

# Discussion of Matthew 7:6 “Pearls Before Swine (Epicureans?)”

**Post by “Al-Hakiim von Grof” of January 22, 2025 at 12:13 AM**

Matthew 7:6 “Do not give dogs what is holy; do not throw your pearls before swine. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and then turn and tear you to pieces.”

The most straightforward meaning of this passage is plain enough.

I just find it interesting that two influential philosophical schools, both of which pre-date Christianity and practitioners of which may have been present in the multicultural cities Jesus spent time in were Cynics (dogs) and Epicureans (pigs).

Perhaps the passage has a double meaning? Maybe a little wordplay by Jesus (or whomever put the words in his mouth)?

Or perhaps it's not that deep; just a fun thought. Maybe somebody with a better understanding of Greek could take a look at the passage in its original language and weigh in.

---

**Post by “Cassius” of January 22, 2025 at 5:24 AM**

Very interesting thought. In my experience actual animals don't find stone-like objects of any kind to be particularly interesting one way or another, so I wouldn't expect them to take much notice of pearls.

So is this a figurative slam at Epicureans and Cynics rather than actual pigs and dogs?

I'm not aware that there was a significant body of Cynics active during the times this statement was allegedly made, but I definitely think that's worth consideration, especially since I gather that the attitude toward dogs and pigs among the Judeo-christians of the time was generally negative.

I have never felt that what I understand to be Cynicism is attractive at all, but to the extent there is a core of affinity between their attitude and the honesty and forthrightness of dogs, then since I like dogs more than many people, I would find that to be the best attribute of "Cynicism."

Seeing the phrase not as a focusing on the obvious truth that it's not good to throw away valuable things, but as more focused on slamming "undesirables" like dogs and pigs, and connecting that with Epicureans, does make sense to me.

---

## Post by "Don" of January 22, 2025 at 5:58 AM

I'm intrigued! I'll admit that I never made that connection, and possibly both animals were seen as unclean... But the juxtaposition of dogs and swine is too juicy to pass up digging into a little.

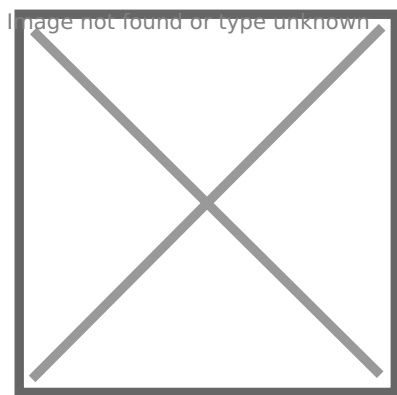
The phrase comes from Matthew 7:6: μὴ δώτε τὸ ἅγιον τοῖς κυσίν μηδὲ βάλητε τοὺς μαργαρίτας ὑμῶν ἔμπροσθεν τῶν χοίρων μήποτε καταπατήσουσιν αὐτοὺς ἐν τοῖς ποσὶν αὐτῶν καὶ στραφέντες ῥήξωσιν ὑμᾶς

"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. (NRSVue)

χοῖρος, χοιρου, ὄ, from Homer down, a swine: plural, Matthew 7:6; Matthew 8:30,(31),32; Mark 5:11-13, 14 Rec.,(16); Luke 8:32; Luke 15:15f. (Not found in the O. T.)

So, the only other uses of χοιρος are Jesus casting demons into swine and the prodigal son eating what swine eat when he was starving from the famine.

But that juxtaposition in "Jesus'" words in Matthew does intrigue me, could it be Cynics and Epicureans?? The part about tearing you to pieces reminds me of Acts 17.



[Acts 17 :: King James Version \(KJV\)](#)

Acts 17 - Then certain philosophers of the Epicureans, and of the Stoicks, encountered him. And some said, What will this babblers say? other some, He seemeth...

[www.blueletterbible.org](http://www.blueletterbible.org)

Act 17:18 - Then certain philosophers of the Epicureans, and of the Stoicks, encountered him. And some said, What will this babbler say? other some, He seemeth to be a setter forth of strange gods: because he preached unto them Jesus, and the resurrection....

And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked: and others said, We will hear thee again of this matter.

Questions for me:

Did the Jesus Seminar vote that Jesus said Matthew 7:6?

Were the Cynics and Epicureans active when and where *Matthew* was written?

What word did Horace use for "a pig in Epicurus' sty" in Latin? Is that the one in the Vulgate?

Have any scholars gone this route with Matthew 7:6?

Great question, [Al-Hakiim von Grof](#) !

---

### **Post by “Cassius” of January 22, 2025 at 6:13 AM**

Also: just as the title of this thread was abbreviated to "pearls before swine," I realize now that I tend to completely forget that that is only 50% of the allusion.

As to the second part, people seem to be acclimated to accept unthinkingly that pigs are "unworthy" creatures. Aside from that being an extremely debatable assumption in general, in my most recent encounter with two large pigs running wild I found them to be friendly and totally unthreatening.

But as to the mostly-forgotten first part, they've largely lost the war on that one. Dogs are almost universally beloved at least here in the West, and dogs' perceptiveness as to the true value of the "sacred" seems to me to be a lot better reasoned than that of many humans.

From now on I will be remembering the "dogs" part as much or more than the "swine" part.

