



The Sermon on the Mount Study
Bible Study Session 23
Matthew 7:6 : Topic 22

Study By
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Greek NT

Μὴ δώτε τὸ ἅγιον τοῖς κυσίν μηδὲ βάλητε τοὺς μαργαρίτας ὑμῶν ἔμπροσθεν τῶν χοίρων, μήποτε καταπατήσουσιν αὐτοὺς ἐν τοῖς ποσίν αὐτῶν καὶ στραφέντες ῥήξωσιν ὑμᾶς.

Gute Nachricht Bibel

»Gebt das Heilige, das euch anvertraut ist, nicht den Hunden! Und eure Perlen werft nicht den Schweinen vor! Die trampeln doch nur darauf herum, und dann wenden sie sich gegen euch und reißen euch in Stücke.«

NRSV

Do not give what is holy to dogs; and do not throw your pearls before swine, or they will trample them under foot and turn and maul you.

NLT

“Don’t give what is holy to unholy people. Don’t give pearls to swine! They will trample the pearls, then turn and attack you.”

The Study of the Text:¹

1. What did the text mean to the first readers?

This text is one of the most curious passages in the entire New Testament. The highly figurative Saying of Jesus is deeply entrenched in first century Jewish culture, which is not familiar to modern western thought. Jesus mentions dogs and pigs in the same context of holy things and pearls. For many years I have been intrigued by this Saying and have sought to probe its meaning with greater insight. A part of that study was published in a Festschrift in 2004.² The Saying presents the Bible student with the opportunity to explore cultural mind sets in the ancient world and how they were used to express ideas, ideas not uncommon in our world but presented in dramatically different ways than would be the case in modern western society.

One should also note the uniqueness of this Saying of Jesus to Matthew’s gospel. No parallel exists anywhere else in the New Testament.³ Consequently, the range of interpretive conclusions about this saying is extensive, as John Nolland summarizes.⁴

It is difficult to be sure about the meaning and role of this verse, and many suggestions have been made. Without trying to be exhaustive, I will indicate something of the difficulty posed by this verse through a survey. A considerable body of interpretation improves the parallelism by postulating mistranslation of an original Semitic source (‘what is holy’ becomes ‘a ring/rings’, and the pearls end up ‘on the snouts’ of the pigs), but this is speculative and unnecessary (see below) and does not get us any closer to knowing what to apply the image to.

Sensitive to these concerns, others have postulated that either already in Aramaic or at the point of translation into Greek the existing (and original?) application of the saying to some form of Eucharistic exclusiveness led (on the basis of a ready-to-hand wordplay between ‘ring’ and ‘holy’ in Aramaic) to an interpretive rewording of the first part of the text.⁵ Whatever the value of these suggestions, a Eucharistic reference in Mt. 7:6 has no contextual support.

With either the text as we have it or with a reconstructed text, interpretive efforts have focussed on identifying a suitable referent for ‘what is holy’ and for ‘the dogs’ (‘your pearls’ and ‘the pigs’ are generally seen to share

¹Serious study of the biblical text must look at the ‘then’ meaning, i.e., the historical meaning, and the ‘now’ meaning, i.e., the contemporary application, of the scripture text. In considering the historical meaning, both elements of literary design and historical aspects must be considered. In each study we will attempt a summary overview of these procedures in the interpretation of the scripture text.

²Lorin L. Cranford, “Throwing your Margaritas to the Pigs. A Rhetorical Reading of Matthew 7,6.” *Gemeinschaft der Kirchen und gesellschaftliche Verantwortung: Die Würde des Anderen und das Recht anders zu denken, Festschrift für Dr. Erich Geldbach*, pp. 351-363. Edited by Lena Lybæk, Konrad Raiser, and Stefanie Schardien. Münster, Deutschland: Lit Verlag, 2004.

³“This verse is from Matthew’s special source and is not found in any other canonical Gospel. The first half of the verse is found in the “Gospel according to Basilides” as reported by Epiphanius (*Pan. haer.* 24.5.2). It is also found, slightly modified and incomplete, in the *Gos. Thom* 93. The first clause of the verse is found in the *Didache* (9:5), where “the holy thing” is understood to be the Eucharist. All of these instances are probably to be explained through dependence on Matthew.” [Donald A. Hagner, vol. 33A, *Word Biblical Commentary : Matthew 1-13*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2002), 170.]

⁴Nolland, J. (2005). *The Gospel of Matthew : A commentary on the Greek text* (321–322). Grand Rapids, Mich.; Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press.

⁵Maxwell-Stuart, “Do not give”’, 341, offers a variant on this procedure by proposing an early scribal change from τῖμιον (meaning ‘what is valuable’ but understood by the scribe as ‘what is honourable’ and interpreted as referring to the Eucharist) to τὸ ἅγιον (‘what is holy’).

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respectively the same referents). The main candidates for ‘what is holy’ have been the gospel message, the Sermon on the Mount, Israel, sacrificial flesh for the temple (possibly disqualified for temple use by blemish, etc.), and the Eucharist. The main candidates for ‘dogs’ (beyond the occasional attempt to take the word literally) have been Gentiles, the Romans, unbelievers, heretics, and Christians not living up to their profession. When scholars have made serious attempts to fit the verse into its Matthean context, the preferred suggestions have been: a statement to counter-balance ‘do not judge’ (not judging can be taken too far!); an extension and generalisation of vv. 1–5 making the point that stupid acts (such as judging others) bring God’s judgment on oneself; a sarcastic restatement of vv. 3–5 (‘your pearls of helpful criticism are not going to be appreciated’); a relaying of a (Pharisaical?) proverb expressing a restrictive view only in order to overturn it on the basis of the (to-be-imitated) pattern of God’s generosity as laid out in vv. 7–11 to follow; a restriction to be imposed on vv. 7–11 (good things do not come to ‘dogs’ or ‘pigs’).

Von Lips has made the case that, with parabolic materials like this, application should be based on an appreciation of how the imagery and the action function as a whole rather than on a rather allegorical decoding of the elements of the imagery. He has also, by careful exploration of comparative materials, helped to clarify the imagery involved.⁶ Though the interpretation offered here is quite different from his, his work provides basic information for, and the central stimulus from which, my own proposals emerge.

