Matt. 7:6

Do not give that which is holy to the dogs, and do not cast your pearls before pigs, lest they trample upon them with their feet, and turn and rend you.

This is a very difficult saying of Jesus for, on the face of it, it seems to demand an exclusiveness which is the very reverse of the Christian message. It was, in fact, a saying which was used in two ways in the early Church.

(i) It was used by the Jews who believed that God's gifts and God's grace were for Jews alone. It was used by those Jews who were the enemies of Paul, and who argued that a gentile must become circumcised and accept the Law and become a Jew before he could become a Christian. It was indeed a text which could be used--misused--in the interests of Jewish exclusiveness.

(ii) The early Church used this text in a special way. The early Church was under a double threat. It was under the threat which came from outside. The early Church was an island of Christian purity in a surrounding sea of gentile immorality; and it was always supremely liable to be infected with the taint of the world. It was under the threat which came from inside. In those early days men were thinking things out, and it was inevitable that there would be those whose speculations would wander into the pathways of heresy; there were those who tried to effect a compromise between Christian and pagan thought, and to arrive at some synthesis of belief which would satisfy both. If the Christian Church was to survive, it had to defend itself alike from the threat from outside and the threat from inside, or it would have become simply another of the many religions which competed within the Roman Empire.

In particular the early Church was very careful about whom it admitted to the Lord's Table, and this text became associated with the Lord's Table. The Lord's Supper began with the announcement: "Holy things for holy people." Theodoret quotes what he says is an unwritten saying of Jesus: "My mysteries are for myself and for my people." The Apostolic Constitutions lay it down that at the beginning of the Lord's Supper the deacon shall say, "Let none of the catechumens (that is, those still under instruction), let none of the hearers (that is, those who had come to the service because they were interested in Christianity), let none of the unbelievers, let none of the heretics, stay here." There was a fencing of the Table against all but pledged Christians. The Didachi, or, to give it its full name, The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles, which dates back to A.D. 100 and which is the first service order book of the Christian Church, lays it down: "Let no one eat or drink of your Eucharist except those baptised into the name of the Lord; for, as regards this, the Lord has said, 'Give not that which is holy unto dogs.'" It is Tertullian's complaint that the heretics allow all kinds of people, even the heathen, into the Lord's Supper, and by so doing, "That which is holy they will cast to the dogs, and pearls (although, to be sure, they are not real ones) to swine" (De Praescriptione 4 1).
In all these instances this text is used as a basis of exclusiveness. It was not that the Church was not missionary-minded; the Church in the early days was consumed with the desire to win everyone; but the Church was desperately aware of the utter necessity of maintaining the purity of the faith, lest Christianity should be gradually assimilated to and ultimately swallowed up in, the surrounding sea of paganism.

It is easy to see the temporary meaning of this text; but we must try to see its permanent meaning as well.

REACHING THOSE WHO ARE UNFIT TO HEAR

Matt. 7:6 (continued)

It is just possible that this saying of Jesus has become altered accidentally in its transmission. It is a good example of the Hebrew habit of parallelism which we have already met (Matt. 6:10). Let us set it down in its parallel clauses:

"Give not that which is holy unto the dogs; Neither cast ye your pearls before swine."

With the exception of one word the parallelism is complete. Give is paralleled by cast; dogs by swine; but holy is not really balanced by pearls. There the parallelism breaks down. It so happens that there are two Hebrew words which are very like each other, especially when we remember that Hebrew has no written vowels. The word for holy is qadosh (HSN6918) (Q-D-SH); and the Aramaic word for an ear-ring is qadasha (Q-D-SH). The consonants are exactly the same, and in primitive written Hebrew the words would look exactly the same. Still further, in the Talmud, "an ear-ring in a swine's snout" is a proverbial phrase for something which is entirely incongruous and out of place. It is by no means impossible that the original phrase ran:

"Give not an ear-ring to the dogs; Neither cast ye your pearls before swine," in which case the parallelism would be perfect.

If that is the real meaning of the phrase, it would simply mean that there are certain people who are not fit, not able, to receive the message which the Church is so willing to give. It would not then be a statement of exclusiveness; it would be the statement of a practical difficulty of communication which meets the preacher in every age. It is quite true that there are certain people to whom it is impossible to impart truth. Something has to happen to them before they can be taught. There is actually a rabbinic saying, "Even as a treasure must not be shown to everyone, so with the words of the Law; one must not go deeply into them, except in the presence of suitable people."

This is in fact a universal truth. It is not to everyone that we can talk of everything. Within a group of friends we may sit and talk about our faith; we may allow our minds to question and adventure; we may talk about the things which puzzle and perplex; and we may allow our minds to go out on the roads of speculation. But if into that group there
comes a person of rigid and unsympathetic orthodoxy, he might well brand us as a set of
dangerous heretics; or if there entered a simple and unquestioning soul, his faith might
well be shocked and shaken. A medical film might well be to one person an eye-opening,
valuable, and salutary experience; while to another it might equally produce a prurient
and prying obscenity. It is told that once Dr. Johnson and a group of friends were talking
and jesting as only old friends can. Johnson saw an unpleasant creature approach. "Let us
be silent," he said, "a fool is coming."

So, then, there are some people who cannot receive Christian truth. It may be that their
minds are shut; it may be that their minds are brutalised and covered over with a film of
filth; it may be that they have lived a life which has obscured their ability to see the truth;
it may be that they are constitutional mockers of all things holy; it may be, as sometimes
happens, that we and they have absolutely no common ground on which we can argue.

