God at the Final Judgment (thus Gundry, 120; cf. the parallel in Lk 6:37-38, also Mt 6:14-15; Rom 2:1-3; Js 2:12-13; 4:12).
b. Judgment by the same standard. There is no indication that the judge's standard is faulty. On the contrary, it is a good standard, God's own standard (the Law). In judging the judge, God will use this same standard, the very one the judge has employed in judging his brother (v. 2). In stating this, v. 2 implies that the judge may be guilty of the very sin for which he condemns his brother (cf. Rom 2:1, 17-24). NB that Jesus addresses the judge as "hypocrite" (7:5): he appears to be righteous, but he is really unrighteous. It is a psychological fact that the sins which beset us are the very sins we most quickly detect and condemn in others. A proud man will rail against pride, a self-righteous preacher against the self-righteousness of his people. A lustful man may be unduly suspicious about the sexual practice of his teenage son. (The plank and the sawdust may come from the same kind of wood!)

B. Righteous Judgment. 7:5-6.

The negative imperative of v. 1 does not comprehend Jesus' whole teaching on the subject. He speaks here of two senses in which a disciple may properly exercise judgment.

1. Judgments about a believer, v. 5. The warnings considered under A. are issued toward a good end: "First take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye." Let the self-righteous sinner first examine himself. Once he really sees his own sin (the "plank"), he is in a position - really for the first time - to understand his brother's sin. He is now in a position effectively to address and to help remove the brother's sin (cf. the directives of 18:15-20). There is no more room for self-righteousness; awareness of his own sin humbles him before God (cf. 5:3, "How blest are those who know their need of God"), from which lowly position he can help his erring brother. Awareness of his own sin prevents him from placing himself above the sinful brother, and helps him to identify with the struggles of a fellow-sinner. Cf. Phil 2:3-4; Gal 6:1-10.

2. Judgments about an unbeliever, v. 6.

a. The metaphors. Jesus speaks of "dogs" and "pigs." The dogs are not domesticated pets "but the wild pariah dogs, vagabonds and mongrels, which scavenged in the city's rubbish dumps" (Stott, 181); and pigs were unclean animals in Jewish eyes (for the joining of the two, see also 2 Pet 2:22). Moreover, the structure of v. 6 is chiastic (following Gundry, 123): i.e. the pigs trample the pearls underfoot; and the dogs, having devoured "what is holy" (i.e. sacrificial meat from the altar in the temple), "turn and tear to pieces" the one who has tossed them the food. What do the metaphors mean?
b. The unbeliever's response. A Jew might apply the above terms to an unbelieving Gentile. In Jesus' usage, the application has shifted to those unbelievers (whether Jewish or Gentile) outside the community of the disciples. However, the actions illustrated in v. 6b are not those of unbelievers in general, but of those who have repeatedly been exposed to Jesus' Gospel of the Kingdom (4:17, 23) and his Royal Law of the Kingdom (chs. 5-7), yet have persisted both in rejecting his teaching and in attacking it. Cf. the warnings of 7:13-27, and the woes against the scribes and Pharisees in ch. 23; also Acts 13:44-51, on the response of Paul and Barnabas to those of Antioch who "talked abusively against what Paul was saying" (v. 45b).

c. The believer's counter-response. To recognize when an unbeliever has reached that point (as just described), the believer must make certain judgments. (The placement of this saying at this point, guards disciples against concluding from 7:1-5 that there is no place for making judgments about the state of unbelievers.) For doing so, he requires great discernment. His fundamental task, as stated in Mt 28:19, is to address the teachings of Jesus to non-believers; 7:6 is "for exceptional situations only" (Stott, 183). To know when the listener has become so hardened against the truth that further teaching must be withheld, requires penetrating insight. It is instructive to examine the apostles' exercise of such judgments; cf. e.g. 1 Cor 5; 12:10 (on "discerning spirits"); Acts passim.

C. Giving and Receiving. 7:7-12.

1. The theme of the passage. The "golden rule," v. 12, is not simply tacked onto the teaching of vv. 7-11; it is instead the climax for which vv. 7-11 prepare. The main theme of vv. 7-12 is personal relationships; it is principally in support of this theme that the teaching of vv. 7-11 is given. NB the "therefore" (oun) with which v. 12 opens (but which NIV omits).

