

Matthew 7: A new citizenship test
Notes from a sermon preached at Christ Church Liverpool

Having been largely off the agenda in the 1970s and 1980s the issue of immigration has once again emerged in the last 10 years as a major political hot potato.

Our government has engaged in a number of responses to this but one of the most interesting, to me at least, has been to introduce a new "Britishness" test for would be citizens of the UK.

The idea is that people who know something of our history, traditions and language are likely to be better integrated into society and settle more quickly into life in the UK.

The difficulty, of course, is to try and work out what it is that defines Britishness so that you can meaningfully test it.

I've had a go at writing my own citizenship test and I'm rather proud of it – I'm considering sending it to Charles Clark at the Home Office for him to use...

United Kingdom Citizenship Test

- You have two (2) hours to complete the test.
- All answers must be written in the booklet provided.
- Answer all questions

- 1 Moan about today's weather (at least 500 words).
- 2 If someone bumped into you in the corridor and it was not your fault, would you still say sorry?
- 3 What side should the port be passed on?
- 4 Name the main ingredients of a chip butty.
- 5 Who was found guilty at the Sheep Dog Trials?
- 6 Eating which of the following dishes will most impress your drunken workmates:
 - a) Chicken Tikka Masala
 - b) Chicken Vindaloo
 - c) Chicken Phal
- 7 How many adulterous relationships are currently ongoing in British soap operas? (to the nearest 20).

8 *Either:*
Describe the development of the British system of parliamentary democracy
or
Explain the offside rule

9 *Either:*
Name one member of the cabinet
or
List the names, place of origin and favourite food of all the Big Brother housemates.

10 Defend this statement: *Darts is a sport.*

And Britain isn't the only country going down this particular route. The US and Canada already have citizenship tests and India is considering introducing one as well.

If you've been here over the last few weeks you'll know that chapters 5-7 of Matthew's account of Jesus' life are all part of a single sermon given by Jesus to those who desire to be his disciples.

And one of the key themes of the sermon is the kingdom of heaven.

We find it at the very start of the sermon: *"Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven."*

We find it in 5:10 *"Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."*

And again in 5:20 *"I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven."*

Then in 6:9 *"Our father in heaven...your kingdom come."*

And in 6:33 *"Seek first [God's] kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."*

And in chapter 7 we'll see Jesus answering lots of important questions about what it looks like to be a citizen in the kingdom of heaven.

But before you decide that this is all a bit esoteric and irrelevant let me just remind you that to be a citizen of the kingdom of heaven is just another way of saying being a Christian.

The things Jesus talks about here are not bonus material for people who take it all a bit too seriously. This is no frills, basic discipleship for everyone who would be a follower of Jesus.

1 How should citizens of Heaven judge? (v1-6)

Ridley Scott and his colleagues making the movie "Kingdom of Heaven" could probably have taken Matthew 7:1 as the strapline for the view of the world they want to commend in that film. If you've not seen it, and I would generally recommend that you don't bother unless you have to, the film is all about the crusades. On one side in the film are Balian, played by Orlando Bloom, King Baldwin of Jerusalem, his adviser Tiberias and, surprisingly, the approaching Muslim leader Saladin. The reason for that is that what marks you out as a bad guy in this movie is not which side you are on – but how tolerant you are of the other side. Ranged against these bastions of liberal enlightenment are the foaming fundamentalists – the Knights Templar, priests and some of the Saracens. Of course much of the film is taken up with fighting (after all you have to put some bloodshed in to get people to come and see your movie about the need to live in harmony with each other). As one reviewer put it: "*You pay \$8.50. You expect mass destruction, and when it's not preaching tolerance, Kingdom of Heaven delivers.*"

Don Carson suggests that Matthew 7:1 is probably now the best known and most quoted verse in the Bible in the Western world.

I myself have found, both as a staff worker with Christian Unions and as a church leader, that the standard response from churchgoing people when challenged about a moral issue is "But doesn't the Bible tell us not to judge?"

