DISCERNMENT

Do not give what is holy to dogs and do not set your pearls before swine, lest they trample them down with their hoofs and then turn to slash you with their teeth.
Matthew 7:6

We will cover this verse by itself since at first it appears to be detached and independent from the preceding section on judging.

However, if one is careful to see this verse in the context of applying judgment, then it could very well make sense to use it following the preceding section since this verse clearly exhorts the disciple to be discerning in their dealings with those who have been given the opportunity to receive the news of the Kingdom.

The disciple is told not to judge unfairly but to judge with charity. Then Jesus turns right around and places them in a situation where they need to make judgments concerning those who are *dogs* and *swine."*

Therefore, the text could be read: *"Do not judge, but be critical, be discerning."*

Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples came to him, saying, "Explain to us the parable of the wees of the field." He answered, "The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, and the good seed is the sons of the kingdom. <u>The weeds are the sons of the evil one</u>. And the enemy who sowed them is the devil.
Matthew 13:36-39

The repercussions of giving what is *"holy to dogs"* and *"setting pearls before swine"* can be found in the Old Testament, and later in the New Testament.

He who corrects a scoffer gets himself abuse, and he who reproves a wicked man incurs injury.
Proverbs 9:7

But conduct yourself wisely toward outsiders, making the most of your time. Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer everyone.
Colossians 4:5-6

This verse has the character of a proverb which means it could have a range of applications. Matthew, however, places this teaching of Jesus right after the teaching on judgment and I believe it is here that we shall find the evangelist's intention in doing so.

Whatever Matthew's source was that he drew from, this teaching is his alone as it is not found in any other canonical Gospel.

The structure of this verse also contains parallels. The first parallel is a blending of animals that makes essentially the same point. The second parallel describes the result of the first parallel.

Do not give to dogs what is holy / do not set pearls before swine;
lest they trample them / turn and slash you.

The difficulty of the verse concerns the meaning of the metaphorical terms *"dogs and swine"* in the first half of the verse. To whom do these designations refer?

Dogs and *swine* are among some of the most derogatory terms in the Jewish vocabulary.

And what is the *"holy thing"* mentioned here and the *"pearls?"*

1) Some have speculated that the *"holy"* is a mistranslation of the Aramaic word *"ring"* and that this slogan refers to Proverbs 11:22.

Like a gold ring in a pig's snout is a beautiful woman without discretion.
Provers 11:22

Any reference of this to the verse hand, however, leaves little to be gained as to any meaning of the metaphors.

2) By the early 2nd Century, the Didache applied the saying exclusively to the eucharist. In this instance the *dogs* and *swine* were those who didn't believe

It is unclear is this case why witnessing or participating in the Eucharist would cause unbelievers to turn upon believers.

3) Esoteric teachings were also considered for this verse.

Matthew, on his part, never hints at this kind of teaching throughout his narrative.

4) Most likely, what is *"holy"* and *"pearls"* refer to the gospel of the kingdom. For the Jews *"swine"* were unclean animals and the term *"dogs* was often reserved for Gentiles.

And he answered, "It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs."
Matthew 15:26

From this it might be gleaned that prohibition was given from preaching the word of God to the Gentiles which would reinforce the teaching of the following:

These twelve Jesus sent out, instructing them, "Go nowhere among the Gentiles and enter no towns of the Samaritans."
Matthew 10:5

He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."
Matthew 15:24

In the Torah, the *"outsider"* was not allowed to eat the food of the offerings because they were *"holy."*

They shall eat those things with which atonement was made at their ordination and consecration, but an outsider shall not eat of them, because they are holy.
Exodus 29:33

A lay person shall not eat of the holy thing: no foreign guest of the priest shall eat of a holy thing.
Leviticus 22:10

And yet, by the time of this writing Matthew clearly expected the gospel to go out to the Gentiles.

"Go therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirt."
Matthew 28:19

And while the Jews might clearly view the gospel as a stumbling block and therefore, react with violence to its proclamation, it is uncertain that Gentiles, for whom the gospel was only a kind of foolishness, would react in a *"slashing"* way.

For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles.
1 Corinthains 1:22-23

It might be best not to limit this verse to any particular group at all but rather to broaden the *"dogs / swine"* designation to all people.

The imagery of trampling down in the sense of spurning and profaning what is holy is found in the letter to the Hebrews where it refers to those apostate.

How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has spurned the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace?
Hebrews 10:29

Again, I do not think we should read the verse with only apostates in mind, but keep the text broadened to those unreceptive to the word. Noted, however, are the fact that apostates are those who become and continue to be unreceptive to the gospel. By this they could well be included in the application of this proverb regarding dogs and swine.

Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and the sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood.
Revelation 22:15

As God's people, we are privileged to handle the "holy things" of the Lord. He has entrusted to us the precious truths of the word of God, and we must regard them carefully. While it is true that we must carry the gospel to "every living creature," it is also true that we must not cheapen the gospel by a ministry that lacks discernment. Even Jesus refused to talk to Herod (Luke 23:9), and Paul refused to argue with people who resisted the Word (Acts 13:44-49).

The Wiersbe Bible Commentary, page 25

The mission to proclaim the gospel of the kingdom is an urgent one, and at least by the end of Matthew it is a universal one.

And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.
Matthew 24:14

In this mission everything depends on the receptivity of those who hear the message. Although it cannot be known in advance what the response will be, when the disciples encounter resistance or hostility they are not to persist, but as emphasized in 10:13-14, they are to proceed on their way in order to reach others with the message.

And if the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it, but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. And if anyone will not receive you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet when you leave that house or town.
Matthew 10:13-14

The issue here thus focuses on the lack of receptivity rather than on any intrinsic unworthiness of any individuals or group.

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