A man can only understand what he is fit to understand. It is not to everyone that we can
lay bare the secrets of our hearts. There are always those to whom the preaching of Christ
will be foolishness, and in whose minds the truth, when expressed in words, will meet an
insuperable barrier.

What is to be done with these people? Are they to be abandoned as hopeless? Is the
Christian message simply to be withdrawn from them? What Christian words cannot do,
a Christian life can often do. A man may be blind and impervious to any Christian
argument in words; but he can have no answer to the demonstration of a Christian life.

Cecil Northcott in A Modern Epiphany tells of a discussion in a camp of young people
where representatives of many nations were living together. "One wet night the campers
were discussing various ways of telling people about Christ. They turned to the girl from
Africa. `Maria,' they asked, `what do you do in your country?' `Oh,' said Maria, `we don't
have missions or give pamphlets away. We just send one or two Christian families to live
and work in a village, and when people see what Christians are like, then they want to be
Christians too.'" In the end the only all-conquering argument is the argument of a
Christian life.

It is often impossible to talk to some people about Jesus Christ. Their insensitiveness,
their moral blindness, their intellectual pride, their cynical mockery, the tarnishing film,
make them impervious to words about Christ. But it is always possible to show men
Christ; and the weakness of the Church lies not in lack of Christian arguments, but in lack
of Christian lives.
THE CHARTER OF PRAYER

Matt. 7:7-11

Keep on asking, and it will be given you; Keep on seeking, and you will find; Keep on knocking, and it will be opened to you. For everyone that asks receives; And he who seeks finds; And to him who knocks it will be opened. What man is there, who, if his son will ask him for bread, will give him a stone? Or, if he will ask for a fish, will he give him a serpent? If, then, you, who are grudging, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to them that ask him?

Any man who prays is bound to want to know to what kind of God he is praying. He wants to know in what kind of atmosphere his prayers will be heard. Is he praying to a grudging God out of whom every gift has to be squeezed and coerced? Is he praying to a mocking God whose gifts may well be double-edged? Is he praying to a God whose heart is so kind that he is more ready to give than we are to ask?

Jesus came from a nation which loved prayer. The Jewish Rabbis said the loveliest things about prayer. "God is as near to his creatures as the ear to the mouth." "Human beings can hardly hear two people talking at once, but God, if all the world calls to him at the one time, hears their cry." "A man is annoyed by being worried by the requests of his friends, but with God, all the time a man puts his needs and requests before him, God loves him all the more." Jesus had been brought up to love prayer; and in this passage he gives us the Christian charter of prayer.

Jesus' argument is very simple. One of the Jewish Rabbis asked, "Is there a man who ever hates his son?" Jesus' argument is that no father ever refused the request of his son; and God the great Father will never refuse the requests of his children.

Jesus' examples are carefully chosen. He takes three examples, for Luke adds a third to the two Matthew gives. If a son asks bread, will his father give him a stone? If a son asks a fish, will his father give him a serpent? If a son asks an egg, will his father give him a scorpion? (Lk.11:12). The point is that in each case the two things cited bear a close resemblance.

The little, round, limestone stones on the seashore were exactly the shape and the colour of little loaves. If a son asks bread will his father mock him by offering him a stone, which looks like bread but which is impossible to eat?

If a son asks a fish, will his father give him a serpent? Almost certainly the serpent is an eel. According to the Jewish food laws an eel could not be eaten, because an eel was an unclean fish. "Everything in the waters that has not fins and scales is an abomination to you" (Lev.11:12). That regulation ruled out the eel as an article of diet. If a son asks for a fish, will his father indeed give him a fish, but a fish which it is forbidden to eat, and which is useless to eat? Would a father mock his son's hunger like that?
If the son asks for an egg, will his father give him a scorpion? The scorpion is a
dangerous little animal. In action it is rather like a small lobster, with claws with which it
clutches its victim. Its sting is in its tail, and it brings its tail up over its back to strike its
victim. The sting can be exceedingly painful, and sometimes even fatal. When the
scorpion is at rest its claws and tail are folded in, and there is a pale kind of scorpion,
which, when folded up, would look exactly like an egg. If a son asks for an egg, will his
father mock him by handing him a biting scorpion?

God will never refuse our prayers; and God will never mock our prayers. The Greeks had
their stories about the gods who answered men's prayers, but the answer was an answer
with a barb in it, a double-edged gift. Aurora, the goddess of the dawn, fell in love with
Tithonus a mortal youth, so the Greek story ran. Zeus, the king of the gods, offered her
any gift that she might choose for her mortal lover. Aurora very naturally chose that
Tithonus might live for ever; but she had forgotten to ask that Tithonus might remain for
ever young; and so Tithonus grew older and older and older, and could never die, and the
gift became a curse.

There is a lesson here; God will always answer our prayers; but he will answer them in
his way, and his way will be the way of perfect wisdom and of perfect love. Often if he
answered our prayers as we at the moment desired it would be the worst thing possible
for us, for in our ignorance we often ask for gifts which would be our ruin. This saying of
Jesus tells us, not only that God will answer, but that God will answer in wisdom and in
love.

Although this is the charter of prayer, it lays certain obligations upon us. In Greek there
are two kinds of imperative; there is the aorist imperative which issues one definite
command. "Shut the door behind you," would be an aorist imperative. There is the
present imperative which issues a command that a man should always do something or
should go on doing something. "Always shut doors behind you," would be a present
imperative. The imperatives here are present imperatives; therefore Jesus is saying, "Go
on asking; go on seeking; go on knocking." He is telling us to persist in prayer; he is
telling us never to be discouraged in prayer. Clearly therein lies the test of our sincerity.
Do we really want a thing? Is a thing such that we can bring it repeatedly into the
presence of God, for the biggest test of any desire is: Can I pray about it?

