

“The Pig & The Pearl”

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Hey! I want to say hi to everybody at all of our campuses, people joining us online. Listen to these amazing words from Jesus, who said, ***"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."***

So in this passage we see some people are swine. Some people (unlike you, with your spiritual sensitivity) are evil. They cannot appreciate what is sacred and holy. It's like they have some kind of a spiritual disability. You, on the other hand, have pearls: pearls of wisdom, pearls of truth, pearls of good advice, pearls that could straighten people out if only they would receive them, but they're just spiritual clods, like people of other religions or secularists. So you should not waste your time on such people. They are not worthy.

That's what Jesus is saying, right? I actually took those words from a quite typical sermon on this passage, from the Sermon on the Mount. Doesn't that kind of seem not really Jesus-y? This business about pearls and pigs is one of his most intriguing sayings, and it's one people have often been quite unsure what they ought to do with.

A group of little children was once asked to interpret, "What does this saying mean, 'Don't cast your pearls before swine'?" Jacob (age 6) said, "I would never give my sister my toys." Is that what Jesus had in mind? "My toys are my pearls, and my sister is the swine." One time I was going through a door with a very quick-witted friend who was older than I was. I motioned for him to go first and said, "Age before beauty." He went first and said, "Pearls before swine."

Now here is the problem with the, "Some people are unworthy swine who you should not help" interpretation. According to the Bible, quite consistently who is in the sinful, wicked, fallen, broken, ***"All we like sheep have gone astray..."*** messed-up people category? Well, that would be everybody, starting with you and me. Now if Jesus is the great treasure, the pearl of heaven, then he should never have been cast into the midst of us, because we're all in the messed-up people category.

Yet Jesus actually said it was precisely for the messed-up, sinful, wicked people that he came. He said, ***"It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."*** Jesus did not teach that we shouldn't do good things for people who might reject or misuse them. He, in fact, taught precisely the opposite. ***"...love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good..."***

So let's be very clear. Jesus is not saying here that certain classes of people are to be viewed as pigs or dogs that are unworthy of our great pearls. Nobody ever taught or modeled the worth and dignity of every

human being and the universal command to love all people with the depth, clarity, and urgency of Jesus Christ.

See, the problem with giving a pearl to a pig is not that the pig isn't worthy. The problem is a pearl is not a helpful thing to give to a pig. Very few pigs wear pearls (one or two, but not many). Jesus is actually getting to a much deeper problem in human relationships with wisdom that could save your friendships, your marriage, or your relationship with your kids. Sometimes the pearl you know you have that is so wonderful that you want so badly to give will not be wanted and will not be helpful. In that case, you shouldn't try to force it on somebody.

True story. We actually got a pearl necklace for one of our kids one time. It was a major milestone birthday. There had been a lot of difficult challenges in their life, and we thought this could be a really meaningful gift. As a parent, you get your hopes up. You imagine this deep Hallmark moment when your child is filled with teary-eyed gratitude.

We had the dinner, just the three of us at the table, and they opened the box. You could just tell it was the wrong gift. It was not wanted. You could tell by the look on our child's face, and Nancy asked, "Johnny, are they the wrong color?" Actually, it was not Johnny. It was another one of our kids, but it's a true story.

See, a pearl does not nourish a pig, and nourishment is what the pig is looking for. What will help a pig is food. If you put a bunch of slop in the trough, you'll have a happy, healthy pig. If you keep putting pearls in the trough, you will not have a happy pig. You will have a resentful pig. You might think, "You ungrateful pig, look at all the pearls you've been given!" That won't help at all.

Eventually, the pigs will turn and take a bite out of you. Why? Well, because they're hungry, and you at least are edible. It's the same with a dog. We love our dog, Baxter, but if we give him what is sacred (a New Testament, a Jesus bumper sticker, or some rosary beads), he would do with them the only thing Baxter knows how to do with something. That is, try to eat it.