2. The Father's example. 7:7-11 is clearly related to the teaching on prayer found in 6:5-15. As these verses make plain, disciples are not only permitted to ask God for things, but commanded to do so. However, the principal subject of 7:7-11 is not prayer (had it been, would not Matthew have placed this material with that of 6:5-15?), but personal relationships (as noted above). The main focus in vv. 7-11 is not the disciples' requests but the heavenly Father's gracious response (v. 11, with its qal wahomer) - which provides the model for disciples' attitudes, v. 12 (cf. Gundry, 123, and 3. below). Does Matthew's placement of vv. 7-11 here instead of with 6:5-15, suggest that the "good gift" to
be sought by disciples is the kind of heart that will enable them to act according to the teaching of vv. 1-12?

3. The disciples' response, v. 12.

a. Background. About 100 years earlier, the Golden Rule appears in a **negative** form, in the rabbinical school of Hillel: "Do not do to others what you would not have them do to you" ([b. Sabb.] 31a; see Gundry, 125). This calls upon rabbinical disciples to avoid harming others. Jesus, by contrast, calls for positive acts of love. He does not permit his disciples to rest comfortably in that neutral territory where one refrains both from wrongful another person and from doing good for him or her.

b. The call to radical obedience. As noted, 7:12 begins with the conjunction "therefore" (found in KJV but not NIV). The disciples remain "evil" (v. 11a). Nevertheless they are members of the New Community from whom a radical obedience is expected (5:21-48). Jesus calls upon them here (as he did in 5:43-48) to follow the Father's example of gracious love. "Oun makes the Father's giving good gifts a reason for Jesus' disciples to treat others well" (Gundry, 125). Moreover, the command of v. 12 relates to the subject of vv. 1-5: "the Golden Rule demands a Father-like graciousness which forestalls the judging prohibited at the start of the section (vv 1-5)" (Gundry, 123). Cf. Rom 12:21, "Do not be overcome by evil [by judging others], but overcome evil with good [by loving others]."

c. The sum of the whole matter. As Gundry notes, 7:12 concludes the section begun at 5:17 (which rested in turn upon the gracious indicatives of 5:1-16). In closing this section, Jesus emphasizes the vital importance of love to neighbor (without distinction: v. 12 does not speak exclusively of "brothers," as did vv. 3-5; cf. Lk 10:25-37) - one of the principal objectives of the OT: "for this sums up the Law and the Prophets" (v. 12b). (As this v. speaks exclusively of loving neighbors, the word "all" is lacking. In 22:37-40, which concerns love for both God and neighbor, the phrase is "all the Law and the Prophets," v. 40.) Having thus concluded his exposition of the Law, Jesus now turns to exhortations based on that instruction.
IX. EXHORTATIONS TO OBEDIENCE. 7:13-27.

A. The Two Ways. 7:13-14.

1. The figure. These vv. speak of a "narrow gate" and a "wide gate," of a "broad road" and a "narrow road." Apparently the "narrow gate" is "a small, doorlike gate set within or beside the large city gate in order that known citizens might be allowed into the closed city at night and in times of danger" (Gundry, 127). (The gates into Cambridge University colleges exhibit the same features.) But note that here the gate provides entry not into a city but onto a road.

2. The cruciality of decision. The figure of the gate entering onto the road demonstrates the cruciality of listeners' present, decisive response to Jesus' teaching (cf. Gundry, 127) - specifically what he has just taught about the Law of God. Living according to Law, particularly as radically interpreted by Jesus, does not appeal to most listeners; it seems far too limiting and restrictive. The antinomian way is far more appealing. But the former leads to life, and the latter to death. Cf. Psalms 1, 119.