Jesus here lays down the twin facts that God will always answer our prayers in his way,
in wisdom and in love; and that we must bring to God an undiscouraged life of prayer,
which tests the rightness of the things we pray for, and which tests our own sincerity in
asking for them.
THE EVEREST OF ETHICS

Matt. 7:12

*So, then, all the things which you wish that men should do to you, so do you too do to them; for this is the Law and the prophets.*

This is probably the most universally famous thing that Jesus ever said. With this commandment the Sermon on the Mount reaches its summit. This saying of Jesus has been called "the capstone of the whole discourse." It is the topmost peak of social ethics, and the Everest of all ethical teaching.

It is possible to quote rabbinic parallels for almost everything that Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount; but there is no real parallel to this saying. This is something which had never been said before. It is new teaching, and a new view of life and of life's obligations.

It is not difficult to find many parallels to this saying in its negative form. As we have seen, there were two most famous Jewish teachers. There was Shammai who was famous for his stern and rigid austerity; there was Hillel who was famous for his sweet graciousness. The Jews had a story like this: "A heathen came to Shammai and said, 'I am prepared to be received as a proselyte on the condition that you teach me the whole Law while I am standing on one leg.' Shammai drove him away with a foot-rule which he had in his hand. He went to Hillel who received him as a proselyte. He said to him, 'What is hateful to yourself, do to no other; that is the whole Law, and the rest is commentary. Go and learn.'" There is the Golden Rule in its negative form.

In the Book of Tobit there is a passage in which the aged Tobias teaches his son all that is necessary for life. One of his maxims is: "What thou thyself hatest, to no man do" (Tob.4:16).

There is a Jewish work called The Letter to Aristeas, which purports to be an account of the Jewish scholars who went to Alexandria to translate the Hebrew scriptures into Greek, and who produced the Septuagint. The Egyptian king gave them a banquet at which he asked them certain difficult questions. "What is the teaching of wisdom?" he asked. A Jewish scholar answered, "As you wish that no evil should befall you, but to be a partaker of all good things, so you should act on the same principle towards your subjects and offenders, and you should mildly admonish the noble and the good. For God draws all men unto himself by his benignity" (The Letter to Aristeas 207).

Rabbi Eliezer came nearer to Jesus' way of putting it when he said, "Let the honour of thy friend be as dear unto thee as thine own." The Psalmist again had the negative form when he said that only the man who does no evil to his neighbour can approach God (Ps.15:3).

It is not difficult to find this rule in Jewish teaching in its negative form; but there is no parallel to the positive form in which Jesus put it.
The same is true of the teaching of other religions. The negative form is one of the basic principles of Confucius. Tsze-Kung asked him, "Is there one word which may serve as a rule of practice for all one's life?" Confucius said, "Is not reciprocity such a word? What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others."

There are certain beautiful lines in the Buddhist Hymns of the Faith which come very near the Christian teaching:

"All men tremble at the rod, all men fear death; Putting oneself in the place of others, kill not, nor cause to kin. All men tremble at the rod, unto all men life is dear; Doing as one would be done by, kill not nor cause to kill."

With the Greeks and the Romans it is the same. Isocrates tells how King Nicocles advised his subordinate officials: "Do not do to others the things which make you angry when you experience them at the hands of other people." Epictetus condemned slavery on the principle: "What you avoid suffering yourselves, seek not to inflict upon others." The Stoics had as one of their basic maxims: "What you do not wish to be done to you, do not do to anyone else." And it is told that the Emperor Alexander Severus had that sentence engraved upon the walls of his palace that he might never forget it as a rule of life.

In its negative form this rule is in fact the basis of all ethical teaching, but no one but Jesus ever put it in its positive form. Many voices had said, "Do not do to others what you would not have them do to you," but no voice had ever said, "Do to others what you would have them do to you."

THE GOLDEN RULE OF JESUS

Matt. 7:12 (continued)

Let us see just how the positive form of the golden rule differs from the negative form; and let us see just how much more Jesus was demanding than any teacher had ever demanded before.

When this rule is put in its negative form, when we are told that we must refrain from doing to others that which we would not wish them to do to us, it is not an essentially religious rule at all. It is simply a common-sense statement without which no social intercourse at all would be possible. Sir Thomas Browne once said, "We are beholden to every man we meet that he doth not kill us." In a sense that is true, but, if we could not assume that the conduct and the behaviour of other people to us would conform to the accepted standards of civilized life, then life would be intolerable. The negative form of the golden rule is not in any sense an extra; it is something without which life could not go on at all.

Further, the negative form of the rule involves nothing more than not doing certain things; it means refraining from certain actions. It is never very difficult not to do things. That we must not do injury to other people is not a specially religious principle; it is rather a legal principle. It is the kind of principle that could well be kept by a man who has no belief and no interest in religion at all. A man might for ever refrain from doing
any injury to any one else, and yet be a quite useless citizen to his fellow-men. A man could satisfy the negative form of the rule by simple inaction; if he consistently did nothing he would never break it. And a goodness which consists in doing nothing would be a contradiction of everything that Christian goodness means.