We actually got a big nativity scene one year when Baxter was a puppy, and he ate a wise man. He just ate him! We could put up with that. He ate a sheep. We could put up with that. Then he started to eat the baby Jesus in the manger. That just seemed like that was, you know, way over the edge. Our main command to him that Christmas was, "Baxter, stay away from Jesus." Do not give what is sacred to a dog, not because the dog is unworthy but because it won't help the dog.

Now this is something important for all of us to understand. When you study the Bible, you always want to keep in mind the larger context of the passage at which you're looking. In Matthew 7 (we've been looking at this week-by-week), Jesus is talking about wrong ways of relating to people to which religious folks are particularly prone.

Two weeks ago (you can go online if you didn't catch this message), we saw where Jesus said, "Do not judge. Thou shalt not judge." He warns people against condemnation engineering. Then last week, we saw where Jesus said, "Don't point out the speck in your brother or sister's eye when there is a plank in your own." He warns people against criticizing and blaming. We gave everybody a plank so you could remember this.

Now he says, ***"Do not throw your pearls to pigs."*** He is still talking about wrong ways religious people relate to others. Some of you are wondering, "Does this mean we get a pearl to remind us of this sermon?"

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No. A pig, maybe. Jesus is forbidding the practice of what we might call "pearl pushing." This is when you're trying to push your pearls (your wisdom, your will, your way, your superior knowledge) onto another person, even when they don't want it, even when it's not being helpful.

Now if you've been through the Bible a few times, you might wonder, "But doesn't *pearl* in the Bible always mean something of great value to Jesus?" Like when he talks about the kingdom of heaven we're studying these days as a *pearl of great price*. You should know Jesus, like any other good communicator, often uses images quite flexibly.

Like one time he describes the kingdom of heaven being like yeast because of its amazing growth, but another time he says, "Beware the yeast of the scribes or the Pharisees." There yeast is a negative thing. So Jesus here is teaching with unforgettable humor, and you have to put "pearl" and "pig" in air quotes. Pearl pushers just drift into the habit of criticizing more naturally than encouraging. That's what a pearl pusher does.

The apostle Paul says, "***Let us therefore stop turning critical eyes on one another.***" That's what pearl pushers do. Pearl pushers take it upon themselves to correct everybody else because what they notice is where other people are wrong. Somebody said there are only two kinds of drivers in the world. You may have noticed this.

There are *maniacs* who drive faster than I do and *idiots* who drive slower than I do. "Look at that maniac going so fast. You idiot! Why don't you move?" If you look for flaws, you will find flaws. I'll guarantee you! If you search for faults, you will be successful. You'll go through life wondering, "Why don't people seem to want to be around me?" Pearl pushing is a lonely way to live. Pearl pushers tend to adopt a tone of superiority.

The pig generally notices this. Pigs have pretty sensitive radar. So the teaching here is if the pig isn't ready for your pearl, don't push your pearl. Part of love is not just knowing what to say; it's knowing *when* to say it and (maybe more importantly) knowing when to *not* say it. This is from the book of Proverbs. "***If anyone loudly blesses their neighbor early in the morning, it will be taken as a curse.***" The pig wants to sleep!

Now the pearl might be genuinely good wisdom. Maybe the pearl is the gospel about Jesus itself. I think of a woman I know, and she really loved Jesus. That's a good thing. She wanted her husband to love Jesus. That's a good thing. She had this spiritual pearl she wanted to give him so much, but she kept trying to force the pearl on him.

She would tell him, "Read this spiritual book. Listen to this godly podcast. Consider these five proofs that God exists." She would constantly remind him, "I'm praying for you." Sometimes she would pray at the dinner table while her husband is sitting there and the food is getting cold for Jesus to save her husband. "Have another pearl. Have another pearl!" The pig was not happy about this.

When it comes to telling other people about your faith... You know, we're headed toward the Easter season, when folks might be open to exploring God, might be open to coming to church. It could be such a great time to talk with folks, but one of the most important tips you can follow is obeying the law of supply and demand. In other words, monitor what the level of demand for spiritual conversation is coming from the other person. Are they asking questions about God? Are they wanting to know what your story is?