3. Further observations.

   a. What about the number of the elect? This passage is concerned to describe two ways of life, and to contrast the ease (and thus the appeal) of the one with the difficulty (and thus the unattractiveness) of the other. It is not occupied (at least principally) with the question just posed. If we insist on concluding from this passage that the number of the elect is relatively small, then we must take account of balancing passages such as Lk 16:16 and Rev 7:9.

   b. What about those who have never heard the Gospel? The passage does not address this question. If we insist on raising it, we must note that implied here is a decision based on awareness of the alternatives. One chooses the one gate (and road) or the other, after having heard Jesus' teaching (cf. 7:28-29). "The whole picture seems to relate only to those who have had the opportunity of decision for or against Christ; it simply leaves out of view those who have never heard" (Stott, 196).

B. Warning against False Prophets. 7:15-23.

1. The prophets' intention. This passage must be closely related to 7:13-14. I.e. the "false prophets" (pseudoprophetai) are bent (whether consciously or not, 7:21-22) upon deterring listeners from the narrow way to the
broad way. By both precept and example, they advocate an antinomian way of life.

2. Being and doing. This is the main subject of 7:15-20. What a person does inevitably reveals what he is. No disguise can effectively conceal that (v. 15). A tree that is good will produce good fruit, and one that is bad will produce bad (v. 17). "A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit" (v. 18). A false prophet's life exposes him for what he is, v. 20. See also 12:33-35.

3. Saying and doing. Vv. 21-23 advance the teaching of vv. 15-20. I.e. the "fruit" produced by the false prophet is a life lived contrary to Jesus' teaching. He may call Jesus "Lord," and prophesy and work miracles in Jesus' name (vv. 21-22). But the critical factor is whether he "does the will of my Father who is in heaven" (v. 21b). Saying that Jesus is "Lord" - even if by so doing one affirms his deity (Gundry, 131) - means nothing unless one's life accords with the affirmation, i.e. unless he actually submits to Jesus' Lordship by doing the Father's will as Jesus has expounded it (in 5:17-7:12). Jesus identifies such people as "workers of lawlessness" (a better translation for hoi ergazomenoi tôn anomian than NIV's "evidoers"), v. 23b, which shows that the so-called "antinomian" does not really live without law. Instead, he substitutes his own law for God's and dedicates himself to accomplishing "lawless deeds" - those actions which God's Law forbids.

C. The Wise and Foolish Builders. 7:24-27.

1. The figure. Both Mt and Lk (6:46-49) stress the cruciality of the foundation (though in Mt the rock is the foundation, whereas in Lk the foundation stands upon the rock). But Mt says less than Lk about the actual building of the houses, and more than Lk about assaults from the weather. NB that each house experiences the same threefold assault from the weather (in the Greek, 7:25a is almost identical to 7:27a). "A cloud bursts, flash floods race down the usually dry ravines...and winds blow fiercely during the storm" (Gundry, 135).

2. The meaning.

   a. The call to obedience. As in vv. 15-23, Jesus emphasizes obedience. The disciple who hears Jesus' words and does them, is like a wise builder (v. 24). The one "who hears these words of mine and does not do them" (v. 26), is like the foolish builder. The parallel between vv. 24a and 26a rules out a closer link between "hearing" and "doing," as though the "hearing" of the first disciple is different from that of the second. The parallel indicates that both have
heard but only one has acted in accordance with what he has come to understand; the second has consciously and deliberately rejected Jesus' teaching (cf. B. 3. above).

b. The common hazards. Both sorts of disciples are sure to experience pressures in life. It would limit the figure unduly, to equate the "storms" with persecutions, though these may be included (see 13:21).

c. The solid foundation. When those pressures come, only one foundation will stand - namely Jesus' teaching, more precisely his exposition of the Law. Building on this foundation means both hearing Jesus' teaching and obeying it. This foundation, unlike the other, provides stability and solidity. An antinomian lifestyle rests on a foundation which is no foundation (note that v. 25b lacks a parallel in v. 27) and thus has no real basis for living and no protection against destructive influences.

X. THE CONCLUSION. 7:28-29.

See THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT, I. B.

Jesus' authority (exousia) is derived in the first place from his person, 11:25-30. (Exousia means literally "out of being." There is a connection between "author" and "authority.") Secondly, it comes from his fidelity to the OT, as distinct from rabbinic traditions ("and not as their scribes," v. 29b; cf. 15:1-9).