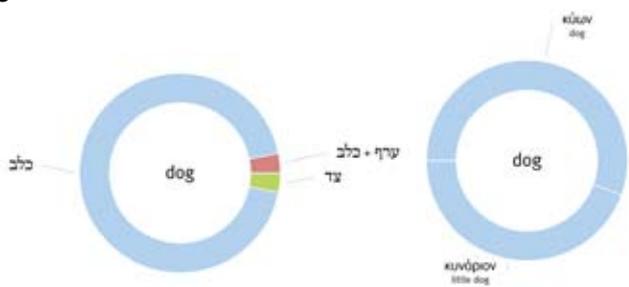
Some attention will be given to the history of interpretation, i.e., die Wirkungsgeschichte. But a distinctive interpretation will be offered to this text, as earlier published in the German Festschrift.

Historical Context:

The role of both dogs and pigs, both literally and symbolically, in the ancient world stands as the central historical aspect of this text in the interpretive process. Proper assessment of this will play an important role in accurate understanding of the saying of Jesus.

Two Greek words for ‘dogs’ are found in the New Testament:⁷ κύων (5x in NT) and κυνάριον (4x in NT).⁸ Davies and Allison provide a helpful summary of the use of the terms for dogs:⁹

Because dogs in the ancient world were known primarily not as pets¹⁰: but as wild creatures which roamed the streets in packs scavenging for refuse on which to feed, ‘dog’ became a word of reproach (as in 1 Sam 17:43; 24:14; 2 Sam 9:8; 16:9; Ps 22:20; Prov 26:11; Isa 56:10–11; Diogenes, *Ep.* 44).



⁶Von Lips, ‘Schweine’, 165–86. Van de Sandt, ‘Do Not Give’, 230 n. 17 and 234–38, also helpfully gathers relevant Jewish materials highlighting the Jewish horror of what is holy to the temple finding its way into the mouths of dogs.

⁷Three separate Hebrew words for ‘dog’ are used a total of 32 times in the Old Testament.

⁸kýōn [dog], kynárion [house dog]
kýōn.

1. This word, meaning “dog,” is mostly used disparagingly in the OT for despicable street dogs (cf. 1 Sam. 17:43; 2 Kgs. 8:13; 1 Kgs. 14:11; Ps. 22:16, 20; Prov. 26:11). The rabbis display similar contempt for dogs when they compare the ungodly or Gentiles to them.

2. What distinguishes Israel is possession of the law, which is not to be given to the unclean. Jesus takes up this thought in Mt. 7:6. In view of the majesty of the gospel the disciples must not address it to the wrong people, i.e., where they cannot break through opposition in their own strength. The cultic form of the saying suggests an application in worship too. In Lk. 16:19ff. the licking of the sores of Lazarus by dogs describes the supreme wretchedness of his position.

3. Paul’s warning in Phil. 3:2 has a sharp edge. He is perhaps referring Mt. 7:6 to those who disturb the community, or thinking of the hostility of his opponents in reminiscence of Ps. 22 or Ps. 59:6–7. 2 Pet. 2:22 takes up Prov. 26:11 to describe believers who fall back into sin. The influence of the OT may also be seen in Rev. 22:15 with its exclusion of dogs from the holy city, i.e., those who reject the truth and are hardened against grace (cf. Ignatius Ephesians 7.1).

kynárion. This diminutive of kýōn means “house dog” and is probably chosen by Jesus in Mk. 7:27; Mt. 25:26 to show that there is a distinction between Jews and Gentiles but still to give the Gentiles a place in the house. The woman in her reply accepts the distinction but in so doing takes the place that is offered and finds the help she seeks.” [Gerhard Kittel, Gerhard Friedrich and Geoffrey William Bromiley, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament Abridged* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1995), 494–495. S.V., O. MICHEL, III, 1101–04]

⁹W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (London; New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), 674–677.

¹⁰There are, however, indications that dogs were sometimes domesticated; see Tob 6:1 (v. 1.); 11:4 (v. 1.); Mk 7:27 (?); Philo, *Praem. Poen.* 89; *b. Abod. Zar.* 54b; Anacharsis, *Ep.* 8; Ps.-Dionysius, *De div. nom.* 4:25. The Zoroastrians were known to have had great respect for the dog; cf. Herodotus 1:140.

Compare the English ‘cur’ and recall that ‘Cynic’ (= κυνικός, ‘dog-like’) was used as a term of abuse (as in Diogenes Laertius 6:60). In Deut 23:18, ‘dog’ = a pagan, male prostitute (*qādēš*), and similar equations are made in other texts (e.g. Mt 15:26–7 = Mk 7:27–8; 1 E¹¹ 89:42–9; Ps.—Clem. Hom. 2:19; S¹² 1, pp. 722–6) although it would be going too far to assert that ‘dog’ was a common appellation for the Gentiles (cf. Abraham¹³ 2, pp. 195–6). The question for us is, Are the ‘dogs’ of Mt 7:6 Gentiles (as in 15:26–7), or do we have here a general term of contempt (cf. Phil 3:2 (dogs = the Judaizing faction); Rev 22:15 (dogs = sinners outside paradise); Ignatius,¹⁴ *Ep*¹⁵. 7:1 (mad dogs = heretics); *m*¹⁶. *Soṭa* 9:15 (‘this generation is as the face of a dog’ refers to the impiety of Israel))? Surely the latter.¹⁷ ‘Do not give that which is holy to dogs’ takes up for a novel end a known rule (cf. *m*¹⁸ *Tem.* 6:5; *b*¹⁹ *Bek.* 15a; *b*²⁰ *Pesaḥ.* 29a; *b*²¹ *Šebu.* 11 b; *b*²² *Tem.* 117a, 130b) in which τὸ ἅγιον means sacrificial meat or leaven (cf. Exod 29:33; Lev 2:3; 22:6, 7, 10–16; Num 18:8–19). In Mt 7:6 this rule, by virtue of its new context, becomes a comprehensive statement about the necessity to keep distinct the realms of clean and unclean (cf. Exod 29:33; CD 12:8–9).²³