You adjust your level of supply (how long you go on talking about spiritual matters) to be commensurate to their level of demand (what they are asking for). If the other person is not looking at you anymore; if they're not nodding their head, asking questions, or making listening sounds; if they're leaning backward, stop talking. You have violated the law of supply and demand. Stop pushing the pearl and start watching the pig.

Pearl pushing can happen in a marriage. It can happen in a workplace. It can happen between friends. It can happen in a church. But the place where, in my humble opinion, pearl pushing is most likely to happen and most likely to do damage is between parents and children. Parental pearl pushing is a major source of alienation in families.

When our children were born, I was just overwhelmed by the thought that we needed to watch over every part of their lives, every moment. We controlled when they ate, when they slept, what they wore, where they went, who they saw, what they heard. We could mess them up! That's a very heavy weight when you become a parent. I think there's only one thing harder than being in control of your child's life. Do you know what it is? *Not* being in control of your child's life.

We live with pressure, expectations, worry, hopes, love, and ego all mixed up together. That's just the truth for those of us who are parents. True story. One mom who had tried really hard to get her daughter into her top choice school so she could have a great life said this: "My daughter didn't get in. I'm worried about what this means for her future." That's understandable, but her daughter was 3 years old.

Inflated expectations and pressure can lead to pearl pushing. "Sit up straight. Clean your room better. Get your homework done. Did you get your homework done? I don't think your model nuclear reactor is good enough to get an A, so I guess I'll have to do it for you. Why aren't you more like...? Why can't you...? Why won't you...? Why do you disappoint me?"

You may not say those questions out loud, but the pigs have really sensitive radar. Everybody here had parents. Question: *How many of you really wish your parents had given you more lectures when you were growing up?* Just, "I wish I would have gotten one more talk about..." So often, our kids know exactly what I'm going to say way before I even say it.

Now the point of Jesus' teaching here on the pearl and the pig is not, "Don't confront." It's not, "Don't set boundaries." It's not, "Don't enforce consequences." We all need to do that, and it's part of a parent's job. Jesus' point is don't force your wisdom on a non-receptive person. You cannot control any other human being. They have their kingdom. It's not your kingdom. You cannot make sure any human being turns out right. You have to let go. You have to make space for God.

God is the only one who can enter into their little kingdom at the deepest level. In particular, for those of us who love God and who follow Jesus...I know, I know, I know...what we want more than we want anything else for our children is for them to love, know, and follow God as well. I know there is maybe nothing more painful for a parent than to know the greatest treasure of their life is unwanted by their child.

I was talking to a man I know who had a child kind of late in life. He said his prayer was, "God, do not give me a child unless that child will be a lifelong Christian." He wanted a divine guarantee that he would have a no-risk child when it came to faith. "I don't want the pain of having to love a child who does not hold faith as I do." That's what he was saying.

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I'm not sure I would want to be that man's child. I'm not sure I'd want to carry that kind of weight because God made everybody to be free to choose. God makes people. God makes people free, even at the cost of great pain to God himself. Think about this. God loves people, even when they use their God-given freedom to reject God. He makes the sun to shine, causes the rain to fall on people who love him and people who shake their fist in his face.

Now this is why in a spiritually flourishing church, everybody (not just parents...*everybody*) owns helping our children, our students, grow up rooted in faith, in God, in life, and in love. Let me make this really personal for a moment because this is very important to our church. Some of our staff leaders were telling me often in churches there will be a goal when it comes to caring for kids of a five to one ratio. In other words, the church will want to have one volunteer leader for every five students or every five children.

That's a good thing. However, people who do research about faith development say you really need to flip that ratio. They say the biggest predictor of a child remaining committed to God when they grow up is having a multi-generational team, family, group who is pouring into them. So if you're a parent, what you really want is a team of five adults who will want to enhance your one child's faith development.