No matter that marrying someone who is not a Christian, or loving money to the point where more work becomes a necessity to sustain a particular lifestyle, or homosexual practice, or any one of a hundred other things you can think of have been believed by Christian people to be wrong for 2,000 years. No matter what the Bible says. We mustn't judge.

Well it's curious then, isn't it, that just 5 verses later – in v6 – Jesus should choose to call some people "dogs" and "pigs" and encourage his followers to make a similar evaluation.

In v15 Jesus' followers will be told to watch out for false prophets and to make a judgment about them on the basis of the fruit they bear.

So whatever it means when Jesus says "do not judge" he does not mean that citizens of his kingdom are to be entirely indiscriminating in their acceptance of everything and everyone. Because v6 explicitly tells us that Christians should be discriminating – we are not to cast the pearl, the precious message of the gospel, in front of those who have shown themselves entirely hardened to the things of God.

What Christians are not to do, v5, is be hypocrites. Jesus' command not to judge is, as John Stott brilliantly puts it "*not a requirement to be blind but a plea to be generous.*"

Sinful human beings like you and me have an astonishing capacity for self-deception. We can live in such profound ignorance of our own faults and failings that it is as we were, v3, walking around with enormous timbers, beams, in our eyes. And yet we are so adept at noticing the failings of others that we can spot the tiniest splinter in the eye of another Christian at 30 paces.

Well citizens of Jesus' kingdom are not to be like that.

I've met people whose theological accuracy would run rings round most of the other people in their churches but who never have a kind word to say to another Christian. I've met people who were absolutely convinced that they were God's answer to the ineffectiveness of the CU in evangelism but were manipulating supposed friends and seducing Christian sisters. Such things are not a mark of the genuine citizen of heaven.

I hope that if you've been coming to Christ Church for any length of time you've noticed that we are fanatical about truth. That one of our great passions is to see God glorified as the truth about him in the Bible is made known. I hope you've noticed that we try to be clear not only about what is true, but about what is false. That we specify teachings and books that claim to be truthful but in reality do not reflect the teachings of the Scriptures.

But I hope too that we are equally vigorous in condemning hypocrisy. We ought not to be a church that is critical only of others. We need to be a church that, in a constructive way, is critical of itself.

That understands that there are other churches in this city that are more passionate in evangelism than we are, that are more immediately warm and welcoming than we are, that are better organised than we are and so on.

That, by the way, is not an invitation for some people in the church to become critical of the way they feel other people in the church do or run things. It is simply an acknowledgement that while I hope everyone who is a regular here loves Christ Church, loves the people and is committed and loyal to our vision we need to be frank about our faults – whether they are splinters or planks – and work hard at overcoming them.

Notice that this doesn't mean that Christians should never help their brothers with their weaknesses. When the plank, v5, is removed from your own eye, then, Jesus says, you have a responsibility to remove the speck from your brothers' eye. Now I don't think that means that you have to be perfect before you can challenge another Christian. If it did the verse would be effectively meaningless wouldn't it? Because none of us would ever get there!

This is all about motivation. Why does the hypocrite look to remove specks from other people's eyes? It's because he wants to do something that looks kind and helpful but which is really feeding his own spiritual ego and feelings of superiority and enabling him to avoid dealing with the real problems in his own life.

What the citizen of the kingdom of heaven does is seek to see clearly; not so he can look down his nose at other Christians who aren't doing so well; but so he can gently and kindly help them to do better.

But how on earth can we get the splinters out of our own eyes?

2 How do you keep citizenship of Heaven? (v7-11)

The key to avoiding hypocrisy in your life is not simply to try a bit harder.

If after three weeks looking at this great sermon you are still going home thinking that you need to work harder at being a Christian in order to be the kind of person God will look on with a smile you have completely missed the point.

Remember that the sermon started with the first beatitude – blessed are the poor in spirit,

for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven. Citizenship of this kingdom belongs to those who recognise that they have no right to it. That we cannot earn it. That we are unworthy subjects of its king.