Within the context of Matthew (and, we may presume, for the pre-Matthean tradition), 7:6 is to be assigned one of two meanings, and perhaps both are present simultaneously. (1) The saying is an admonition about the necessity to limit the time and energy directed towards the hard-hearted. The gospel of the kingdom — in 13:45–6 the kingdom is a pearl — was to be preached to all; but its heralds were also instructed to shake the dust off their feet when they were not received into a house or town (10:14). They were not to throw away wittingly the words of the gospel. They were not to give that which is holy to dogs or to throw pearls before swine (so Luther²⁴). There has to be an economy of truth. (2) Matthew may have had in mind certain esoteric teachings and practices that were not to be made known to outsiders (cf. 1QS 9:17, 22; Philo, *De cherub.* 42, 48; Josephus, *Bell.* 2:141; Ps.-Clem Hom, Re²⁵ 3:1; Gregory Nazianzus, *Orat.* 2:79; Ps.-Dionysius, *De div. nom.* 1:8 *ad fin.*)²⁶ Although God gives good gifts even to evil human beings (cf. 5:45), not everything should be set before everybody. ‘Holy things are for the holy’. In this case, the Didache (9:5) would maintain the right spirit of Mt 7:6: those who have not been baptized into the name of the Lord should not receive the Eucharist, for that would be to give that which is holy to dogs (so also Tertullian, Cyril of Jerusalem, Jerome, and many other Fathers).²⁷ Consider also the rabbinic notion that the

¹¹En 1 En 1 Enoch

¹²B SB H. L. Strack and P. Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch*, 6 vols., Munich, 1921–1961.

¹³Abrahams I. Abrahams, *Studies in Pharisaism and the Gospels*, 2 vols., reprint ed., New York, 1967.

¹⁴Ignatius, Ignatius, *Epistle to the Ephesians*

¹⁵*Eph* Ignatius, *Epistle to the Ephesians*

¹⁶*m. Mishnah*

¹⁷Those who would demur could see in Mt 7:6 a prohibition of mission to the Gentiles (cf. 10:5–6; 15:24); cf. T. W. Manson, *Only to the House of Israel?*, FFBS 9, Philadelphia, 1964, p. 1; idem, *Sayings*, p. 174.

¹⁸*m. Mishnah*

¹⁹*b. Babylonian Talmud*

²⁰*b. Babylonian Talmud*

²¹*b. Babylonian Talmud*

²²*b. Babylonian Talmud*

²³Also, if Mt 7:6 goes back to Jesus—a question we have found no way of answering—his apparent openness to Gentiles (note esp. 8:5–13, also 15:21–8) makes a reference to them unlikely. Our conclusions about Mt 7:6 render uncertain a conjecture many have found appealing, namely, that the Aramaic original had to do not with ‘that which is holy’ (*quḏšā*) but with a ‘ring’ (*qēdāšā*, cf. 11Q^tJob on 42:11 and the traditional targum on the same verse). Cf. Prov 11:22 and see Perles (v); Jeremias (v); and Black, pp. 200–2. It is all the more difficult to accept this conjecture because, as Jeremias has observed, there must have been not one but two translation errors: כּפּוֹ must have been taken to mean ‘before’ rather than ‘in the nose of’. There is the further difficulty that Gos. Thom. 93, which might go back to an independent translation of the Aramaic, also has ‘holy’.

²⁴Luther M. Luther, *Luther’s Works, Volume 21: The Sermon on the Mount and the Magnificat*, ed. J. Pelikan, Saint Louis, 1956.

²⁵Ps.-Clem Hom, Rec Ps.-Clem Hom, Rec Pseudo-Clementine Homilies, Recognitions.

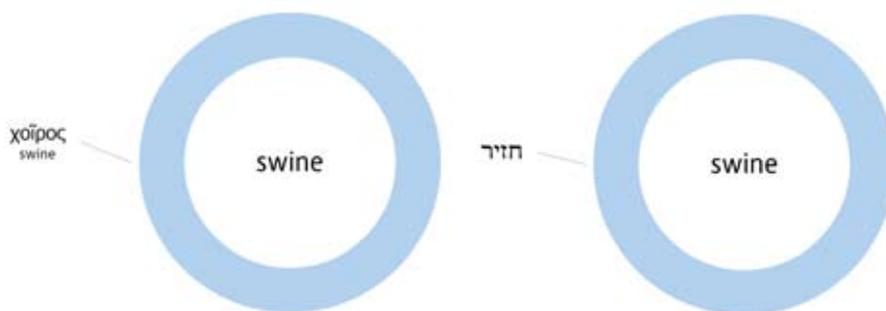
²⁶Cf. Davies, *COJ*, pp. 122–4. The theme of hiding sacred mysteries from the uninitiated is nearly ubiquitous in the history of religions. Recall that the short text of Lk 22:15–19 has sometimes been explained as someone’s attempt to protect the sacred eucharistic formula from profanation (see Jeremias, *Eucharistic Words*, pp. 157–9).

²⁷The range of patristic interpretations is interesting. Elchasai used Mt 7:6 to justify his esoteric, sectarian teachings (so Hippolytus, *Ref.* 9:12). Basilidians referred the verse to non-Gnostics (Epiphanius, *Haer.* 24:5:2), Origen to lapsed Christians

words of Torah should not be transmitted to a Goi: *b*²⁸ *Hag.* 13a; *b*²⁹ *Ketub.* 111a; *S*³⁰ 1, p. 447 (cf. *b*³¹ *Šabb.* 127b: ‘Let not sacred words enter a place of uncleanness’).³²

The generally negative attitude of Jews against dogs in the ancient world made this animal a target for symbolical significance of something bad and evil.

The Greek New Testament uses χοῖρος (12x in the NT) for ‘pigs’ or ‘swine.’³³ The ancient Jewish attitude toward swine was uniformly negative. Thus, the pig was frequently a negative symbol in the literature.³⁴ This attitude stood in contrast to the more dominant positive attitude toward swine by most ancient cultures.



χοῖρος, ου *m*³⁵—‘pig,’ ἀγέλη χοίρων πολλῶν βοσκομένη ‘a herd of many pigs was feeding’ Mt 8:30.

Though references to pigs in the OT frequently involve very strong connotations of uncleanness and disgust, references in the NT are somewhat more neutral. However, in the story of the Prodigal Son (Lk 15:15) the reference to the task of feeding swine certainly indicates the desperate condition of the younger brother. Some translators have found it necessary to indicate such a fact by a marginal note, since the language into

(*Princ.* 3:1:17). In Ep. 2 Concerning Virginité 6, true believers are not to minister—i.e. sing psalms or read the Scriptures—where non-Christians (= dogs and swine) are drinking and blaspheming in their feasts. Methodius, *De creatis* 1, pp. 493–4 (Bonwetsch), in a unique interpretation, equated pearls with virtues, swine with pleasures.

