

# PITFALLS TO POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS

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*By the Book™* A Chapter by  
Chapter Bible Study Series  
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## Let's Begin

*Chapter 7 moves us into the capstone of the Sermon on the Mount—relating to others as Kingdom citizens. At times that can be very difficult. But it is necessary. A man once stood up in an assembly where Jesus was teaching and asked: “What shall I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus responded with a question that threw it right back to the man, forcing the man to answer his own question.*

*The inquirer answered Jesus: “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbour as thyself.” Jesus affirmed that the man understood plainly the entire Old Testament (Luke 10:25-28). Loving God and loving neighbor—those are two relationships **no one** can avoid.*

*In today's lesson, we will examine three pitfalls that prevent positive relationships with other Kingdom citizens.*

### I. No Principled Discernment (vv. 1-6)

### II. No Prayerful Devotion (vv. 7-12)

### III. No Positive Decisions (vv. 13-29)

## I. No Principled Discernment (vv. 1-6)

It's said of Solomon that God gave him very great wisdom, discernment and breadth of understanding as vast as the sand on the seashore (1 Kings 4:29). Discernment has to do with making judgments about one's self as well as others. Actually, the discernment about which Jesus speaks here is criticism and basically there are two kinds—sinful criticism (vv. 1-2) and self-criticism (vv. 3-5). Let's begin with sinful criticism.

Jesus says “judge not” (v. 1). We must first note that Jesus is not here speaking of all criticism. *Actually, all of us are called to make value judgments about both actions and people.* Evaluation is necessary as well as essential. Jesus said elsewhere “Judge not according to the appearance, but judge righteous judgment” (John 7:24).

The phrase translated “judge not” comes from a word that basically means “to decide.” It was a legal term used in a court of law. *Jesus, then, was speaking about unjustly criticizing another person.* He's speaking about a hypocritical spirit which displays itself in fault-finding explorations into another person's character. This is sinful criticism.

The obvious question is raised: What makes criticism a pitfall that prevents positive relationships? First, one does not know all the facts. How embarrassing to make a premature judgment about someone when you lack the proper evidence to judge. In fact, how wrong! A wise man said this: “There's so much good in the worst of us and so much bad in the best of us, it ill behooves any of us to say anything about the rest of us.”

At best, we are all fallible critics. How convenient to sit in the baseball stands and criticize the players on the field. Many persons who refuse to teach or lead in the Church make it a point to criticize those who do. I know of nothing that more quenches the Spirit of God in life and in the Church than a critical spirit. It simply poisons the fellowship. It takes no brains to criticize; any old buzzard can find a carcass. “Judge not” Jesus says. Are you one who easily finds fault with other people? Avoid this pitfall at all costs.

Observe the second type of criticism Jesus mentions—**self-criticism** (vv. 3-5). What is so often missed from the Gospel record is its

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essential.*



### Reflection Connection

*Do you think people are asking the question today, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Why or why not?*

portrayal of Jesus' sense of humor. Jesus was no prude. He asks: "And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye?" (v. 3)

Our Lord contrasted the "mote"—that is, a tiny splinter—about which one focuses in another's eye, with the "beam" in one's own. Imagine the scene of a person with a 4x4 sticking in his eye! But what's humorous is, instead of focusing on his beam, he's obsessed with his neighbor's splinter. Someone said that faults are like headlights on a car. Those of others seem more glaring than our own.

Those who are overly-critical are usually blind to their own faults and sadly are many times guilty of even a worse fault. As a pastor, it's been my experience that it's easy to see the faults of other people but so hard to see one's own. Plainly, folk who excessively concentrate on another person's problem tend to destroy relationships and even become "hypocrites." *It's true that he who knows others is clever, but he who knows himself has discernment.*

Note also, that Jesus says to "first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother's eye" (v. 5). This does not mean that one is not to assist others in dealing with their faults. But it must be done in the right spirit. We should never attempt to help anyone while we hold to a critical, unkind attitude. *Christians must make up their mind they will have no part in inappropriate criticism toward others.* They should never say anything untrue, unnecessary, or unkind. In the Apostle John's prophecy, the Devil himself is called, "the accuser" (Revelation 12:10). Let's don't take sides with the Devil.

## II. No Prayerful Devotion (vv. 7-12)

### Reflection Connection

*What is your response when people are critical of you? Should you care? Have you ever been critical of another person only to find out later that you had been misled?*

*Share it with the class.*

Beginning in verse 7, Jesus offers a second pitfall to avoid if one's relationships are to remain healthy—wrong-focused prayer. *Prayer is the vehicle God uses to distinguish between improper criticism and appropriate discernment.* The great devotional writer Oswald Chambers said, "God never gives us discernment in order that we may criticize, but that we may intercede." Prayerful devotion is linked to godly, principled discernment. There are two principles Jesus makes plain about one's prayerful devotion.

**First, we must be devoted to our prayerful devotion** (vv. 7-8).

Jesus says: "Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you" (v. 7). Note the three actions we are exhorted to do—"ask...seek...knock." Many times the English language does not completely bring out the full meaning from the Greek text. All three of these verbs are in a special Greek tense that means continuation. That means Jesus is actually saying "Ask, and keep on asking; seek, and keep on seeking; knock, and keep on knocking."

Notice also that each of these words has a slightly different contribution to make to one's prayerful devotion. When one "asks," one is demonstrating

*ask...seek...  
knock*



### Reflection Connection

*Is it possible to be fair in one's criticism of another person? How should one proceed? If you have been falsely accused, what do you do?*

dependence upon God. We will note more about that later. When one “seeks,” one is demonstrating desire. No one ever searched who possessed no desire to find. Finally, when one “knocks,” that is demonstrating desperation—a continued knocking upon God’s door. Keep in mind that God is always home when it comes to prayer!

