

Principles for Changing the World #2: Be Careful.

From the Series, "The King and I – Matthew Tells Us About the King of the Universe"

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Introduction

I once heard a heartwarming story. It involves a little boy who went for a walk on the beach one morning. The night before, there had been a bad storm. The storm created a lot of unusual waves. So, the next morning there were lots of little pools - Pools that would disappear when the tide went out.



In one of the pools, the little boy saw some starfishes. (I had to look that up – the plural of starfish can be "starfish" or "starfishes".)

Anyway, he saw lots of them - Thousands of starfishes.

The little boy knew that the water in the pool was going down. It would eventually disappear, leaving dry sand. He thought, "If all these little starfishes stay here, they'll all dry up and die." So, he picked up one of the starfish and walked over to the edge of the ocean. There, he threw the starfish into the water. Then, he walked back and did that same thing with another starfish.

After a while, the boy's dad came looking for him. When he saw his son, he walked over to see what he was doing. The little boy was just ready to throw one of the starfish into the water, so he explained. His father said, "This is very nice, but you understand that you can't save all of those little starfishes." The little boy thought for a moment. Then he threw the starfish he was carrying into the water. He said, "I just saved that one."

Now, as I said, that's a heartwarming story. Maybe we could stop here and go home? Or, we could dig a little deeper. Let's change something about the story. Let's say that instead of starfish, the pool had a shark. Let's say that the little boy thought, "You know, if that shark stays in this pool, the water will dry up, and he'll die." So, the little boy decides that he's going to wade into the water and try to catch the shark so that he can carry him to the ocean. Sadly, the little boy doesn't realize that the shark has no idea what's going on, and will happily eat the little boy if he comes close.

Today, I don't want to start off with a tragedy. So, I won't say that the little boy went into the water and was promptly eaten. I won't say that he lost a limb. I won't even say that he was injured. I'll say that the little boy's father came along and caught him before he went into the pool, and talked him out of this idea. Then, they went and enjoyed a family breakfast together.

That's a much nicer ending.

This is where somebody asks, "Why is Phil doing this?" "Why did he take a heartwarming story and change it so that it was almost a tragedy?"

And as always, I'm glad you asked.

We're in Matthew, chapter 7. In this chapter, Jesus teaches us "Principles for Changing the World. In our last session, we learned principle number one: Start with yourself. Today, we learn principle number two:

"Be careful: Sometime the world does not want to be changed."

Let's read and see what Jesus has to say.

Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you to pieces. (Matthew 7:6)

Like many things that Jesus teaches us, many find this confusing. So, let's dig in.

I. Analysis: Sacred, Pearls, Dogs and Pigs

First, let's ask: What does Jesus mean by things that are sacred, and things that are valuable, like pearls?

A. Sacred

First, let's look at things that are sacred. To be sacred is to be totally set apart for God. Once something is set apart for God, it should only be used by God for his purposes. It's interesting, the thing that is set apart need not be unique in itself. You can have a common cup or bowl set apart for God. You can have food set apart for God. In the days of Hebrew Temple in Jerusalem, people might sacrifice as simple as bread. Bread is common. But, once it was set apart, it was special. So, here's an important principle:

It's the act of being set apart that makes something special, not the thing itself.

B. Pearls, Treasure

Now that we understand what it means to be sacred, let's look at the way that Jesus talks about pearls. A pearl is a symbol of treasure. In the days of Jesus, pearls were rare. Pearls were beautiful. Rare and beautiful combine to make pearls highly valuable. Today, we have ways of farming the oysters that produce pearls. In the days of Jesus, divers with no modern equipment had to hold their breath long enough to look around the ocean floor for oysters. Once found, not all oysters contain pearls. So, these were very uncommon and special.

C. Dogs

Now that we understand those words, sacred and pearls, let's look at the other side of the picture that Jesus uses for us: Dogs and pigs.

In America and the western world, we think of dogs as pets. Dogs are cute. Dogs are friendly. We bring them into our homes and dress them up like children.

In ancient Israel, people had very different views of dogs. To the Jewish people dogs were considered an unclean animal, so they were not normally brought into homes. That meant that the average person only met wild dogs outside in less-populated place. And to say "met" is bad - You didn't actually want to meet one of these in the wild. They were vicious, and they would eat anything they could get their teeth into.