When this rule is put positively, when we are told that we must actively do to others what we would have them do to us, a new principle enters into life, and a new attitude to our fellow-men. It is one thing to say, "I must not injure people; I must not do to them what I would object to their doing to me." That, the law can compel us to do. It is quite another thing to say, "I must go out of my way to help other people and to be kind to them, as I would wish them to help and to be kind to me." That, only love can compel us to do. The attitude which says, "I must do no harm to people," is quite different from the attitude which says, "I must do my best to help people."

To take a very simple analogy—if a man has a motor car the law can compel him to drive it in such a way that he does not injure anyone else on the road, but no law can compel him to stop and to give a weary and a foot-sore traveller a lift along the road. It is quite a simple thing to refrain from hurting and injuring people; it is not so very difficult to respect their principles and their feelings; it is a far harder thing to make it the chosen and deliberate policy of life to go out of our way to be as kind to them as we would wish them to be to us.

And yet it is just that new attitude which makes life beautiful. Jane Stoddart quotes an incident from the life of W. H. Smith. "When Smith was at the War Office, his private secretary, Mr. Fleetwood Wilson, noticed that at the end of a week's work, when his chief was preparing to leave for Greenlands on a Saturday afternoon, he used to pack a despatch-box with the papers he required to take with him, and carry it himself on his journey. Mr. Wilson remarked that Mr. Smith would save himself much trouble, if he did as was the practice of other ministers—leave the papers to be put in an office 'pouch' and sent by post. Mr. Smith looked rather ashamed for a moment, and then looking up at his secretary said, 'Well, my dear Wilson, that fact is this: our postman who brings the letters from Henley, has plenty to carry. I watched him one morning coming up the approach with my heavy pouch in addition to his usual load, and I determined to save him as much as I could.'" An action like that shows a certain attitude to one's fellow-men. It is the attitude which believes that we should treat our fellow-men, not as the law allows, but as love demands.

It is perfectly possible for a man of the world to observe the negative form of the golden rule. He could without very serious difficulty so discipline his life that he would not do to others what he did not wish them to do to him; but the only man who can even begin to satisfy the positive form of the rule is the man who has the love of Christ within his heart. He will try to forgive as he would wish to be forgiven, to help as he would wish to be helped, to praise as he would wish to be praised, to understand as he would wish to be understood. He will never seek to avoid doing things; he will always look for things to do. Clearly this will make life much more complicated; clearly he will have much less time to spend on his own desires and his own activities, for time and time again he will have to stop what he is doing to help someone else. It will be a principle which will
dominate his life at home, in the factory, in the bus, in the office, in the street, in the train, at his games, everywhere. He can never do it until self withers and dies within his heart. To obey this commandment a man must become a new man with a new centre to his life; and if the world was composed of people who sought to obey this rule, it would be a new world.

LIFE AT THE CROSS-ROADS

Matt. 7:13-14

Go in through the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the road which leads to ruin, and there are many who go in through it. Narrow is the gate and hard is the way that leads to life, and those who find it are few.

There is always a certain dramatic quality about life, for, as it has been said, "all life concentrates on man at the cross-roads." In every action of life man is confronted with a choice; and he can never evade the choice, because he can never stand still. He must always take one way or the other. Because of that, it has always been one of the supreme functions of the great men of history that they should confront men with that inevitable choice. As the end drew near, Moses spoke to the people: "See, I have set before you this day life and good, and death and evil.... Therefore choose life, that you and your descendants may live" (Deut.30:15-20). When Joshua was laying down the leadership of the nation at the end of his life, he presented them with the same choice: "Choose this day whom you will serve" (Josh.24:15). Jeremiah heard the voice of God saying to him, "And to this people you will say, Thus says the Lord: Behold I set before you the way of life and the way of death" (Jer.21:8). John Oxenham wrote:

"To every man there openeth A way and ways and a way; And the high soul treads the high way, And the low soul gropes the low; And in between on the misty flats The rest drift to and fro; But to every man there openeth A high way and a low, And every man decideth The way his soul shall go."

That is the choice with which Jesus is confronting men in this passage. There is a broad and an easy way, and there are many who take it; but the end of it is ruin. There is a narrow and a hard way, and there are few who take it; but the end of it is life. Cebes, the disciple of Socrates, writes in the Tabula: "Dost thou see a little door, and a way in front of the door, which is not much crowded, but the travellers are few? That is the way that leadeth to true instruction." Let us examine the difference between the two ways.

(i) It is the difference between the hard and the easy way. There is never any easy way to greatness; greatness is always the product of toil. Hesiod, the old Greek poet, writes, "Wickedness can be had in abundance easily; smooth is the road, and very nigh she dwells; but in front of virtue the gods immortal have put sweat." Epicharmus said, "The gods demand of us toil as the price of all good things." "Knave," he warns, "yearn not for the soft things, lest thou earn the hard."

Once Edmund Burke made a great speech in the House of Commons. Afterwards his brother Richard Burke was observed deep in thought. He was asked what he was thinking
about, and answered, "I have been wondering how it has come about that Ned has
contrived to monopolise all the talents of our family; but then again I remember that,
when we were at play, he was always at work." Even when a thing is done with an
appearance of ease, that ease is the product of unremitting toil. The skill of the master
executant on the piano, or the champion player on the golf course did not come without
sweat. There never has been any other way to greatness than the way of toil, and anything
else which promises such a way is a delusion and a snare.

