

## Day 1

March 9



*Pray | For the Spirit's conviction when judging others hypocritically*

### A Critical Spirit

Her name was Mimi. She had perfected the art of the backhanded insult, with comments so subtle that often it took a few minutes to realize you'd been measured and found wanting. You probably know someone like her: easily finding fault in others, pointing out the negatives—a critical spirit. One of those personalities that we kindly call 'challenging.' Most responses to Mimi's comments included a tight-lipped 'Hmmm' and a barely restrained eye roll. As soon as she was out of hearing, though, there would be plenty of 'justified' negative commentary about her character. Interestingly, not one of us had any long conversations with Mimi about her life, her past, or her story. No one was interested in getting to know her better, and none of us could see the hypocrisy in our character assassination. Did Mimi have a critical spirit? Or did we all?



*Read | Matthew 7:1-5; James 4:11-12*



*Reflect | Spend some time reflecting on one or more of the following:*

The verses you just read from Matthew and James were written specifically to Christians about their relationships with other Christians; to deal with our tendency to become self-righteous in pointing out the sins of other believers. It's much easier for us to see the sin in others than in ourselves. Why do you think this is the case? How have you seen this happen in your own life?

Today's verses easily apply to all of our relationships even though the words were spoken specifically to believers' interactions with other believers. Closely examining our own sin, rather than being quick to criticize another's, can radically change our most challenging relationships. Beloved, will you try it this week? Before saying that word of criticism or judgement to your spouse, your parent, your sibling, your co-worker—will you stop and pray, sincerely confessing your own sin first? You may find yourself amazed at what God will do with your heartfelt prayers!

The word 'hypocrite' in Matthew 7:5 is used only in the gospels and only from the lips of Jesus. Take some time to think about all the aspects of a person you would need to know and understand in order to judge them a hypocrite. Why is Jesus the only one who uses this word? Why should we be thankful that Jesus alone has the authority to judge us?

## Day 2

March 10



*Pray | To be filled with grace for others in their battle with sin*

### Eye Surgery

Doctors in ancient Rome performed cataract surgery by inserting a needle into the eye and wiggling it around to break up the cataract, then whacking the patient repeatedly on the back of the head to help extract the pieces. Of course, all of this was done with no anesthetic and it often resulted in partial or total blindness. If the thought of Lasik makes you feel queasy, how do you feel about ancient cataract surgery? All of us are naturally protective of our eyes. Try moving your finger towards someone's eyeball and watch how quickly they trip over their feet to get away from you. Getting poked in the eye is painful! That's why we're careful about who gets near our eyes; it has to be someone that we trust, and we need to know they mean us no harm. Maybe that's part of the reason why Jesus used our eyes as a metaphor in Matthew 7—we're as sensitive about our eyes as we are about our sin.



*Read | Matthew 7:1-5; Galatians 6:1-6*



*Reflect | Spend some time reflecting on one or more of the following:*

Look again at Matthew 7:5. The second half of this verse refers to a believer seeing the sin in a fellow believer's life and 'removing' it. Think about this in the context of today's introduction and the eye metaphor—our sensitivity, the pain of eye surgery, who we allow to get close to our eyes. What does all of this say about the way we should approach our brothers and sisters in Christ about their sin?

It's only after a straightforward command and a shocking plank-in-the-eye visual about dealing first with our own sin that Jesus says a few words about dealing with the sin of fellow believers. In Galatians, Paul implores us to do it 'gently.' Why are Jesus and Paul so cautious when bringing up the subject of believers calling out the sins of other believers? How well do you think the Church handles this subject in today's world?

Given the careful way that Jesus and Paul speak about pointing out the sin of fellow Christians, when is it right and appropriate for us to do this? Consider that there may not be a clear answer; and if so, think about ways you could seek wisdom about a specific situation. How would you pray; whom would you ask for help; where would you look in Scripture?

## Day 3

March 11



*Pray | For God to provide you with wise discernment*

Dogs and pigs?

These days we treat our dogs like kids with paws. We buy them clothing, toys, special treats—you can even purchase a doggie high chair! Americans also have a history of turning pigs into pets. In the late 1980s, potbelly pigs became all the rage; they were given fancy collars and trained to use litterboxes. Even today there are websites devoted to pig ‘enrichment’ toys. While we might see this pet adoration as somewhat normal, the ancient Jews would have been horrified. Dogs and pigs in those days were not domesticated and were sometimes vicious; the Jewish people viewed them as ritually unclean. So, when Jesus refers to dogs and pigs in Matthew 7:6, what is he saying? While scholars vary somewhat in their interpretation of this verse, all would agree that Jesus is calling us to use wise discernment in our interactions with others.