D. Pigs

Then there are pigs. Once again, people who have never seen a live pig think of them as cute little creatures. This little piggie went to market, and you know the rest. Most people don't see one off a farm. And again that's a good thing, because when you meet them in the wild, they are decidedly unpleasant creatures.



I once heard a presentation on the history of Hawaii. In ancient Hawaii, when the day came for a young boy to become a man, there was a ceremony. The ceremony involved going out into the jungle to kill a wild boar. If you brought one home, you were a hero. There was a feast with the cooked boar taking center stage. If you pulled this off, you had a claim on being one of the leaders of your village. However, it was not unusual for some of the young men to fail to come home. These animals get quite large, and they are ferocious fighters.

So, we have sacred, and we have pearls. We have dogs and we have pigs. How does Jesus use these?

II. The connection of these things to Spiritual Matters

Wild dogs and wild pigs have something in common: They eat whatever they can get. They may hunt for other animals. But, they're just as happy to eat the leftovers from whatever dead things may be lying around. Dead for a day – dead for a week. It doesn't matter. These animals were often seen scavenging around garbage dumps. So, the source of the food doesn't matter. If it's edible, it works.

Compare this with the idea of something being sacred. To be sacred is to be special – very special. Compare this with the idea of a pearl. A pearl is rare and beautiful and valuable. To pigs and dogs, there is nothing that is special. There is nothing that is valuable. Something is either edible, or it's not.

Would anyone even think of giving something special and rare to such a creature? If you had something special and rare, like a fine pearl, you certainly wouldn't throw it away to a wild animal. What would happen if you did? The animal would likely take a bite. When it discovered that what you just threw it was inedible, it might turn on you and attack. In the process of attacking you, whatever you offered to the animal would just get trampled.

No, Jesus says, "Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you to pieces."

III. Personal Application – Understanding Value of the Kingdom

Now, what does this all mean to us? What does this mean to followers of Jesus - Especially, followers of Jesus who want to change the world? Do we have something that's sacred? Do we have something that rare and beautiful and highly valuable?

Yes! We have knowledge of the kingdom of heaven. Let's read about it:

44 "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and hid; and for joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. 45 "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking beautiful pearls, 46 who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had and bought it. (Matthew 13:44-45)

These stories are told in the book of Matthew, so we'll hit those stories down the road. As such, we don't need to pull them apart in detail. On a high level though, the main point is obvious: Having knowledge of the Kingdom of Heaven is like treasure. It's like finding a pearl - And not just any pearl, it's like being an expert pearl hunter who finds the most extraordinary pearl he's ever seen.

So, if you know about the Kingdom of heaven and you're heading there, you have something rare and beautiful and highly valuable.

The Bible describes heaven as a wonderful place. It has streets of gold. The finest jewels are all over the place. But more than the presence of fine and rare things, the most important part of heaven is that God is there. King David wrote about it in the Psalms.

1 How lovely is your dwelling place,
Lord Almighty!
2 My soul yearns, even faints,
for the courts of the Lord;
my heart and my flesh cry out
for the living God.
(Psalm 84:1-2)

There's something even more about heaven - It's the price that was paid which allows us to go there.

18 For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors, 19 but with the precious blood of Christ... (I Peter 1:18-19)

Add to all this: The gift of God is more than a place. It's what happens to us.

6 For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ.

7 But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. (II Corinthians 4:6-7)

As we said before, to be sacred is to be set apart for God. And it's not the thing that's important. It's the fact that the thing is set apart. And so, it is with us. We start out as common things. We are what the writer here calls "Jars of Clay". But, we are used by God to hold treasure. Part of that treasure is the knowledge we have of the kingdom. But there's even more:

19 Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? (I Corinthians 6:19)

When someone receives Christ as their Savior, God sets them apart. He washes them with the precious blood of Christ. Then he sends his Holy Spirit to live in that person.

So, we who start as common things, as jars of clay, are transformed into a living temple. We become sacred.