²⁸*b. Babylonian Talmud*

²⁹*b. Babylonian Talmud*

³⁰SB H. L. Strack and P. Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch*, 6 vols., Munich, 1921–1961.

³¹*b. Babylonian Talmud*

³²Another interpretation has been defended by Guelich, pp. 353–6. Following the lead of G. Bornkamm, ‘Bergpredigt’, he links 7:6 with the clause in the Lord’s Prayer about apostasy: to forfeit what is holy and precious is to succumb to the temptation of apostasy. Lambrecht rightly calls this ‘somewhat farfetched’ (p. 164).

³³The word ‘swine’ is the more formal but less frequently used term. The English word ‘pig’ is much more common, especially in North American English.

³⁴Strict Jews would not even mention swine by name but would always substitute the term “the abomination.” Israelites considered themselves polluted if they were even touched by a swine’s bristle.

To the Hebrews the pig symbolized filth and ugliness. Pigs will eat fecal material, vermin, rodents, carrion, and the like (2 Pt 2:22). Proverbs 11:22 refers to the incongruity of a golden ring in the nose of an animal showing such characteristics. A similar metaphor occurs in Jesus’ statement about casting pearls before swine (Mt 7:6). The prodigal son’s degeneration was shown by his being forced in his poverty to feed pigs and eat their food (Lk 15:15, 16).

Eating the flesh of pigs was forbidden to the Jews (Lv 11:7; Dt 14:8). The Canaanites in the Holy Land killed and ate pigs freely. In intertestamental times Antiochus IV (Epiphanes), a Syrian king whose territories included Israel, used the pig to “Hellenize” the Jews. He first tested their loyalty to the Jewish faith by requiring the consumption of pork, considered a delicacy by the Greeks (2 Mc 6:18). The act of desecration that drove the Jews to rebellion, however, was the sprinkling of pig blood on the temple altar in a sacrifice to Zeus (1 Mc 1:47).

Pigs were frequently used in pagan worship (Is 65:4; 66:3, 17), which may account for their being forbidden to the Jews as food. Evidence in the Holy Land shows that pigs were sacrificed long before Hellenistic times. Pig bones were found in a grotto below the rock-cut place of sacrifice at Gezer. A similar underground chamber with vessels containing piglet bones at Tirzah dates to the Middle Bronze Age (about 2000 B.C.).

Alabaster fragments of a statuette of a pig ready to be sacrificed have been unearthed. Among the Greeks the agrarian rites of the swine god Adonis were popular. Swine were sacrificed to Aphrodite (Venus) in Greece and Asia Minor. In addition, pigs were sacrificed in connection with oaths and treaties; in the *Iliad* Agamemnon sacrificed a boar to Zeus and Helios. So it is not surprising that among the Jews the pig became a symbol of filthiness and paganism.

It is possible that eating pork was forbidden primarily because the pig may carry many worm parasites such as trichina, though that is also true of some “clean” animals. Another reason for forbidding their consumption may have been that pigs eat carrion. Some people are allergic to pork in hot weather, another suggested reason behind the Jewish taboo. The same taboo exists among the Muslims and existed in certain social strata in Egypt. [Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, “Pig,” *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1988), 110–111.]

³⁵*m* masculine

which the translation is being made may reflect a very different cultural attitude from that which occurs in the Scriptures. For example, in certain areas of New Guinea, one who is responsible for taking care of pigs is an individual with relatively high social status.

ῥς, ὑός ^{36f}: a female pig—'sow.' ῥς λουσαμένη εἰς κυλισμὸν βορβόρου 'a sow that has bathed herself only to roll in the mud again' 2 Pe 2:22.³⁷



Consequently, both dogs and pigs were convenient ways to express a very negative image to Jesus' audience. The 'everyday life' basis of the symbolical use of these two animals communicated dramatically Jesus' strong sense of disapproval of the actions linked to these two images.

Literary Aspects:

Although a very short verse, Matt. 7:6 contains a declaration that can be best understood only when the literary features are given proper consideration.

Literary Form:

The literary genre of this sentence is clearly that of a Saying of Jesus, i.e., *Logion Jesu*. The comparative nature of the expression gives its parabolic tones as a Sayings Parable in the teaching of Jesus. Donald Hagner notes:³⁸

This verse appears to be a detached independent logion apparently unrelated to the preceding (pace Guelich, Sermon; Davies-Allison) or following context, inserted here for no special reason but only as another saying of Jesus. It has the character of a proverb, which may have had a range of application. Although it is very obscure as it presently stands in Matthew, when Jesus first uttered these words he quite probably made clear what he meant by them. That explanatory material has not come down to us.

The significance of such classification is to stress that the meaning of the Logion literally is very broad, and consequently can have numerous applications. The warning against taking something valuable and giving it to a couple of despised animals is very clear as the foundational meaning.

Some commentators see a more precise genre of an ancient 'riddle' in the saying.³⁹ Such forms were common in ancient writings, and can be clearly found in the Bible as well.⁴⁰ Although the 'mysterious' tones contained in the saying excite curiosity about figuring out a meaning, this saying lacks a clear signal of being a riddle in the fashion typical in ancient writings. The parabolic nature of the saying is what gives it the 'hidden' tone of meaning, much as Jesus

The more precise meaning of such a saying then depends heavily upon the contextual setting used by the speaker and/or writer. Thus the Bible student must be careful to not lift the saying out of this specific context in which Matthew has placed it. Otherwise no clear meaning is possible for the saying. This reality is at the heart of the struggles of Bible students over the centuries to make proper sense of the saying. When commentators de-emphasize the context, they move toward an impossible goal of concluding meaning from the saying beyond the root meaning of the comparative expression. On the other side, when commentators fail to give correct weight to the literary setting, they easily draw wrong conclusions about the meaning. Methodologically one can't just 'deconstruct' the symbolical meanings of dogs, holy thing, pigs, and pearls and then arrive at the proper meaning of the saying.

^{36f}feminine

³⁷Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament : Based on Semantic Domains*, electronic ed. of the 2nd edition. (New York: United Bible societies, 1996).

³⁸Donald A. Hagner, vol. 33A, *Word Biblical Commentary : Matthew 1-13*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2002), 171.