The only way to avoid the hypocrisy of wanting to look better than you are, to impress people with your own holiness is to come in humble dependence to the only person in the universe who can clean your heart and transform your life from the inside out.

*Ask, and it will be given to you;
Seek, and you will find;
Knock, and the door will be opened to you.*

Coming to God for the good gifts we need to live a life that is not stinking with hypocrisy will itself defeat our pride. Because to come to God we have to recognise that the door is open to everyone who knocks. That all who seek will find and that all who ask will receive – in other words there is nothing special, in that sense, about us.

God does not give to us because we are his favourite child. He gives because he is a good Father to all his children. Even wicked human beings, v11, know how to give good gifts to their children. How much more will God, who knows no evil at all, answer the requests of his people?

Retaining citizenship in God's kingdom is not based on performance standards. There is no annual appraisal of good deeds, doctrinal development or evangelistic results. There is simply a continual need to come in prayer, dependent on God, and acknowledging our need of his grace. A need that will protect us from the corrosive effects of pride and judgmentalism.

But if that is how we should treat God, as our sovereign king, the one on whom we are completely dependent...

3 How should citizens of Heaven treat others? (v12)

Shortly before his death actor Paul Eddington, best known for his role in Yes Minister and The Good Life (for the students here those are television shows from the olden days) was asked how he would like to be remembered. He said he would like to be remembered as someone who "did very little harm".

As far as most versions of the so-called "golden rule" are concerned that would be a very good ethic to live by. The philosopher

Confucius said "Do not do to others what you would not wish to have done to yourself." And versions of this rule are known in almost every religion. But Jesus' version of the rule says that doing "very little harm" is not enough for the citizen of his kingdom. Because Jesus, uniquely, puts the rule positively. It's not enough for the Christian to retreat into a cave and do no wrong.

Jesus' summary of God's law as it relates to our treatment of others is positive: do to others as you would wish them to do to you. That is the standard for citizens of the kingdom. And it's a remarkably useful, flexible, everyday way of thinking about your behaviour if you're a Christian. Using this as your ethic won't make you a Christian – but if you are already one this is to be the norm for your life. Christians should have no need for a million case laws to cover every eventuality in life. Whether the question is about boy/girl friendships, financial dealings, doing the washing up on your house, dealing with juniors you supervise at work, the way you speak to your wife or husband, your expectations of your children, the names you call the referee during a football match, whatever it is the Christian ethic is clear: think of the way you would really like other people to treat you – and treat them that way.

4 How hard is it to become a citizen of Heaven? (v13-14)

I wonder how difficult you found it to become a Christian? Or maybe you're here this morning and you're not yet a Christian. How easy do you imagine it will be to become one?

At one level, of course, it's extremely simple. All you have to do is confess that you have been living in rebellion against God, recognise that Jesus is the only one who can rescue you and put your trust in him – being a Christian is, literally, only a few words away from you.

But there is another, equally real, sense in which becoming and continuing as a Christian is hard. The gate is narrow. Unlike the wide gate, which people with all sorts of beliefs, ideas and baggage can pass through – to their destruction – the way that leads to life is entered through a narrow gate.

All sorts of concepts, philosophies and suitcases have to be left behind to tread the Christian path. Other religions, feelings that you are worthy of God's favour, love of money, desire to be someone. All of these have to be discarded in favour of total commitment to Christ.

I suspect there are some people here this morning who are just, to extend the metaphor a bit, hanging around the gateway. You're in churchy stuff. Maybe you've been baptised. Maybe you're involved in Christian things. But you have never actively, radically, decisively made Jesus Christ alone your hope for life. And even once you have done that the way is hard. Much easier to walk the other way. The wide way. As C S Lewis put it in his brilliant "Screwtape Letters" *"the safest road to Hell is the gradual one – the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts."*

Most people in hell won't be murderers, or rapists, or thieves, or swindlers or prisoners. They will be husbands and wives, community leaders, religious people, hard workers.