That team could include like a grandparent, aunts, uncles, volunteer ministry leaders. Maybe it's somebody with whom you go on a mission trip. Maybe it includes somebody who is in your Life Group with you or the parent of one of your kid's friends. It's a weird thing about children. I don't fully understand this, but I have seen it firsthand. There will come a time when they don't want your pearls anymore, as great as your pearls are, but they'll want somebody else's pearls.

Tony Dungy was a famous Super Bowl-winning NFL coach. His son was going to high school, playing on the football team. He was expending a lot of energy doing that, but all he would eat for breakfast was a Pop-Tart. I love Pop-Tarts, but they're not like the greatest nutrition in the world. Tony told his son about the science of nutrition, training, and how he needed a bigger breakfast. "This is nothing." He is getting this from an NFL Super Bowl-winning coach. He doesn't respond at all.

One day Tony came downstairs, and his son was fixing this great breakfast: eggs, bacon, oatmeal, fruit. Tony was so glad his pearl had gotten through, so he couldn't resist commenting to his son, "Hey, you're fueling up today, buddy." His son said, "Yeah, my coach said I needed a bigger breakfast." His dad is a Super Bowl-winning NFL rock star, but he's dad, so the pig doesn't want that pearl.

You know, we all own together helping to pass the torch of faith to the next generation. I just want to say as a pastor, I am so grateful for every single one of you, every person who volunteers your time, your energy, and your heart to love our children, to love our students, to pour into them, to help them come to know the love of God.

Gang, there was a parent at one of our campuses who was interested in learning more about our church after she heard when she was picking her kids up from school a little kid loudly telling all their friends how cool it is, how much fun they have at Menlo Kids. This parent had never been to a church, and she was so fired up about hearing her kid say this, she tracked down one of our leaders, started talking about God and church, and finally asked, "Could I come to one of the Sunday morning services for adults, and how much extra would I have to pay?"

Actually, you don't have to pay anything at all! The leader sent this parent a link to a message from Menlo from one of our services. The message was 27 minutes long. Twenty-eight minutes later came back an email, "I can't wait for next Sunday to be able to learn more about God." If you're a parent, you love your child, they're all grown up, and they are far from faith and far from God, know this. You still get to love them. No matter what, you can will, work for, and pray for their good.

Their story is not over, and God loves your child more than you do. God's heart breaks over your child more than your heart breaks, so you can release your child into the hand and the care of God. I say this too to all of you who are parents. You are responsible *to* your child; you are not responsible *for* your child. That is a burden you cannot carry. "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change." This is one of the things pearl pushers have to learn.

There's a story about what can happen when you stop looking with a critical eye, when you stop trying to force your wonderful pearls all the time. It was written quite long ago. It's a story of fiction. I want to tell it to you, and then I want to tell you the story that's behind the story. It's a story about a fifth grade teacher named Mrs. Thompson and a fifth grade boy she did not like. His name was Teddy Stallard.

Teddy did not play well with other children, and his clothes were kind of a mess. He was just unpleasant to be around, kind of disruptive, kind of uncooperative. It got to the point where she kind of took delight in putting a lot of red ink on his papers so he knew he wasn't doing well. That kind of made her feel good. It wasn't until halfway through the year when she was reviewing his files that she learned his story. Everybody has a story. *Everybody* has a story!

Teddy's first grade teacher wrote, "Teddy is a bright child with a ready laugh. He is a joy to be around." His second grade teacher wrote, "Teddy is an excellent student, well-liked by his classmates, but he is troubled because his mother is very ill. Life at home must be a struggle." His third grade teacher wrote, "Teddy's mother's death has been hard on him. He tries to do his best, but his father doesn't show much interest."

Teddy's fourth grade teacher wrote, "Teddy is withdrawn, does not show much interest in school." By now, Mrs. Thompson realized the problem, and she was ashamed of herself. She felt even worse when her students brought her Christmas presents wrapped in beautiful ribbons and bright, shiny paper, except for Teddy's. Teddy brought her a present, but it was quite clumsily wrapped in the heavy, brown paper he got from ripping up an old grocery bag.