Now we know why Jesus is talking about pearls and sacred things. Let's stop for a moment to think about this. As always, there are two kinds of people reading. For some, this is new. Would you like to receive treasure from God? Right now, you are something common - Something locked into the time you spend on the earth. Would you like to be changed - Changed into something sacred - Something eternal? Talk to us. We'd love to share how you can know with certainty that you possess the treasure of the living God. We'll share some important info at the end of this article.

Then there are the folks who have heard this for years. You know, sometimes the years go by, and it becomes easy to forget. We may be temples of the Holy Spirit, we may be something sacred, but we live on a very common and very un-sacred earth. Do we fully understand what God has given to us? Treasure!

Take a moment to let God reawaken the awe and wonder inside of you. Let God show you how lovely his dwelling place is. Let God remind you of the beauty and incredible worth that you possess as a child of God.

IV. Application to our Mission

Let's see how this applies to our mission as followers of Jesus. You see, normally, in Christian circles, we talk about sharing this knowledge we have with other people. In fact, we are to go to great lengths to do so. Let's be reminded of the way that Matthew closes his book:

Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations... (Matthew 28:19)

We read here that Jesus tells us to "go". Go to all nations. That's the whole planet - We are to go into the whole world. But, in the passage we're reading today, Jesus seems to be giving us an

exception - A big “but”. There are some people in the world with whom we’re not supposed to share.

Jesus has some unkind names for those people: Dogs and pigs. As we’ve learned, dogs and pigs were not (shall we say) favored creatures in ancient Israel. Why would Jesus refer to people with an unkind name? Answer: Because there’s something serious going on here, and he wants to get our attention.

We don’t have a lot of time to go through the complete story, but for now, let’s say that the names “dog” and “pig” were given to people who resisted God. Let’s look at one usage in the Psalms. We’re going to read about a follower of God who is being attacked by enemies of God.

11 Do not be far from me,
for trouble is near
and there is no one to help.
12 Many bulls surround me;
strong bulls of Bashan encircle me.
13 Roaring lions that tear their prey
open their mouths wide against me.
(same slide)
16 Dogs surround me,
a pack of villains encircles me;
(Psalm 22:11-13, 16)

We see here a man who is a follower of God who is under attack. He’s being attacked by enemies of God. Those enemies are strong. Bulls were a symbol of strength. Those enemies are heartless and brutal. Lions and dogs were symbols of these qualities.

Sadly, some leaders in ancient Israel misread this. They believed that “dogs” and “pigs” were titles to be used for anyone who wasn’t a Hebrew. There are lots of reasons in the Scripture to believe that those names are more appropriately used in the wider sense for people who are enemies of God. In particular, those who can become vicious.

To summarize what we have so far: Jesus is saying that his followers who want to change the world will do so with something that is highly valuable: The message of the Kingdom of Heaven. That message is sacred. And it makes the people who accept it sacred, too. So Jesus is saying that his followers need not give it to people who will turn around and hurt them.

Note: Jesus is not saying that the message should not be offered. He’s saying that it should not be thrown around as though as though it was simple and cheap.

Let’s see how Jesus implemented this with his immediate followers - Those who walked with them and heard his voice.

A while after he presented the Christian Manifesto, he sent his disciples out for a short time to share his message. Here are the instructions that he gave to them:

11 Whatever town or village you enter, search there for some worthy person and stay at their house until you leave. 12 As you enter the home, give it your greeting. 13 If the home is deserving, let your peace rest on it; if it is not, let your peace return to you. 14 If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, leave that home or town and shake the dust off your feet. 15 Truly I tell you, it will be more bearable for Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town. (Matthew 10:11-15)

A little further down in those instructions, Jesus says this:

When you are persecuted in one place, flee to another. (Matthew 10:23)

So, Jesus gave clear instructions to his followers. Go to various places. When you get there, **offer** the message of the kingdom. If people there accept, great. If they don't, give them a stern warning and move on.

This was practiced later by the Apostle Paul on his missionary journeys. When he reached the city of Corinth, he went to the synagogue to share the message of Jesus. He spoke to both fellow Jews and to gentiles. Here's how it went:

5 When Silas and Timothy came from Macedonia, Paul devoted himself exclusively to preaching, testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Messiah. 6 But when they opposed Paul and became abusive, he shook out his clothes in protest and said to them, "Your blood be on your own heads! I am innocent of it. From now on I will go to the Gentiles." (Acts 18:5-6)

In this situation, Paul spoke to everyone. He shared a clear message of the Kingdom. When people listened, fine. If they accepted, wonderful. If people weren't sure but were polite, Paul kept on speaking. But, when people became abusive, Paul gave them a stern warning and moved on.