*Read | Matthew 7:6; 2 Peter 2:1-3, 12*



*Reflect | Spend some time reflecting on one or more of the following:*

One view of Matthew 7:6 is that we should discern whether a person is so viciously opposed to the gospel that we shouldn’t speak of it to them. How would you make that sort of judgement about a person, keeping in mind that sometimes the least likely person you could imagine ends up accepting Jesus?

We often encounter people who are just not ready to understand the gospel. They may have objections or questions or have had negative experiences with Christians in the past. This, too, requires our discernment. What can you do when you encounter a person who isn’t ready?

Today’s verses from 2 Peter talk about discernment of false teachers. Peter uses strong language, even comparing false teachers to animals. Why do you think Peter takes such an aggressive stance on false teaching in the Church? How can we guard against false teaching in the Church?

*Day 4*  
*March 12*



*Pray* | *With faith that God will answer you*

Approach with Expectation

Alex and Stephen Kendrick are best known for producing films such as *Facing the Giants*, *Fireproof*, *Courageous*, *War Room*, and most recently, *Overcomer*. Both of the brothers are ordained ministers, as was their father. One of the Kendrick brothers came to Five Oaks a few years back to speak on the topic of prayer. He told story after story of God's generous answers to the specific prayers of his family and members of their church. For the Kendrick's, there is no question that God answers the prayers of the faithful—they have seen it happen over and over again. They have learned to approach God with the expectation to receive because they know God has promised that he will respond.



*Read* | *Matthew 7:7-8; James 1:5-8*



*Reflect* | *Spend some time reflecting on one or more of the following:*

The Greek words for ask, seek, and knock used in Matthew 7:7-8 imply a continual action, essentially telling us to keep on asking, keep on seeking, and keep on knocking. How does this change your understanding or perspective on these verses?

In today's verses, both Jesus and James are addressing believers. The assumption is that the prayers are coming from people whose hearts are submitted to God's will and who believe that God will answer, and it's okay if you're not quite to this point in your faith journey! Keep talking with God and ask him, persistently and sincerely, to increase your belief and to help you to fully submit to him.

Prayer can be frustrating! We all experience times when it feels as though God is not listening to our prayers. How can you remain faithful in prayer during these difficult periods? If this is a current struggle for you, try looking up encouraging Bible verses about prayer and posting them in your car or on your bathroom mirror. God's words are powerful; meditate on these verses and allow the Holy Spirit to bring them to life in you!

*Day 5*  
*March 13*



*Pray / Praise God for not providing everything you ask him for*

You Get What You Need

Modern-day poets Keith Richards and Mick Jagger spoke truth to the world when they wrote: “You can’t always get what you want. But if you try, sometimes you just might find you get what you need.”<sup>1</sup> Often, what we want is really not what we need. It’s not what would be best for us. Children provide us the best demonstrations of what this concept means. When kids want cake and ice cream for breakfast, a wise parent gives them oatmeal or eggs. When kids want to stay up late, the wise adult puts them in bed at a reasonable time, knowing that kids need plenty of sleep. In a much deeper, wiser, and mysterious way, God knows when to say ‘no’ to the things we ask for in prayer. He knows when these things are not what we really need.



*Read | Matthew 7:7-12; James 4:3*



*Reflect | Spend some time reflecting on one or more of the following:*

Jesus’ rhetorical questions in Matthew 7:9-10 assure us that he gives us good gifts and imply that if we were to ask for a snake—meaning something that would be harmful—he would not give it to us. Have you ever prayed for something that you later realized would have been harmful? If so, take some time to praise God for his wisdom!

Even if we’re praying for something that we believe is for our good, God may say ‘no’ because we’re asking with, as James puts it, ‘wrong motives.’ Think back on your recent prayers and spend time in self-examination. Are there any hidden, selfish motives to your prayers? If so, confess this to God.

A short devotional cannot even come close to covering all that the Bible says about prayer. If you have questions, are struggling, or want to learn more about Biblical prayer, any of the pastors on staff at Five Oaks Church would love to help you— please seek them out. And in the meantime, be encouraged to keep talking with God. He longs to hear your voice!

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<sup>1</sup>You Can’t Always Get What You Want, Lyrics: Keith Richards and Mick Jagger