Mrs. Thompson was quite careful to open it in the middle of the other presents. Some of the children started to laugh when she found an old rhinestone bracelet with some of the stones missing and a bottle that was about one-quarter full of just some cheap perfume. She stifled the children's laughter when she exclaimed how pretty the bracelet was, putting it on, and then dabbing some of the perfume on her wrist.

Teddy Stallard stayed after school that day just long enough to say, "Mrs. Thompson, today you smelled just like my mom used to, and that bracelet looked really pretty on your wrist." After the children left, she cried for a half an hour. On that very day, she quit teaching reading, writing, and arithmetic, and instead she began to teach children.

Mrs. Thompson paid particular attention to Teddy. As she worked with him, as she saw something good in him, his mind seemed to come alive. The more she encouraged him, the more she believed in him, the faster he responded. By the end of the year, Teddy had become one of the smartest children in that class.

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Six years later, she got a note from Teddy. He then wrote he had finished high school second in his class. Four years after that, she got another letter saying that while things had been tough at times, he would soon graduate from college with highest honors.

Then four more years passed, and eventually another letter came. This time the letter was signed, "Theodore F. Stallard, MD." He told her he'd met a girl, and he told her he was getting married. He asked her if she would come and sit in the place of the mother of the groom. She did. She wore the old bracelet, and she wore the perfume he gave her. When he thanked her for being the best teacher he ever had, she told him he had it all wrong: *he* was the one who taught *her*.

That story was written by a woman named Elizabeth Ballard. She said it was triggered by two real-life events. Once was a time when she'd been teaching Sunday school, because she is a follower of Jesus, the Jesus who said, "Don't cast your pearls before swine." She was teaching, and a grubby, little boy had given her a rhinestone bracelet and a bottle of cheap perfume.

That moment reminded her of when she was a little girl, and she grew up in a family that was quite impoverished. She had no money, so she brought her teacher a gift of pecans from a tree in their yard. All the other students started to laugh. Her teacher stopped them. Her teacher saved her by saying she was going to make a fruitcake, and this was just what she needed.

Now of course she wasn't really going to make a fruitcake. Nobody *makes* a fruitcake. Fruitcakes just happen, like accidents and sinkholes. I think the reason the story has touched so many people is we forget every day we will choose the eyes we use to see people: eyes of judgment or eyes of love. I don't know about you, but I think the world is kind of tired of Christians trying to force their pearls on people.

I don't think it's actually our job to try to go around day after day correcting people, fixing people, giving advice to folks who are not asking for it, and explaining everything that is wrong with the world and what the problem is with *this* group and what the problem is with *that* group and, "Why don't these people behave like we think they should?" I kind of think, gang, it's time for followers of Jesus to just come alongside of people and offer hope, healing, some humility, servanthood, generosity, and love.

I kind of think that's how Jesus created what became the most inclusive, inviting movement in the history of humanity. Now in this Jesus, no more divisions. The dividing wall has been torn down. No more separating Jew, Gentile, slave, free, male, female. This week, no pearl pushing. No judging. No condemning. No superiority. No comparing. No blaming.

I know that raises the question...*If you're not supposed to relate to people by judging or condemning and if you're not allowed to force advice on them and you're not supposed to do relationship by criticism, then how are you supposed to relate to people?* What are you supposed to do if you're concerned about something or there's a problem where you want one thing and they want another?

Jesus has a way. It is actually the simplest, best practice for human relationships on earth. It always unites people. It almost magically puts you on the same side. It is how we are to relate not only to other people but also to God. It is the basic operating system for relationships of the kingdom, and we'll talk about it next week, but for this week, no pearl pushing. No judging. No condemning. Just remember that story about Teddy.

As you go from one relationship to another, ask God this question: "God, would you help me to see what you see when you look at this people? Would you help me to think what you think and feel what you feel and say what you say?" Then a little bit of his kingdom will come from up *there* down *here* through you and flow to them.