(ii) It is the difference between the long and the short way. Very rarely something may
emerge complete and perfect in a flash, but far oftener greatness is the result of long
labour and constant attention to detail. Horace in The Art of Poetry advises Piso, when
he has written something, to keep it beside him for nine years before he publishes it. He
tells how a pupil used to take exercises to Quintilius, the famous critic. Quintilius would
say, "Scratch it out; the work has been badly turned; send it back to the fire and the
anvil." Virgil's Aeneid occupied the last ten years of Virgil's life; and, as he was dying, he
would have destroyed it, because he thought it so imperfect, if his friends had not stopped
him. Plato's Republic begins with a simple sentence: "I went down to the Piraeus
yesterday with Glaucon, the son of Ariston, that I might offer up prayer to the goddess." On
Plato's own manuscript, in his own handwriting, there were no fewer than thirteen
different versions of that opening sentence. The master writer had laboured at
arrangement after arrangement that he might get the cadences exactly right. Thomas
Gray's Elegy written in a Country Churchyard is one of the immortal poems. It was
begun in the summer of 1742; it was finally privately circulated on 12th June, 1750. Its
lapidary perfection had taken eight years to produce. No one ever arrived at a masterpiece
by a short-cut. In this world we are constantly faced with the short way, which promises
immediate results, and the long way, of which the results are in the far distance. But the
lasting things never come quickly; the long way is the best way in the end.

(iii) It is the difference between the disciplined and the undisciplined way. Nothing was
ever achieved without discipline; and many an athlete and many a man has been ruined
because he abandoned discipline and let himself grow slack. Coleridge is the supreme
tragedy of indiscipline. Never did so great a mind produce so little. He left Cambridge
University to join the army; he left the army because, in spite of all his erudition, he
could not rub down a horse; he returned to Oxford and left without a degree. He began a
paper called The Watchman which lived for ten numbers and then died. It has been said
of him: "He lost himself in visions of work to be done, that always remained to be done.
Coleridge had every poetic gift but one--the gift of sustained and concentrated effort." In
his head and in his mind he had all kinds of books, as he said, himself, "completed save
for transcription." "I am on the eve," he says, "of sending to the press two octave
volumes." But the books were never composed outside Coleridge's mind, because, he
would not face the discipline of sitting down to write them out. No one ever reached any
eminence, and no one having reached it ever maintained it, without discipline.

(iv) It is the difference between the thoughtful and the thoughtless way. Here we come to
the heart of the matter. No one would ever take the easy, the short, the undisciplined way,
if he only thought. Everything in this world has two aspects--how it looks at the moment,
and how it will look in the time to come. The easy way may look very inviting at the
moment, and the hard way may look very daunting. The only way to get our values right
is to see, not the beginning, but the end of the way, to see things, not in the light of time,
but in the light of eternity.

THE FALSE PROPHETS

Matt. 7:15-20

Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but who within are
rapacious wolves. You will recognize them from their fruits. Surely men do not gather
grapes from thorns, and figs from thistles? So every good tree produces fine fruit; but
every rotten tree produces bad fruit. A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a
rotten tree produce fine fruit. Every tree which does not produce fine fruit is cut down
and thrown into the fire. So then you will recognize them from their fruits.

Almost every phrase and word in this section would ring an answering bell in the minds
of the Jews who heard it for the first time.

The Jews knew all about false prophets. Jeremiah, for instance, had his conflict with the
prophets who said "Peace, peace, when there is no peace" (Jer.6:14; Jer.8:11). Wolves
was the very name by which false rulers and false prophets were called. In the bad days
Ezekiel had said, "Her princes in the midst of her are like wolves tearing the prey,
shedding blood and destroying lives, to get dishonest gain" (Eze.22:27). Zephaniah drew
a grim picture of the state of things in Israel, when, "Her officials within her are roaring
lions; her judges are evening wolves that leave nothing till the morning. Her prophets are
wanton, faithless men" (Zeph.3:3). When Paul was warning the elders of Ephesus of
dangers to come, as he took a last farewell of them, he said, "Fierce wolves will come in
among you, not sparing the flock" (Ac.20:29). Jesus said that he was sending out his
disciples as sheep in the midst of wolves (Matt. 10:16); and he told of the Good Shepherd
who protected the flock from the wolves with his life (Jn.10:12). Here indeed was a
picture which everyone could recognize and understand.

He said that the false prophets were like wolves in sheep's clothing. When the shepherd
watched his flocks upon the hillside, his garment was a sheepskin, worn with the skin
outside and the fleece inside. But a man might wear a shepherd's dress and still not be a
shepherd. The prophets had acquired a conventional dress. Elijah had a mantle
(1Kgs.19:13,19), and that mantle had been a hairy cloak (2Kgs.1:8). That sheepskin
mantle had become the uniform of the prophets, just as the Greek philosophers had worn
the philosopher's robe. It was by that mantle that the prophet could be distinguished from
other men. But sometimes that garb was worn by those who had no right to wear it, for
Zechariah in his picture of the great days to come says, "He will not put on a hairy mantle
in order to deceive" (Zech.13:4). There were those who wore a prophet"s cloak, but who
lived anything but a prophet's life.

There were false prophets in the ancient days, but there were also false prophets in New
Testament times. Matthew was written about A.D. 85, and at that time prophets were still
an institution in the Church. They were men with no fixed abode, men who had given up

everything to wander throughout the country, bringing to the Churches a message which they believed to come direct from God.