³⁹1: a mystifying, misleading, or puzzling question posed as a problem to be solved or guessed : conundrum, enigma; 2: something or someone difficult to understand. Synonyms see mystery" ["riddle," *Merriam-Webster Online* dictionary]

⁴⁰"The literary genre of vs. 6 may be related to the riddle, but riddles are or imply questions to be figured out.¹ Its purpose is to let the hearer or reader guess what the meaning is.² More likely, vs. 6 is an esoteric saying that the uninformed will never be able to figure out. Finding the explanation is not a matter of natural intelligence but of initiation into secrets. The decision which option is before us depends on the context as well as on the content. Both context and content suggest that the saying conveys something serious; it is not one of the playful riddles that occur in wisdom literature, usually in the company of other such sayings. That vs. 6 is isolated and that its content involves some "sacred object" (τὸ ἅγιον) speaks in favor of some message of importance.³" [Hans Dieter Betz and Adela Yarbro Collins, *The Sermon on the Mount : A Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount, Including the Sermon on the Plain (Matthew 5:3-7:27 and Luke 6:20-49)*, Hermeneia--a critical and historical commentary on the Bible (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 496.]

Literary Setting:

Thus, determining a literary context for this saying plays a critical role in the interpretative process. The possibilities for understanding context include at least three considerations.

First, the connection to what precedes, i.e., verses 1-5. One tendency among commentators is to see verse 6 as a continuation of verses 1-5. Davies and Allison reflect this understanding:⁴¹

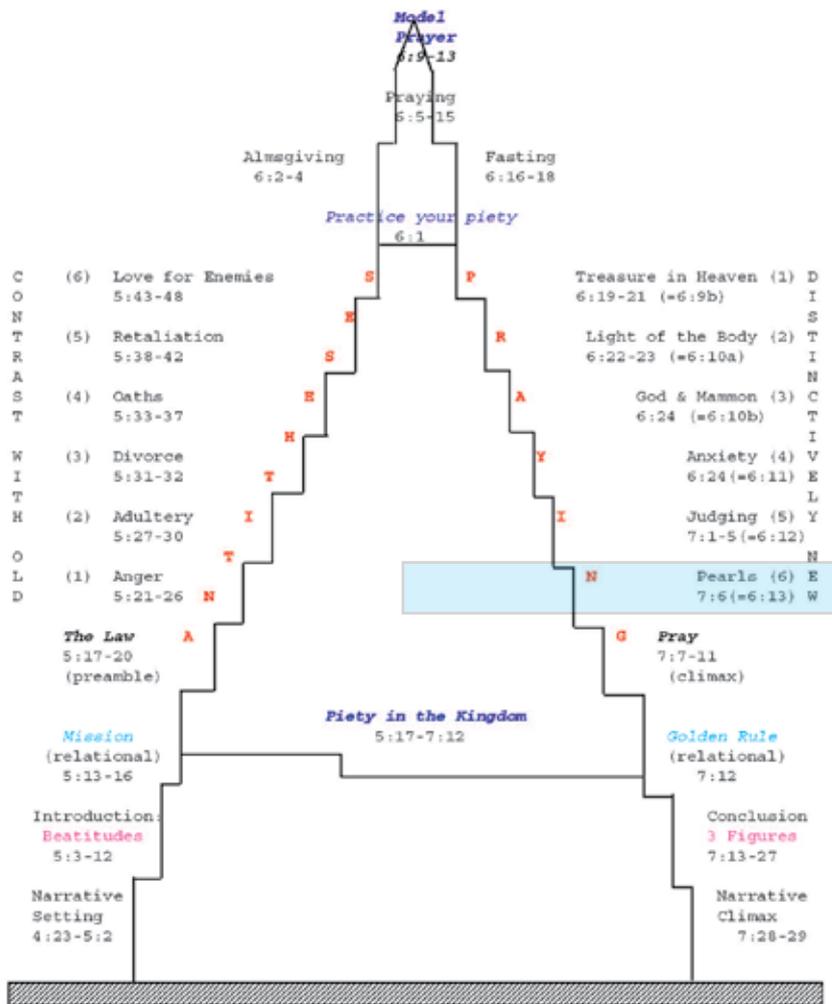
Having warned his audience about judging others, Matthew now adds ‘gemara’ in order to counteract an extreme interpretation of 7:1–5: if there must not be too much severity (vv. 1–5), there must at the same time not be too much laxity (v. 6). Our author is anticipating a problem and searching for a balance, for moral symmetry. The principles advanced in 7:1–5 are not to be abused. They do not eliminate the use of critical faculties when it comes to sacred concerns. One should not always throw the cloak over a brother’s faults. One must not be meekly charitable against all reason. Compare 2 Cor 6:14–18.

The problem with this approach is that it reflects a modern mind-set oriented away from critical expression, and particularly away from ‘judgmentalism.’ The appeal to 2 Cor. 6:14-18 as pointing the same direction is unconvincing.⁴²

What appears better is to see a continuation of emphasis found in 6:19-7:5, as the sixth pericope in a collection of sayings that generally demand unconditional commitment to God and to others in the pattern of the ‘vertical / horizontal’ religious relationships foundational to the Decalogue in the Old Testament, and that we have seen repeatedly surface thus far in the Sermon on the Mount. A destructive spirit of criticism toward our spiritual brothers and sisters is clearly ruinous to proper relationships. And a lack spiritual discernment about the things of God in our relationships with others is equally destructive to healthy connections. The two pericopes are not ‘antithetical,’ as Davies and Allison propose among others. Instead, they are complementary to one another.

Second, the connection to what follows, i.e., verses 7-11. Somewhat out of desperation, a few commentators link verse 6 to verses 7-11 in rejection of the link to verses 1-5. John Nolland would reflect one tendency this direction.⁴³ The pattern moves toward

The Literary Structure of the Sermon on the Mount
Matthew 4:23-7:29



Source: Lein L. Cranford, *Study Manual of the Sermon on the Mount: Greek Text* (Fort Worth: Scripta Publishing Inc., 1988), 320. Adapted from Guntor Bonikamm, "Der Aufbau der Bergpredigt," *New Testament Studies* 24 (1977-78): 419-432.

⁴¹W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (London; New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), 674

⁴²2 Cor. 6:11-18 (NRSV): "11 We have spoken frankly to you Corinthians; our heart is wide open to you. 12 There is no restriction in our affections, but only in yours. 13 In return — I speak as to children — open wide your hearts also. 14 Do not be mismatched with unbelievers. For what partnership is there between righteousness and lawlessness? Or what fellowship is there between light and darkness? 15 What agreement does Christ have with Beliar? Or what does a believer share with an unbeliever? 16 What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, 'I will live in them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. 17 Therefore come out from them, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch nothing unclean; then I will welcome you, 18 and I will be your father, and you shall be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty.'"