**Second, we must be dependent upon our prayerful devotion** (vv. 9-11). But this is not meant we are to trust in prayer and not in God. Instead we are to confidently trust God through our prayer. Jesus uses the dependence within family life in these verses to speak about prayer. He imagines the possibility of a hungry little boy who, upon asking his father for a slice of bread, is given a rock. Or, even more absurd, if the little boy asks for a fish, his dad serves him a snake. The unmistakable answer is “No way!”

Jesus then drives home the lesson about being utterly dependent upon God in prayer: “how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask him?” (v. 11).

Admittedly, sometimes we ask and do not receive precisely what we ask. Does that make Jesus’ lesson void? Not at all.

The fact is, often times we ask for things that will harm us. We do not know that but God does. Here is a principle I have learned in my life: God may substitute some good thing for a bad thing; but God will never substitute some bad thing for a good thing. We can have the utmost confidence God takes care of us. Prayerful devotion leads to positive relationships with other Kingdom citizens.

The capstone of this section is verse twelve: “Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets.” *Once we’ve devoted ourselves to prayer and shown ourselves dependent completely upon God, we simply live out what’s known as the “Golden Rule.”* Treating others like you want to be treated is the underlying principle of all morality. We are, in effect, putting ourselves in another person’s place. With incredible summary, Jesus put the entire Old Testament’s moral code into this “Golden Rule”—“this is the law and the prophets.”

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### Reflection Connection

*What happens when we pray? Does God change His mind? Was He going to give us our requests anyway? If so, why do we still need to pray?*

*What does it mean to be dependent on God? Do we need to be concerned about paying the rent and buying groceries? How is being concerned for such matters depending upon God?*

### III. No Positive Decisions (vv. 13-29)

We are at the conclusion of the greatest sermon ever preached. It is no surprise that there is an appeal to be saved from one’s sin. Jesus has been speaking directly to His disciples but the multitudes were listening (5:1). He spoke the truth and when a person encounters truth, decisions invariably are demanded.

In making the positive decisions, Jesus assists by warning of three possible alternative decisions that would disrupt one’s Kingdom life and ruin our relationships with other Kingdom citizens.



### Reflection Connection

*How can we tell if we are following the right path or not? Explain. What is a false profession? Do you think there are people in the church that have given a false profession? What should you do?*

### Golden Greek Nugget

The word translated “broad” in verse 13 is found nowhere else in the New Testament. It is a combination of two words. One means “broad” or “wide” and the other means “country.”

It suggests that the way that leads to death is a way that is wide open with no boundaries whatsoever, somewhat like the open country. There are no rules or regulations that hinder one from doing precisely what one pleases. It is the life of the undisciplined and always leads to destruction.

**The first is the false path** (vv. 13-14). Jesus begins by warning of a path that many take that leads only to destruction. He says: “Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat:” (v. 13). The road about which the Lord Jesus warns is the “wide” and “broad” route. In essence, Jesus is speaking about the road to Hell. It is a popular road, for “many” travel it. And, while it begins “broad” it continues to tighten until it chokes the life out of you. The end of the road is “destruction.” This is the false path and definitely shows horrible decisions made. Proverbs 14:12 reminds us “There is a way which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death.”

On the other hand, a positive decision may be made. Listen to Jesus as He explains: “Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it” (v. 14). This is none other than the highway to heaven. Admittedly, unlike the broad entrance to Hell, the opening to heaven is very narrow. However, anything worthwhile has a narrow entrance! Once the decision is made to travel the true path, while it begins narrow, it does not end that way. It gets broader and better. “But the path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day,” is a perfect description (Proverbs 4:18).

**The second warning Jesus gives is false prophets** (vv. 15-20). His caution is to the point: “Beware of false prophets.” While the false path misleads your direction, the false prophet misleads your doctrine. Jesus makes sure that all understand the danger the false prophet poses. He comes pretending he’s one thing, but is actually another—a wolf in sheep’s clothing Jesus insists. This makes it doubly difficult to recognize the danger until it’s too late.

So how is one to know a false prophet from a true one? Jesus makes it perfectly clear: “Ye shall know them by their fruits.” (v. 16). Never be misled by what they look like; see what they live like is the wisdom Jesus gives. Look at what they produce.

**Finally, Jesus warns of the false profession** (vv. 21-29). Polls consistently show that at least one half of all Americans think they are born again. Jesus is dealing here with self-deception. Note the contrast between “saith” and “doeth” (v. 21). *It is not the right religious language that settles one’s relationship with God. Rather it’s the doing that settles it.* Jesus asks a telling question elsewhere: “And why call ye me, Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say?” (Luke 6:46).

In addition, there is a tragedy involved. People many times are self-deceived into thinking they are doing His will. How sobering the words that “Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name...cast out devils...and in thy name done many wonderful works?” (v. 22). But even more alarming are the words of Jesus. Please note them carefully: “I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity” (v. 23).

### Wrap Up

*The greatest of all sermons also presents the greatest of all challenges—living the life of a Kingdom citizen in the here and now. Jesus offers Kingdom principles which prevent us from falling into the pitfalls that ruin relationships with other Christians. It begins with a principled understanding of Biblical discernment. We are to avoid at all costs developing a critical, judgmental spirit. Admittedly, this is difficult at times. That’s why our Lord warns us to maintain prayerful devotion. Prayer is our tool God puts in our hands to get things done—including the hard work of biblical discernment. Finally, God challenges us to make positive decisions. And the most positive decision anyone can make is to bow before the Kingdom’s King, trusting Him to save you and keep you for eternity.*