At their best the prophets were the inspiration of the Church, for they were men who had abandoned everything to serve God and the Church of God. But the office of prophet was singularly liable to abuse. There were men who used it to gain prestige, and to impose on the generosity of local congregations, and so live a life of comfortable, and even pampered, idleness. The Didachi is the first order book of the Christian Church; it dates to about A.D. 100; and its regulations concerning these wandering prophets are very illuminating. A true prophet was to be held in the highest honour; he was to be welcomed; his word must never be disregarded, and his freedom must never be curtailed; but "He shall remain one day, and, if necessary, another day also; but if he remain three days, he is a false prophet." He must never ask for anything but bread. "If he asks for money, he is a false prophet." Prophets all claim to speak in the Spirit, but there is one acid test: "By their characters a true and a false prophet shall be known." "Every prophet that teacheth the truth, if he do not what he teacheth, is a false prophet." If a prophet, claiming to speak in the Spirit, orders a table and a meal to be set before him he is a false prophet. "Whosoever shall say in the Spirit: Give me money or any other things, ye shall not hear him; but if he tell you to give in the matter of others who have need, let no one judge him." If a wanderer comes to a congregation, and wishes to settle there, if he has a trade, "let him work and eat." If he has no trade, "consider in your wisdom how he may not live with you as a Christian in idleness.... But if he will not do this, he is a trafficker in Christ. Beware of such" (Didache chapters 11 and 12).

Past history and present events made the words of Jesus meaningful to those who heard them for the first time, and to those to whom Matthew transmitted them.

KNOWN BY THEIR FRUITS

Matt. 7:15-20 (continued)

The Jews, the Greeks and the Romans all used the idea that a tree is to be judged by its fruits. "Like root, like fruit," ran the proverb. Epictetus was later to say, "How can a vine grow not like a vine but like an olive, or, how can an olive grow not like an olive but like a vine" (Epictetus, Discourses 2: 20). Seneca declared that good cannot grow from evil any more than a fig tree can from an olive.

But there is more in this than meets the eye. "Are grapes gathered from thorns?" asked Jesus. There was a certain thorn, the buckthorn, which had little black berries which closely resembled little grapes. "Or figs from thistles?" There was a certain thistle, which had a flower, which, at least at a distance, might well be taken for a fig.

The point is real, and relevant, and salutary. There may be a superficial resemblance between the true and the false prophet. The false prophet may wear the right clothes and use the right language; but you cannot sustain life with the berries of a buckthorn or the flowers of a thistle; and the life of the soul can never be sustained with the food which a
false prophet offers. The real test of any teaching is: Does it strengthen a man to bear the burdens of life, and to walk in the way wherein he ought to go?

Let us then look at the false prophets and see their characteristics. If the way is difficult and the gate is so narrow that it is hard to find, then we must be very careful to get ourselves teachers who will help us to find it, and not teachers who will lure us away from it.

The basic fault of the false prophet is self-interest. The true shepherd cares for the flock more than he cares for his life; the wolf cares for nothing but to satisfy his own gluttony and his own greed. The false prophet is in the business of teaching, not for what he can give to others, but for what he can get to himself.

The Jews were alive to this danger. The Rabbis were the Jewish teachers, but it was a cardinal principle of Jewish Law that a Rabbi must have a trade by which he earned his living, and must on no account accept any payment for teaching. Rabbi Zadok said, "Make the knowledge of the Law neither a crown wherewith to make a show, nor a spade wherewith to dig." Hillel said, "He who uses the crown of the Law for external aims fades away." The Jews knew all about the teacher who used his teaching self-interestedly, for no other reason than to make a profit for himself. There are three ways in which a teacher can be dominated by self-interest.

(i) He may teach solely for gain. It is told that there was trouble in the Church at Ecclefechan, where Thomas Carlyle's father was an elder. It was a dispute between the congregation and the minister on a matter of money and of salary. When much had been said on both sides, Carlyle's father rose and uttered one devastating sentence: "Give the hireling his wages, and let him go." No man can live on nothing, and few men can do their best work when the pressure of material things is too fiercely on them, but the great privilege of teaching is not the pay it offers, but the thrill of opening the minds of boys and girls, and young men and maidens, and men and women to the truth.

(ii) He may teach solely for prestige. A man may teach in order to help others, or he may teach to show how clever he is. Denney once said a savage thing: "No man can at one and the same time prove that he is clever and that Christ is wonderful." Prestige is the last thing that the great teachers desire. J. P. Strutliers was a saint of God. He spent all his life in the service of the little Reformed Presbyterian Church when he could have occupied any pulpit in Britain. Men loved him, and the better they knew him the more they loved him. Two men were talking of him. One man knew all that Struthers had done, but did not know Struthers personally. Remembering Struthers' saintly ministry, he said, "Struthers will have a front seat in the Kingdom of Heaven." The other had known Struthers personally and his answer was: "Struthers would be miserable in a front seat anywhere." There is a kind of teacher and preacher who uses his message as a setting for himself. The false prophet is interested in self-display; the true prophet desires self-oblation.

(iii) He may teach solely to transmit his own ideas. The false prophet is out to disseminate his version of the truth; the true prophet is out to publish abroad God's truth.
It is quite true that every man must think things out for himself; but it was said of John Brown of Haddington that, when he preached, ever and again he used to pause "as if listening for a voice." The true prophet listens to God before he speaks to men. He never forgets that he is nothing more than a voice to speak for God and a channel through which God's grace can come to men. It is a teacher's duty and a preacher's duty to bring to men, not his private idea of the truth, but the truth as it is in Jesus Christ.

THE FRUITS OF FALSENESS

Matt. 7:15-20 (continued)

This passage has much to say about the evil fruits of the false prophets. What are the false effects, the evil fruits, which a false prophet may produce?