⁴³John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, in the *New International Greek Testament* Page 6 of Bergpredigt Study

the focus on God and prayer requests to Him in verses 7-11.

It seems to me that we have in 7:6 a fresh image for the challenge to make God our exclusive priority. In 6:19–20 the imagery was that of storing up treasure, in v. 24 it was that of having an exclusive master, but in 7:6 it is that of dispersing our resources (what we do with the holy and the valuable that we have available to us). In particular the rejected option is a use of our resources that is not focussed on God. An image of ‘spending’ now takes the place of an image of ‘hoarding’ (6:19–20) or an image of serving a master (v. 24) to make much the same point. There is the same assumption of a rejected middle ground as earlier. What is not directed towards God is seen to be as inappropriately dispersed as sacrificial flesh given to dogs or valuable pearls offered as pig feed. The pigs do not value the proffered pearls, and the dogs, stimulated by the taste and smell of raw meat, attack the giver in the hope of gaining more. The outcome here is probably the counterpart to the damage by moth and corrosion and the loss to thieves found earlier.

Nolland sees the emphasis as ‘vertical’ and not ‘horizontal,’ as do Davies and Allison. The catch word ‘give’ (δίδωμι) between 7:6 and 7:7 can be seen as a linking of the two pericopes. But this is not decisive. One appeal of this approach is to move away from understanding the saying in precise, specific terms. Rather, the saying sets forth a broad generalized principle of careful handling to the sacred. But to argue that the focus is on what we offer to God, rather than what we withhold from others, is a ‘argument from silence,’ (*argumentum ex silentio*) in the sense that the negative images of ‘dog’ and ‘pig’ are implying the positive image of God. The sense becomes ‘Don’t give it to dogs and pigs; instead, offer it to God.’ This line of reasoning has serious flaws, and doesn’t make a strong case for itself. The positive side of Nolland’s approach is to keep the larger focus on commitment to God, clearly in 6:19-7:11, center stage in the discussion.

Third, the connection to the Model Prayer, i.e., Mt. 6:13. As we have repeatedly argued in the last six studies, these six pericopes must be understood largely as Jesus’ commentary on the six petitions in the Model Prayer (Mt. 6:9-13). As such this final pericope in 7:6 stands as His commentary on the sixth petition in 6:13, as is reflected in the structural chart on the previous page.

“And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one.” (**Petition**)

Presupposes:

“Do not give what is holy to dogs; and do not throw your pearls before swine, or they will trample them under foot and turn and maul you.” (**Commentary**)

The advantage of this connection is that it argues also, as does Nolland, for a broader understanding of the meaning of the saying. As we turn to the world around us, spiritual discernment of what is genuinely sacred becomes paramount. Experience and observation over the years has demonstrated over and over to me that most Christians have little idea of the truly sacred. And that misconception of the sacred is rampant among supposed Christians. Deep spiritual discernment, the emphasis of the first three petitions (6:9-10) and commentaries (6:19-24), has been Jesus’ emphasis. Then, to balance that out with a clear understanding of physical needs and constructive relationships has followed in 6:11-12 and 6:25-7:5.

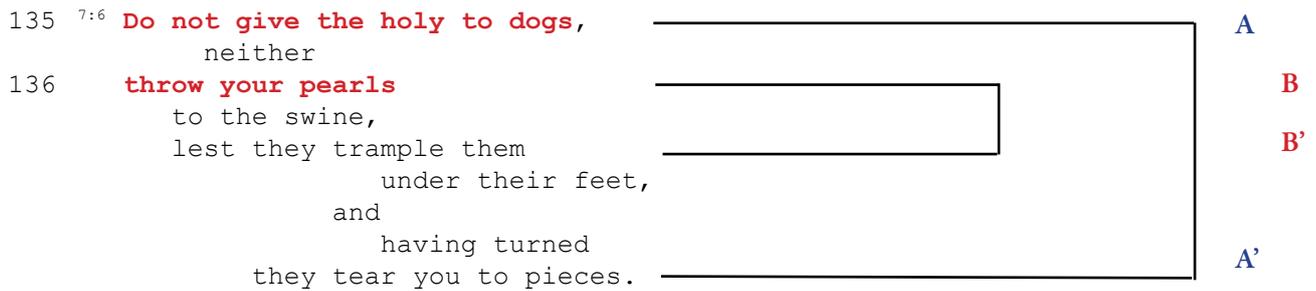
How then to properly handle and disperse the sacred becomes critical. Our prayer petition is for deliverance from the Devil’s blinding grip on our lives so that we have clear eyes to see correctly what is holy and what is unholy. Then in ministry and witness to the sacred we will be able to focus on genuinely sharing the authentically sacred with those prepared by God to receive it. Where we detect lack of openness to the sacred we will know how to follow the leadership of the Holy Spirit in offering the things of God to such individuals. To be certain, 7:6 has connection with 7:1-5 in the sense that knowing how to use the sacred properly is crucial to helping a wayward brother recover spiritual health. Otherwise, the ‘surgical removal of the splinter’ in the brother’s eye can result in disaster! Yet, spiritual discernment comes only with unconditional focus on God and the things of God.

This contextual perspective on 7:6 offers a better way of understanding the text.

Literary Structure:

The literary structure of this single sentence is at first clear, and then upon closer examination one realizes that it is more complex than it first appeared to be. The block diagram in English of the underlying Greek text of the passage helps to highlight the thought flow to a fair degree. From another angle of literary structural analysis, one realizes that an informal chiasmus is also present in the text. This helps identify

the verb subjects in the ‘they’ at the compound subordinate clause level in the ‘lest they...’ segment of the sentence.