V. Practical Applications for Today

So, having learned all this, let's consider some practical examples.

A. A College Campus

When I taught at a college, I volunteered to help with the Christian fellowship group. At one point, there was an individual in the group who was very disruptive. He would act rudely to people in general, doing things like talking out of turn in meetings. Worse, he would go up to different young women in the group and do things that made them uncomfortable. This was resulting in people, especially young women, going to the student leaders and saying that they were interested in learning about the message of Jesus, but they couldn't keep coming to the meetings because they didn't feel safe.

The student leaders went to the campus worker who headed the group and asked what they should do. They wanted to tell the young man that he wasn't welcome. He replied, "No, everyone must be welcome. You need to love this young man and work with him." Unfortunately, the young man didn't change, even after many loving attempts to work with him. In fact, he got worse. This resulted in student leaders burning out.

At a later point, the campus worker moved on, and I was left in charge until another worker was appointed. The students came to me and asked for my advice. I told them that, based on what we learned today, they had no obligation to include this disruptive individual. I told them to tell him that he was not welcome until he was ready to treat everyone, especially the young women, with respect.

I saw some huge sighs of relief.

B. In a Church

Let's look at a practical example from a church. A while back, I was involved in some ministries with a large church in Philadelphia. In the city, you get a lot of random people wandering into the service. Many of them sit quietly and don't bother anyone - Those individuals were welcome.

One day though, a man wandered in who was either inebriated or on drugs. He got loud during the sermon. The pastor stopped the sermon and told the ushers to escort the man out. (Ushers in city settings have to be trained how to handle things like this.)

Later, the pastor got some flak from people in the congregation. They said, "we need to love everyone, even people who get loud during the service". Based on what we studied today that pastor replied, "No, we only need to accept people who are willing to abide by the rules of common decency."

As a note, I have worked in many settings with people who suffer from emotional and mental handicaps. Many times, they have behaviors involving acting in eccentric and sometimes rude ways in public. I have seen on more than one occasion that such people can magically develop manners and self-control when they are confronted. The problem is: People for some reason have the mistaken notion that it's kind and loving to ignore such behavior. Many times, it's more helpful to a person to lovingly, and perhaps sternly, confront bad behavior.

As a final note: There are exceptions to all this. Sometimes we have family members who can be abusive. Because we have family ties, we can't just move on. We deal with those situations as they arise. The same can happen with employment or neighbors. Sometimes persecution arises and as a practical matter, we can't run away. Again, we seek God's wisdom and grace in those situations.

Finally, sometimes people are abusive one day, but on another day, they come back ready to listen. On those days we forgive the sins of the past and offer people the message of life: The gospel of Jesus Christ.

Let's pull this all together.

Conclusion

So today, we learned the second principle of changing the world: Be careful, because sometimes the world does not want to be changed.

The message of the Kingdom of God is a treasure. It's like a rare and beautiful pearl. And it changes people. It changes us from common things, jars of clay, into something sacred - something set apart for God. When we accept the sacrifice of Jesus for our sins, God cleanses us from all sin and sends his Holy Spirit to dwell in us. We become holy temples.

We have been told to offer this treasure to the world. Sometimes the world responds by accepting the treasure. That's a wonderful thing. Sometimes the world responds not with acceptance, but with abuse. That's a sad and tragic thing.

Sometimes, the world is like the little boy who rescued starfish by picking them up and taking them to the ocean. Sometimes, the world happily accepts us and is changed. Sometimes, the world is like the little boy who tried to save a shark. On those days, our loving Father comes along. And you know what he does? Often times, He talks us out of it!

Let's listen and apply the advice our Lord gives to us as we go out to change the world.

Thanks for reading! Here are some helpful links:

Trinity Church
www.TrinityTeaneck.org

Phil's Site
PhilBrainerd.com

To learn how to begin a new life with Jesus Christ, visit Billy Graham's site:

PeaceWithGod.net