(i) Teaching is false if it produces a religion which consists solely or mainly in the observance of externals. That is what was wrong with the Scribes and Pharisees. To them religion consisted in the observance of the ceremonial law. If a man went through the correct procedure of handwashing, if on the Sabbath he never carried anything weighing more than two figs, if he never walked on the Sabbath farther than the prescribed distance, if he was meticulous in giving tithes of everything down to the herbs of his kitchen garden, then he was a good man.

It is easy to confuse religion with religious practices. It is possible--and indeed not uncommon--to teach that religion consists in going to Church, observing the Lord's Day, fulfilling one's financial obligations to the Church, reading one's Bible. A man might do all these things and be far off from being a Christian, for Christianity is an attitude of the heart to God and to man.

(ii) Teaching is false if it produces a religion which consists in prohibitions. Any religion which is based on a series of "thou shalt not's" is a false religion. There is a type of teacher who says to a person who has set out on the Christian way: "From now on you will no longer go to the cinema; from now on you will no longer dance; from now on you will no longer smoke or use make-up; from now on you will never enter a theatre; from now on you will never read a novel or a Sunday newspaper; from now on you will never enter a theatre."

If a man could become a Christian simply by abstaining from doing things Christianity would be a much easier religion than it is. But the whole essence of Christianity is that it does not consist in not doing things; it consists in doing things. A negative Christianity on our part can never answer the positive love of God.

(iii) Teaching is false if it produces an easy religion. There were false teachers in the days of Paul, an echo of whose teaching we can hear in Rom.6. They said to Paul: "You believe that God's grace is the biggest thing in the universe?" "Yes." "You believe that God's grace is wide enough to cover every sin?" "Yes." "Well then, if that be so, let us go on sinning to our hearts' content. God will forgive. And, after all, our sin is simply giving God's wonderful grace an opportunity to operate." A religion like that is a travesty of religion because it is an insult to the love of God.
Any teaching which takes the iron out of religion, any teaching which takes the Cross out of Christianity, any teaching which eliminates the threat from the voice of Christ, any teaching which pushes judgment into the background and makes men think lightly of sin, is false teaching.

(iv) Teaching is false if it divorces religion and life. Any teaching which removes the Christian from the life and activity of the world is false. That was the mistake the monks and the hermits made. It was their belief that to live the Christian life they must retire to a desert or to a monastery, that they must cut themselves off from the engrossing and tempting life of the world, that they could only be truly Christian by ceasing to live in the world. Jesus said, and he prayed for his disciples, "I do not pray that thou shouldest take them out of the world, but that thou shouldst keep them from the evil one" (Jn.17:15). We have heard, for instance, of a journalist who found it hard to maintain her Christian principles in the life of a daily newspaper, and who left it to take up work on a purely religious journal.

No man can be a good soldier by running away, and the Christian is the soldier of Christ. How shall the leaven ever work if the leaven refuses to be inserted into the mass? What is witness worth unless it is witness to those who do not believe? Any teaching which encourages a man to take what John Mackay called "the balcony view of life" is wrong. The Christian is not a spectator from the balcony; he is involved in the warfare of life.

(v) Teaching is false if it produces a religion which is arrogant and separatist. Any teaching which encourages a man to withdraw into a narrow sect, and to regard the rest of the world as sinners, is false teaching. The function of religion is not to erect middle walls of partition but to tear them down. It is the dream of Jesus Christ that there shall be one flock and one shepherd (Jn.10:16). Exclusiveness is not a religious quality; it is an irreligious quality. Fosdick quotes four lines of doggerel:

"We are God's chosen few, All others will be damned; There is no room in heaven for you; We can't have heaven crammed."

Religion is meant to bring men closer together, not to drive men apart. Religion is meant to gather men into one family, not to split them up into hostile groups. The teaching which declares that any Church or any sect has a monopoly of the grace of God is false teaching, for Christ is not the Christ who divides, he is the Christ who unites.

ON FALSE PRETENCES

Matt. 7:21-23

_Not everyone that says to me: "Lord, Lord" will enter into the Kingdom of Heaven, but he who does the will of my father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day: "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name did we not cast out devils, and in your name did we not do many deeds of power?" Then will I publicly announce to them: "I never knew you. Depart from me you doers of iniquity."_
There is an apparently surprising feature about this passage. Jesus is quite ready to concede that many of the false prophets will do and say wonderful and impressive things.

We must remember what the ancient world was like. Miracles were common events. The frequency of miracles came from the ancient idea of illness. In the ancient world all illness was held to be the work of demons. A man was ill because a demon had succeeded in exercising some malign influence over him, or in winning a way into some part of his body. Cures were therefore wrought by exorcism. The result of all this was that a great deal of illness was what we would call psychological, as were a great many cures. If a man succeeded in convincing—or deluding—himself into a belief that a demon was in him or had him in his power, that man would undoubtedly be ill. And if someone could convince him that the hold of the demon was broken, then quite certainly that man would be cured.

The leaders of the Church never denied heathen miracles. In answer to the miracles of Christ, Celsus quoted the miracles attributed to Aesculapius and Apollo. Origen, who met his arguments, did not for a moment deny these miracles. He simply answered, "Such curative power is of itself neither good nor bad, but within the reach of godless as well as of honest people" (Origen: Against Celsus 3: 22). Even in the New Testament we read of Jewish exorcists who added the name of Jesus to their repertoire, and who banished devils by its aid (Ac.19:13). There was many a charlatan who rendered a lip service to Jesus Christ, and who used his name to produce wonderful effects on demon-possessed people. What Jesus is saying is that if any man uses his name on false pretenses, the day of reckoning will come. His real motives will be exposed, and he will be banished from the presence of God.

