

Trampled

A VERSE WITH NO CATEGORY

There is a line in the Sermon on the Mount that gives a warning without giving you any way to act on it.

Do not give dogs what is holy, and do not throw your pearls before pigs, lest they trample them underfoot and turn to attack you.

It arrives immediately after being told not to judge – take the log out of your own eye before you go near the speck in your brother's – and immediately before being told to ask, and seek, and knock. Between a prohibition on sorting people and an invitation to ask for things.

The difficulty is not that the language is harsh. Dogs and pigs were common terms of contempt in the world Matthew wrote into, and the sermon has said harder things than this about anger and adultery and money. The difficulty is that the sentence requires a judgement it does not equip you to make. Somebody in front of you is a dog. Somebody else is not. Nothing in the verse tells you which, and the verse before it has just removed the instrument you would have used.

Most readings of the verse quietly supply the missing category. It becomes a warning about wasting good teaching on the hostile, or about arguing doctrine with people who only want a fight. Those readings are useful and I have used them. But they work by answering a question the text leaves open.

This article is about two chapters, but only a small part of them.

Matthew seven keeps going after this verse. So does Matthew eight. There is the narrow gate, the tree and its fruit, the men who say *Lord, Lord*, the house built on rock, three healings, a storm, and two men who want to follow Jesus. Each one is worth an article of its own. None of them is this one.

I am following one word. It appears twice in Matthew and nowhere else. I want to show what it does to the pearl, and then what the next chapter does to the question this verse leaves hanging.

ONE WORD, TWICE

The word is *trample*.

Lest they trample them underfoot and turn to attack you.

In Greek it is καταπατέω. It means to tread something down, to walk on it. Matthew uses it twice.¹ This is the second time. The first is two chapters earlier, and it is a verse most of us know by heart.

You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.

Those are the only two places the word appears in Matthew's Gospel. Nowhere else.

The first thing to notice is that the salt saying is not about how valuable salt is.

Read it again. Salt that has lost its taste is thrown out and walked on. What gets trampled is not something precious being wasted on people who cannot appreciate it. It is salt that has stopped being salt. The trampling is what happens to a thing that no longer does what it was for.

So when the same word turns up at the pearl, it is not saying *this is too good for them*. That reading is available in English and it is not what the word has been used for.

Then there is the question of who is carrying it.

You are the salt of the earth is said to a particular group. It is not a general address to a congregation. Two verses earlier the sermon has stopped speaking about people and started speaking to them – blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those who mourn, and then, at verse eleven, blessed are *you* when they revile you and persecute you. It never goes back to the third person. The *you* who are the salt of the earth are the people who have just been told they will be hated.

That same *you* is still being addressed at chapter seven. Nothing has changed the audience in between.

The Gentile officer of the occupying army is held up, in public, as the standard the covenant people have not reached.

And by then, a great deal has been put into their hands. Do not hit back. Do not swear oaths. Love the people who are against you. Give without letting anyone see. Pray without performing. Forgive. Do not sort people into those who deserve you and those who do not.

None of that is a doctrine. It is a way of treating people, and it is the way God is described as treating people all through the Hebrew Scriptures – faithful to those who are not faithful to him, going on loving where there is no reason left to. The Old Testament has a word for it: *hesed*. The sermon does not use the word. It describes the thing and tells them to do it.

The word is mine, not Matthew's. But it is the word for the way of treating people the sermon has just described, and Jesus is telling them to treat people the way God does.

That is what is in their hands at 7:6.

WHAT THE PEARL IS

Which brings us to the pearl itself.

There is another pearl in Matthew. Six chapters later, in a run of very short parables about the kingdom, this one:

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it.

It is worth being careful here, because this parable is often read as being about Jesus buying us at great cost. It is what I have thought and even preached. But it does not fit the sentence. The merchant is the one who sells everything. If the pearl were Jesus, then Jesus would be both the buyer who pays and the thing bought, and the parable would be arguing with itself.

Matthew does not say what the pearl is. He says the kingdom is like the transaction. Someone finds something, works out what it is worth, and pays everything he has.

So the pearl is not a person. It is the thing worth everything.

