

It's not unusual for 'self help' books to top the best sellers list. Our appetites for the 7 principles for a better life, 5 steps to success, and Three ways I Can Make you Rich (#1 - write a self help book) are as insatiable as they are misguided. After all, after all these years and all that helping ourselves, we're still just as messed up as we were when the Victorians first invented the genre, perhaps more so. Nevertheless, for a daytime TV presenter or stage hypnotist pretty much part of the job description is to write a book detailing in easy steps how to be better, thinner, happier, wealthier and healthier. It's more unusual for one to be penned by a professor of psychology and almost unheard of for the resulting tome to sweep to the top of the bestseller lists in the English speaking world, largely on the back of an interview on Channel Four news. But then unlikely things happen all the time and '12 Rules for life' by Jordan B Peterson has for months been selling like all-butter hot cross buns mostly, apparently, to the sort of people who voted for Donald Trump. This is a little surprising: though the book does have pictures in it, it also has words in it, long words some, with more than two syllables. As self-help books go it's infinitely better than anything ever written by Paul McKenna- not difficult. Despite it being adopted by the alt-right as their current Little Red Book, it's hardly Mein Kampf. I haven't read Hitler's book but I doubt it's full of such aphorisms as 'do not bother children when they are skateboarding' and 'pet a cat when you encounter one in the street'.

However, I'm now in serious danger of breaking Professor Peterson's Rule number ten of twelve rules for life which is 'be precise in your speech'. Call me cynical, but 'be precise in your speech' is a bit rich coming from a professor of psychology. Of the things in my life I have studied at a reasonably serious level psychology was the first and because much of psychology looks almost exactly the same as common sense- it isn't but it really does look like it- because of that psychologists are always looking for extremely big and complicated sounding words they can use to explain something really obvious. You could argue I suppose that 'cognitive dissonance' was more precise than 'in two minds about it' or that 'catastrophising' was more scalpel like than 'in a tizz'; you could argue it, but I don't think you'd win. If psychological jargon is not really helping your linguistic precision, it does expand your vocabulary. So does studying medicine, theology and scraping a living as a journalist, the latter sometimes forcing you from desperation into the more obscure cul-de-sacs of the language, mudlarking around for a better or failing that more alliterative way to say 'this album isn't very good.' Many obscure and jargonistic words I could have chosen from my personal lexicon for this sermon today, but the one I want to use dates from the High Middle ages, around the time the building you are sitting in right now was built, and that word is 'accroach'. It means to assume, appropriate or usurp

power, which in the Middle ages meant the power of the King. To accroach is to hook for yourself a power that properly belongs to somebody else. I think, therefore, this is an excellent word to describe the most widespread Christian attitude to judgement.

'Judgement'. It's a big word. You can't really take it lightly: it comes with its own readymade gravity. Speak it, and speak a heaviness that mixes implacable severity with inexorable finality. Judgement.

If you come at it unprepared, reading Matthew's gospel can be quite a shock. Although it wasn't the first to be written, it's often the first gospel people read because it comes first in the Bible. And it's quite difficult to stomach because Matthew majors on judgement. Barely a gospel moment seems to go by without people being divided into sheep and goats, wheat and tares, wise and foolish bridesmaids, good fish and bad. Barely a speech can be made without someone mentioning axes lying at the roots of trees, the wrath to come and the ovens firing, everything larded with a lot of outer darkness, unquenchable fire, weeping, wailing and gnashing of teeth. Jesus does not step into the limelight of that Gospel in the role of the good shepherd, gentle pastor or prophet healer. Make no mistake, if you had to sum up Matthew's gospel in just one word, that word would be 'judgement.'

That means, it's all very scary. If you can listen to the words of judgement in Matthew's gospel and not feel just that slightest bit panicked, then you're really not listening to what is being said. In all four gospels but most obviously in the first of the four, Jesus, winnowing fork in hand, is the judge, capital 'J'.

'J' also for 'jealous'. He is a jealous God, jealous of his prerogative, because repeated again and again with the gospel warnings of the judgement to come is the command to humanity: judge not. *You* are not God. Every time you judge, you accroach to yourself the power that properly and only belongs to God.

There is a quotation from G K Chesterton that has pretty much reached the status of a cliché. "The Christian ideal" he said "has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult; and left untried."

And nowhere is this most clearly evident when it comes to the command 'Do not judge'.

Do not judge? We judge everybody. I don't mean judging the X Factor or the cake competition at a summer fete. I mean that favourite Christian habit of declaring judgements on our brothers and sisters on God's behalf.

Some Christians will tell you that you're an 'unrepentant' sinner and are thus going to hell. Some will tell you that as a 'non-believer' then your ultimate destination is also the fiery furnace. Charge, judgement and sentence all in one. It's breathtaking. Maybe some of us are headed for Hell. I'd like to think not and the New Testament is overwhelmingly on the side of the universalists, but whatever is the case, it is not for us to know and it is not for us to declare: *that* judgement call is solely for God.

The Christian faith, our faith, is not about separating good people from bad people. It's not, for the simple reason that there are no good people: we are all guilty of something. Different things. We are all guilty of something. God will be our judge- and his judgement- again the New Testament is overwhelmingly clear- his judgement will be based on what we have done.

'Only God can judge me' is a popular tattoo among the hedonist crowd. Despite 'God' being in the wording it's meant more as a warning against excessive tutting should you witness what they get up to at the weekend rather than as a profound theological statement. But it's still true. 'Only God can judge me.' Indeed. And he can, and he will.

Which is really, really, really fortunate for us.

God will be our judge.

Complete knowledge- nothing we can hide; complete power- nothing we can do to evade the judgement. Why should we count ourselves fortunate? Because, as judges come, God is not us, just written a lot bigger. At its best, human judgement can be incorrupt, fair-minded, dispassionate. But it's not always at its best. It is also frequently petty, commonly vindictive and however hard we try, never entirely impartial. Because judgements are also to do with the exercise of power, too often they favour those with power and weigh heaviest on the defenceless.

But God is not like that, and God is our judge.

Two examples from the teaching of Jesus can show us what the heavenly judge is like, why we are fortunate indeed to stand weighed in his balances.

The first is that beloved tale you will have heard if you were at church on Ash Wednesday, the woman caught in adultery. It is an almost perfect contrasting of human judgement and God's. The humans are all ready to stone the sinner. Jesus- who sees into our hearts- looks at everybody assembled there and he doesn't see a crowd of righteous people and one terrible sinner: he sees a whole crowd of terrible sinners. He sees nothing in this regard to distinguish one from another. All have sinned. All have fallen short of the glory of God. And none, not one of them, does he condemn. That's who I want judging me.

And the second is the parable of the Prodigal Son. The son does all sorts of terrible things against his father, finally upping and leaving. One day much later the father sees the son returning. He runs around excitedly organising a celebration. Before he knows what the son is coming back for. He might be coming back to curse his father. He might be coming back to demand the rest of the money. The father doesn't know; what he does know is that the son is back. So it is with us, sin and God. The love of the father for the prodigal son is the love of God for us. Before we even ask, we are forgiven. That's who I want judging me.

Only God can judge us. Thank God for that.