It is easy to be a citizen of the Kingdom of Heaven because all you have to do is trust in Jesus. It is hard to be a citizen of the Kingdom of Heaven because you must trust in Jesus.

And if you don't want to be led on the wrong road you have to learn how to spot other people who are also citizens of Heaven.

5 How do you spot a citizen of Heaven? (v15-27)

Well you spot them by their fruit, v16. That doesn't mean that everybody who simply calls Jesus "Lord", v21, is genuinely a Christian.

Because there will be some who say the words, who even perform mighty deeds in the name of Jesus to whom at the end of history Jesus will say – but I don't know you. Go away from me. The fruit, v21, is to do God's will. It is, v24, to put Jesus words into practice.

That's not to say that anybody earns a place in eternity by doing things. Rather that what we do marks out the difference between professing to be a Christian and actually having a Christian way of life. That is not an excuse for judgmentalism – we've been warned about that already. It's not for you or me to say that this person or that person who claims to be a Christian but who we've met a few times and taken a dislike to isn't really a believer. We're not generally called upon to go round making judgments about the reality of other people's professions of Christian faith.

But there are some times when we really do need to do that. So for example if someone wants to become a member of our church it's

very important to establish the reality of their faith. So I've taken to asking people to tell me the story of how they came to be a Christian, or to explain the Christian message to me as if I weren't a Christian. But even then I've no doubt that someone could fool me if they wanted to. Because any of us, with a bit of effort, could speak, sound and live a Christian for a while. Perhaps even for a very long time. But, normally, eventually, we will be exposed for what we are. You might not be able to tell what kind of a tree you have in your garden for most of the year, but when Autumn comes it will be obvious whether it's an apple tree or a pear tree.

Jesus tells us that it is when the storm comes that the foundation of someone's life is exposed. Ultimately, of course, the coming storm is God's judgment. Then it will be perfectly revealed who is, and is not, genuinely a citizen of the kingdom. But in the meantime there are many other storms of life that may expose the genuineness or otherwise of our profession on faith in Jesus: bereavement, illness, failure, temptation.

Eventually, if our lives are built on anything other than the foundation of believing and doing Jesus' words we will be exposed and our house will fall with a rending of beams, a ear splitting noise of brick and mortar, into a pile of rubble.

Does that frighten you? I hope it does. Because I think Jesus, the most loving man who ever lived, is trying to scare people. He wants to frighten us into heaven. In the Sermon on the Mount, and throughout his teaching, he wants us to realise the seriousness, the utter desolation that awaits those who will not enter his kingdom. He wants you to bear good fruit, to do the will of his Father in heaven, to build on solid rock. He wants us to realise the impossibility of meeting God's standards apart from his mercy. He wants us to throw ourselves, afresh, or perhaps for the first time, on his grace, because only he can grant us citizenship in the kingdom of heaven, and only he can sustain us in the kingdom's standards because he is the King.

6 Who rules the kingdom of Heaven? (v28-29)

Some of us will have heard captivating public speakers. Others of us will have been to the concerts of great stage performers. But when Jesus finished his sermon the astonishment was not for his charisma but to do with his authority.

Jesus didn't rest his case on the rabbis who had taught him. He didn't even quote the authority of the Old Testament law to justify his words. He interpreted the Bible and said it pointed to him. He set his own words up as a rock – a title properly given to God. He said that people would, and should, call him Lord. Jesus rules his kingdom.

So to hear and do his words is to be a wise man or woman. How do you do on the Kingdom of Heaven citizenship test?

Of course none of us pass with flying colours do we – because none of us are in the kingdom yet! And yet the tests Jesus has set out still remain as his standard. So what do we do? Are we trapped with impossible demands for a kingdom we long to attain but whose standards we can never meet? Must we just resolve to try harder to be a better Christian this week?

Well no. What we need to do is come to Jesus, the King. We need to ask for grace to be his subjects, to be citizens of the kingdom. And then we must come again and again, day after day, and ask the king who loves us to so transform our lives that they reflect more and more the standards of his country.

And then we must go out and live them.

*Andrew Evans
June 2005*