Several issues need clarification in order to better understand this declaration. **First**, clearly the two core statements, #s 135 and 136 in **the bold red**, are in parallel to one another. Pearls compares to the holy; swine compare to dogs. But what is the nature of the parallels? Are they synonymous or synthetic? That is, do the second set of ‘pearls’ and ‘swine’ merely redefine the same thing as ‘the holy’ and ‘dogs’? Two possibilities exist. If they are taken as synonymous, then the two sets are taking about one central point. The interpretive task then is to identify this central point. But, if the parallelism is synthetic, sometimes labeled ‘step parallelism,’ then the second set refers to something different from the first. And this second meaning built on, or advances, the idea of the first set. The interpretive task then is to both identify the probable meaning of each set, and how they are connected to one another. In the course of two thousand years to study of this statements, both of these approaches have been taken by different students of the Bible -- and mostly without serious assessment of what is being assumed in each approach. The exegesis below will explore these matters and draw some conclusions.

Second, how should the twofold dependent clause⁴⁴ be understood? Primarily this has to do with the understood subjects of the two verbs, ‘trample’ (καταπατήσουσιν) and ‘tear’ (ρήξουσιν). In other words, do the hogs both trample and tear? Or, do the hogs trample and the dogs tear? Technically from the Greek grammar, either understanding is possible. The verb structures slightly favor a single subject for both verbs, i.e., the hogs. But the clearly differing direct objects of the verbs, ‘them’ and ‘you,’ opens the door for differing verb subjects. Added to that was the common literary depiction of swine as ignorant fools who would ‘trample’ their food in their greed, and of dogs as vicious wild animals who would turn on those who fed them in meanness. Increasingly, scholars have opted for different subjects of the two verbs.

The result of this approach is to see the statement as an informal chiasm in the AB:B’A’ pattern sketched out above. But less certain in the minds of modern scholars is whether this parallelism is synonymous or synthetic in nature. The dominant orientation currently is toward the synonymous view, but a considerable number see it as synthetic. The early tendency in the Patristic Era (100 - 800 AD) was the latter.

Exegesis of the Text:

The challenge of exegeting the text is to put the above pieces of the interpretive puzzle together in order to create a clear and understandable wholistic picture of meaning.

Holy things to snarling dogs, “Do not give what is holy to dogs... or they will...turn and maul you“ (Μὴ δῶτε τὸ ἅγιον τοῖς κυσίν...μήποτε...καὶ στραφέντες ρήξουσιν ὑμᾶς.).

The concept of ‘holy things’ comes from the Greek τὸ ἅγιον. The patterns of English translation usually go from “what is holy” to “that which is holy.”⁴⁵ The concept is simply a designation of something considered holy. In the Jewish background of the LXX of the Old Testament, this Greek expression was used to refer to meat that had been offered in sacrifice on the temple altar.⁴⁶ Inside the Greek New

⁴⁴NRSV: “or they will trample them under foot and turn and maul you”; GNT: μήποτε καταπατήσουσιν αὐτοὺς ἐν τοῖς ποσίν αὐτῶν καὶ στραφέντες ρήξουσιν ὑμᾶς.

⁴⁵“what is holy”: GWD, NASB, NLT, NRSV, CJB, ESV, GNB, CSB, NKJV, RSV; “that which is holy”: KJV, ASV, BBE, RHE, HNV, DBY, WBT, TMB, WEB, YLT; “holy things”: NCV, NIRV; “what is sacred”: NIV, TNIV. In German: “das Heilige”: ELB; “das Heiligtum”: LB. See Bible Study Tools for listing.

⁴⁶“Surely the latter.” ‘Do not give that which is holy to dogs’ takes up for a novel end a known rule (cf. *m Tem.* 6:5; *b Bek.* 15a; *b Pesah.* 29a; *b Šebu.* 11 b; *b Tem.* 117a, 130b) in which τὸ ἅγιον means sacrificial meat or leaven (cf. Exod 29:33; Lev

Testament the neuter form of the adjective refers to things or objects that are considered holy or sacred.⁴⁷ In subsequent use of this expression in the Patristic Era, the term, along with this saying, was often applied to the Eucharist.⁴⁸ The ‘dogs’ were either unbaptized Gentiles or pagans. In more recent times, the tendency has drifted toward the holy thing being understood as the Gospel and the ‘dogs’ as the hard-hearted individuals who vigorously reject the offer of salvation in Christ.

But if τὸ ἅγιον remains simply a general designation of what is holy and sacred, it will fit the context more smoothly. Specific identifications of τὸ ἅγιον as the Lord’s Supper or the Gospel create artificial problems that can be easily avoided by keeping the understood meaning broad and more general.

The dogs, although sometimes a reference to Gentiles from a Jewish perspective, symbolized individuals without understanding or appreciation of genuine spiritual realities.⁴⁹ Similarly, if the reference here remains broad, designating individuals who lack spiritual sensitivities, then the meaning of this segment is easier to grasp. The Aorist imperative verb Μὴ δῶτε stresses emphatically the warning against having dealings with such people. The negative purpose clause, ‘less they turn and maul you,’ alludes to a possible vigorous negative reaction to the believer’s efforts to present the holy to them.

Craig Blomberg offers an intriguing application to modern times:⁵⁰

Both “dogs” and “pigs” were regularly used as pejorative epithets for Gentiles within ancient Judaism. Jesus is using the terms equally pejoratively but in the more general sense of those who are ungodly (cf. 2 Pet 2:22 for the same combination). Certainly for him these would include those who heaped scorn upon his message, which ironically occurred most commonly among his fellow Jews and among the more conservative religious teachers and leaders (cf. Ps 22:16).⁵¹ The number of parallels in modern Christianity to this phenomenon remain frightening. Jesus is obviously not telling his followers not to preach to certain kinds of people, but he does recognize that after sustained rejection and reproach, it is appropriate to move on to others (cf. Paul’s regular practice in Acts—e.g., 13:46; 18:6; 19:9). Bruner’s additional applications prove equally incisive:

There is a form of evangelism that urges Christians to use every opportunity to share the gospel. Unfortunately, insensitive evangelism often proves harmful not only to the obdurate whose heart is hardened by the undifferentiating evangelist, but harmful also to the gospel that is force-fed.... Aggressive evangelism gets converts and counts them, but we are never able to count those turned away from the gospel for the numbers of the offended are never tallied.

2:3; 22:6, 7, 10–16; Num 18:8–19).” [W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (London; New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), 675.]

⁴⁷2. used as a pure subst: the holy (thing, pers)

a. ἅγιον, ου, τό that which is holy

α. concrete sacrificial meat (Lev 22:14.—Also concr θύειν τὸ ἱερόν: 67th letter of Apollon. of Ty. [Philostrat. I 363, 30 K.]) μὴ δῶτε τὸ ἅ. τοῖς κυσίν Mt 7:6; cp. ^p 9:5. Cp. 1Q^s 9:17.