There are two great permanent truths within this passage. There is only one way in which a man's sincerity can be proved, and that is by his practice. Fine words can never be a substitute for fine deeds. There is only one proof of love, and that proof is obedience. There is no point in saying that we love a person, and then doing things which break that person's heart. When we were young maybe we used sometimes to say to our mothers, "Mother, I love you." And maybe mother sometimes smiled a little wistfully and said, "I wish you would show it a little more in the way you behave." So often we confess God with our lips and deny him with our lives. It is not difficult to recite a creed, but it is difficult to live the Christian life. Faith without practice is a contradiction in terms, and love without obedience is an impossibility.

At the back of this passage is the idea of judgment. All through it there runs the certainty that the day of reckoning comes. A man may succeed for long in maintaining the pretenses and the disguises, but there comes a day when the pretenses are shown for what they are, and the disguises are stripped away. We may deceive men with our words, but we cannot deceive God. "Thou discernest my thoughts from afar," said the Psalmist (Ps.139:2). No man can ultimately deceive the God who sees the heart.
THE ONLY TRUE FOUNDATION

Matt. 7:24-29

So, then, everyone who hears these words of mine and does them will be likened to a wise man who built his house upon the rock. And the rain came down, and the rivers swelled, and the wind blew, and fell upon that house, and it did not fall, for it was founded upon the rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be likened to a foolish man who built his house upon the sand. And the rain came down, and the rivers swelled, and the winds blew and beat upon that house, and it fell; and its fall was great. And when Jesus had ended these words, the people were astonished at his teaching, for he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their Scribes.

Jesus was in a double sense an expert. He was an expert in scripture. The writer of Proverbs gave him the hint for his picture: "When the tempest passes, the wicked is no more, but the righteous is established for ever" (Prov.10:25). Here is the germ of the picture which Jesus drew of the two houses and the two builders. But Jesus was also an expert in life. He was the craftsman who knew all about the building of houses, and when he spoke about the foundations of a house he knew what he was talking about. This is no illustration formed by a scholar in his study; this is the illustration of a practical man.

Nor is this a far-fetched illustration; it is a story of the kind of thing which could well happen. In Palestine the builder must think ahead. There was many a gully which in summer was a pleasant sandy hollow, but was in winter a raging torrent of rushing water. A man might be looking for a house; he might find a pleasantly sheltered sandy hollow; and he might think this a very suitable place. But, if he was a short-sighted man, he might well have built his house in the dried-up bed of a river, and, when the winter came, his house would disintegrate. Even on an ordinary site it was tempting to begin building on the smoothed-over sand, and not to bother digging down to the shelf of rock below, but that way disaster lay ahead.

Only a house whose foundations are firm can withstand the storm; and only a life whose foundations are sure can stand the test. Jesus demanded two things.

(i) He demanded that men should listen. One of the great difficulties which face us today is the simple fact that men often do not know what Jesus said or what the Church teaches. In fact the matter is worse. They have often a quite mistaken notion of what Jesus said and of what the Church teaches. It is no part of the duty of an honourable man to condemn either a person, or an institution, unheard--and that today is precisely what so many do. The first step to the Christian life is simply to give Jesus Christ a chance to be heard.

(ii) He demanded that men should do. Knowledge only becomes relevant when it is translated into action. It would be perfectly possible for a man to pass an examination in Christian Ethics with the highest distinction, and yet not to be a Christian. Knowledge
must become action; theory must become practice; theology must become life. There is little point in going to a doctor, unless we are prepared to do the things we hear him say to us. There is little point in going to an expert, unless we are prepared to act upon his advice. And yet there are thousands of people who listen to the teaching of Jesus Christ every Sunday, and who have a very good knowledge of what Jesus taught, and who yet make little or no deliberate attempt to put it into practice. If we are to be in any sense followers of Jesus we must hear and do.

Is there any word in which hearing and doing are summed up? There is such a word, and that word is obedience. Jesus demands our implicit obedience. To learn to obey is the most important thing in life.

Some time ago there was a report of the case of a sailor in the Royal Navy who was very severely punished for a breach of discipline. So severe was the punishment that in certain civilian quarters it was thought to be far too severe. A newspaper asked its readers to express their opinions about the severity of the punishment.

One who answered was a man who himself had served for years in the Royal Navy. In his view the punishment was not too severe. He held that discipline was absolutely essential, for the purpose of discipline was to condition a man automatically and unquestioningly to obey orders, and on such obedience a man's life might well depend. He cited a case from his own experience. He was in a launch which was towing a much heavier vessel in a rough sea. The vessel was attached to the launch by a wire hawser. Suddenly in the midst of the wind and the spray there came a single, insistent word of command from the officer in charge of the launch. "Down!" he shouted. On the spot the crew of the launch flung themselves down. Just at that moment the wire towing-hawser snapped, and the broken parts of it whipped about like a maddened steel snake. If any man had been struck by it he would have been instantly killed. But the whole crew automatically obeyed and no one was injured. If anyone had stopped to argue, or to ask why, he would have been a dead man. Obedience saved lives.

It is such obedience that Jesus demands. It is Jesus' claim that obedience to him is the only sure foundation for life; and it is his promise that the life which is founded on obedience to him is safe, no matter what storms may come.