It is salt that has stopped being salt.

And if the sermon has spent two chapters putting the character of God into somebody's hands and telling them to live it, then that is a serious candidate for what the pearl is. Not the truth about God. Not a doctrine to be defended. The thing itself, being lived by someone who has paid for it.

And then, immediately, the asking.

Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.

These verses are usually read on their own, as being about prayer in general – bring God what you need and he is a better father than you expect. That is in the passage and I am not taking it out. Verse eleven says he gives *good things* to those who ask him. It does not say he gives discernment.

But the arrangement is worth noticing. A man has just been told that some of the people he gives himself to will walk on him and then turn on him. He has not been told which ones. The very next thing he hears is: ask.

I cannot prove that the asking is for discernment. What I can say is that a person who has just been given an impossible judgement to make and no way to make it needs something, and that the sermon puts the asking exactly there.

WHO HE WENT TO NEXT

The sermon ends at the close of chapter seven. The crowds are astonished, because he taught as one having authority. Then Matthew tells us what he did next.

He came down the mountain, and a leper came to him.

A leper is the clearest case of a man you are required to keep away from. It is not a matter of preference or prejudice; it is written into the law. He is unclean, he lives outside the town, and anyone who touches him becomes unclean as well. Matthew says Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him.

Then a centurion. A Roman officer, part of an occupying army, a Gentile, a man whose house a Jew could not enter without defilement. He asks for his servant to be healed. Jesus offers to come, and the centurion says there is no need – say the word from where you stand, because I understand how orders work.

Then, later in the chapter, two men in the country of the Gadarenes, on the far side of the lake, in Gentile territory. They live among the tombs. They are so violent that nobody can pass that way. And on the hillside behind them there is a herd of pigs.²

Three men, and the sermon has been over for a few verses.

The leper and the Gadarenes could be read as compassion. Jesus is kind to people in a terrible state, and nobody is surprised by that. If chapter eight were only those two, the warning at 7:6 would survive intact – you could still hold that some people are dogs, and that Jesus went to these ones because he could see they were not.

But then there is the centurion.

Jesus does not merely help him. He turns round to the people following him and says this:

Truly, I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith.

That is not kindness to an outsider. It is a measurement, and Israel is the thing being measured. The Gentile officer of the occupying army is held up, in public, as the standard that the covenant people have not reached. And Matthew puts the sentence in Jesus' mouth barely a page after *do not throw your pearls before pigs*.

Whatever that verse means, it cannot mean *work out who the outsiders are and withhold from them*. The Gospel's next act is to go to the outsiders, and to say that one of them has more faith than anyone at home.

Which is why the warning is real and the category is missing. The danger in 7:6 is not invented – people do trample what is handed to them, and they do turn on the person who handed it over. But

the means of identifying them in advance is not withheld by accident.

So the verse stays where it is, and it stays difficult.

I had thought it was out of place. I had thought that if you lifted it out, the sermon would run on and nobody would notice. It is not out of place. It is the point at which the sermon stops being advice and becomes something you have to live without knowing the outcome.

Two chapters have put the character of God into a person's hands and told him to hand it out. The next sentence tells him that some of the people he hands it to will walk on it and turn on him. And the sentence after that tells him to ask.

There is no third instruction. He is not told how to tell the difference, and the chapter that follows takes away the list he would have used.

¹ καταπατέω (Strong's G2662) appears five times in the New Testament: Matthew 5:13 and 7:6, Luke 8:5, Luke 12:1, and Hebrews 10:29, where it is used of someone who has "trampled underfoot the Son of God." That last one is said of a person inside the covenant, not outside it.

² The herd is a detail of the setting, not a category of person, and I am not resting anything on it. It is arrangement rather than argument – but it is a striking thing to find on the hillside two verses into the chapter after *do not throw your pearls before pigs*.

This article did not begin with artificial intelligence. It began with years of ministry, reading, prayer, suffering, and conversation.

During the development of this article, AI became a conversation partner. It challenged assumptions, tested arguments, suggested structures, and helped refine expression. Many of the words that follow emerged through that dialogue.

The experiences, convictions, interpretations, and conclusions remain my own.