β. sanctuary (OG¹ 56, 59 [239 B.C.]; UP^z 119, 12 [156 B.C.]; Num 3:38; Ezk 45:18; 1 Esdr 1:5 v.l.; 1 Macc 10:42; Phil^o, Leg. All. 3, 125; Jos., Ant. 3, 125) τὸ ἅ. κοσμικόν Hb 9:1.

[William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker and Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 11.]

⁴⁸“In this case, the Didache (9:5) would maintain the right spirit of Mt 7:6: those who have not been baptized into the name of the Lord should not receive the Eucharist, for that would be to give that which is holy to dogs (so also Tertullian, Cyril of Jerusalem, Jerome, and many other Fathers).” [W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (London; New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), 679]

⁴⁹“1. This word, meaning “dog,” is mostly used disparagingly in the OT for despicable street dogs (cf. 1 Sam. 17:43; 2 Kgs. 8:13; 1 Kgs. 14:11; Ps. 22:16, 20; Prov. 26:11). The rabbis display similar contempt for dogs when they compare the ungodly or Gentiles to them.

“2. What distinguishes Israel is possession of the law, which is not to be given to the unclean. Jesus takes up this thought in Mt. 7:6. In view of the majesty of the gospel the disciples must not address it to the wrong people, i.e., where they cannot break through opposition in their own strength. The cultic form of the saying suggests an application in worship too. In Lk. 16:19ff. the licking of the sores of Lazarus by dogs describes the supreme wretchedness of his position.

“3. Paul’s warning in Phil. 3:2 has a sharp edge. He is perhaps referring Mt. 7:6 to those who disturb the community, or thinking of the hostility of his opponents in reminiscence of Ps. 22 or Ps. 59:6–7. 2 Pet. 2:22 takes up Prov. 26:11 to describe believers who fall back into sin. The influence of the OT may also be seen in Rev. 22:15 with its exclusion of dogs from the holy city, i.e., those who reject the truth and are hardened against grace (cf. Ignatius *Ephesians* 7.1).” [Gerhard Kittel, Gerhard Friedrich and Geoffrey William Bromiley, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1995), 494–495.]

⁵⁰Craig Blomberg, vol. 22, *Matthew*, electronic ed., Logos Library System; The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001), 128.

⁵¹Cf. Gundry, *Matthew*, 122–23, who takes the animals as referring to those from among God’s people who turn on the righteous in persecution.

Pearls to trampling hogs, “and do not throw your pearls before swine, or they will trample them under foot” (μηδὲ βάλητε τοὺς μαργαρίτας ὑμῶν ἔμπροσθεν τῶν χοίρων, μήποτε καταπατήσουσιν αὐτοὺς ἐν τοῖς ποσὶν αὐτῶν).

The question of whether this segment means the same thing as the first one or moves the idea forward to a new designation must be settled first. If it refers to different realities, then some identification of these must be made, along with an explanation of a meaningful connection between the two strophes. Clearly ‘pearls’ (τοὺς μαργαρίτας) refers to something highly prized as having value.⁵² If ‘pearls’ represents something different from ‘the holy,’ then what it might be must be identified clearly and persuasively. Only occasionally have efforts been attempted here.⁵³ Overwhelmingly the interpretive history illustrates the assumption of synonymous parallelism where dogs and pigs designate the same individuals, and the holy and pearls refer to the same spiritual realities. The action of trampling on the pearls signals defeat and disdain, thus reflecting the ignorance of the hogs about the food supplied to them.

In my opinion, the synonymous parallelism is the better understanding. The symbolical meanings of the four terms, dogs, hogs, the holy and pearls, should be kept broad and general, rather than precise and detailed. The general thrust of the saying is then for believers to have a clear sense of spiritual reality and then to wisely invest that insight into the lives of those whom God has opened up to receive this wisdom. The harsh reality is that many people, not just outside the church, are unprepared and/or unwilling to receive the truths of God and to embrace authentic spiritual living. Until God is able to work in their lives to break them open, we best spend our time and energy focusing on those who are ready to embrace the presence of God fully into their lives. Having spiritual discernment sufficient to know when and how to do this is a major part of our petition for God to deliver us from the blinding power of Satan. God help us pray this prayer meaningfully!

2. What does the text mean to us today?

- a) How sensitive are you to the things of God?

- b) How alert are you to the spiritual sensitivities of people around you?

- c) Do you consistently seek God’s leadership to share spiritual things with those ready to receive God into their lives?

- d) How much time do you spend praying for God to open up the hearts of people to receive the Gospel?

⁵²“Pearls, because of their great value (cf. T. Jud. 13:5; Mt 13:45–6; 1 Tim 2:9; b B. Bat. 75a), came to be metaphorically used for something of supreme worth, especially of fine wisdom, excellent sayings, or precious teaching: ARN 18; b Hag. 3a; b Ber. 33b; b Yeb. 94a; b Qidd. 39b (cf. Gregory Nazianzus, Orat. 28:2; the Revelation of John the Theologian, end (in AN^F 8, p. 586)).” [W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (London; New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), 675.]

⁵³“Later Christian texts identify the dogs with pagans, and the swine with heretics (for a collection of passages see Hans-Jürgen Loth, “Hund,” RAC 16 [1993] 810–14), or the dogs with lapsed sinners, and the swine with unbelievers. This process of identifying the animals with rejected adversaries begins in the NT itself. See Mark 5:1–20* par.; Luke 15:15–16*; 2 Pet 2:22*; Did. 9:5; Gos. Thom. log. 93; Ps.-Clem. Hom. 1.12.3; 2.19.2, 3; 4.21.4; 10.6.2; 19.14.4; etc. See BAGD, s.v. ὄς and χοῖρος; EWNT (EDNT) 3, s.v. χοῖρος; Franz Annen, *Heil für die Heiden: Zur Bedeutung und Geschichte der Tradition vom besessenen Gerasener (Mk 5, 1–20 parr.)* (Frankfurter Theologische Studien 20; Frankfurt: Knecht, 1976) 1262–73.” [Hans Dieter Betz and Adela Yarbro Collins, *The Sermon on the Mount : A Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount, Including the Sermon on the Plain (Matthew 5:3–7:27 and Luke 6:20–49)*, Hermeneia—a critical and historical commentary on the Bible (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 497.]