---

### **Post by “Don” of January 22, 2025 at 6:24 AM**

Of course, there's only so many ways to say "pig" in Latin, but fwiw:

Latin for reference: Matthew 7:6: 6 Nolite dare sanctum *canibus*: neque mittatis margaritas vestras ante *porcos*, ne forte conculcent eas pedibus suis, et conversi dirumpant vos.

Horace for reference:

Latin

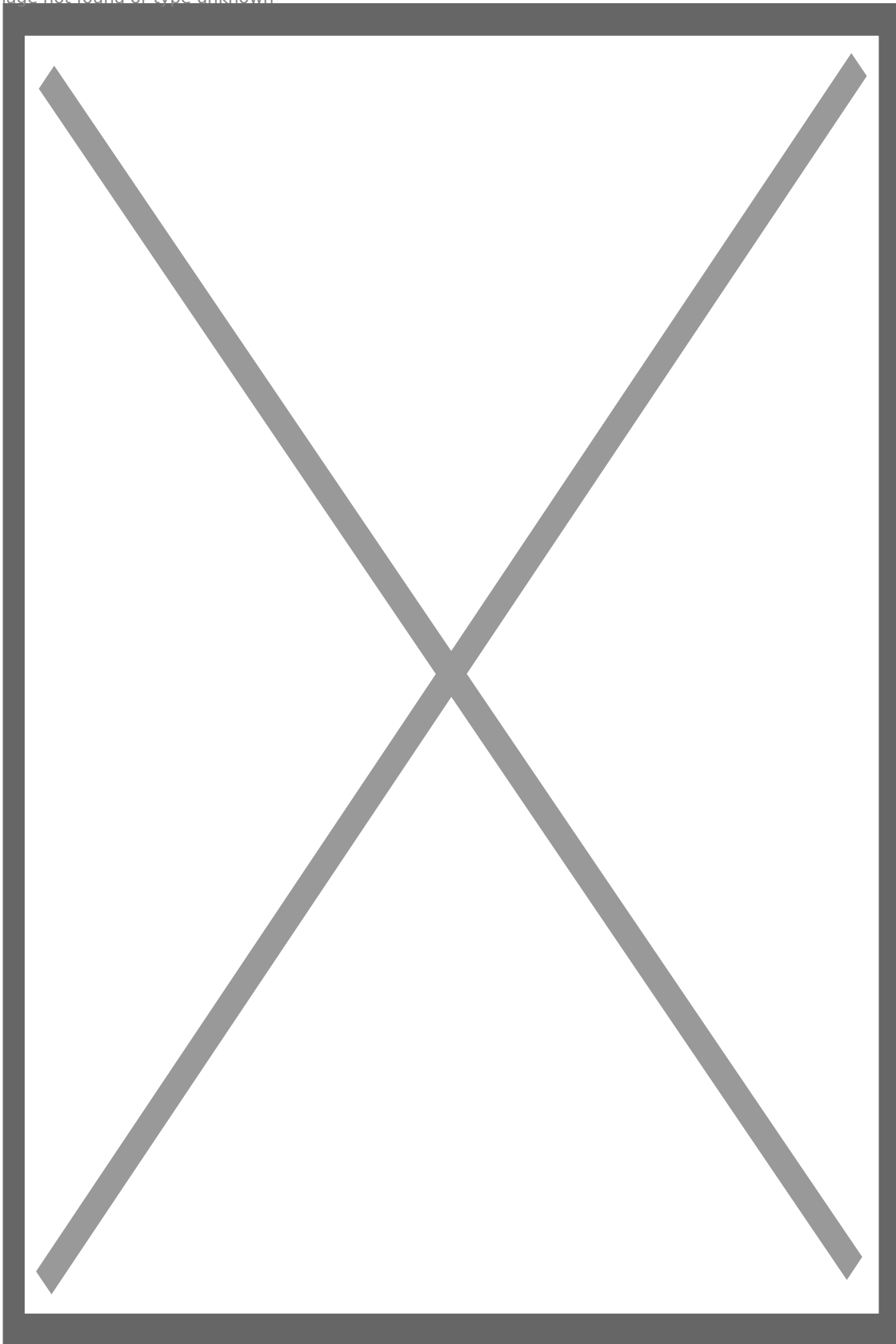
inter spem curamque, timores inter et iras  
omnem crede diem tibi diluxisse supremum:  
grata superveniet quae non sperabitur hora.  
me pinguem et nitidum bene curata cute vises  
cum ridere voles, Epicuri de grege *porcum*.

English (Loeb Classics)

Amid hopes and cares, amid fears and passions,  
believe that every day that has dawned is your last.  
Welcome will come to you another hour unhopd for.  
As for me, when you want a laugh, you will find me in fine fettle,  
fat and sleek, a *hog* from Epicurus's herd.

Also, from Wikipedia as a start (emphasis added):

Image not found or type unknown



[Cynicism \(philosophy\) - Wikipedia](#)

en.wikipedia.org

Cynicism gradually declined in importance after the 3rd century BC, but *it experienced a revival with the rise of the Roman Empire in the 1st century. Cynics could be found begging and preaching throughout the cities of the empire*, and similar ascetic and rhetorical ideas appeared in early Christianity.

---

### **Post by “Cassius” of January 22, 2025 at 6:35 AM**

Good reminder of these lines - hard to find better practical Epicurean advice than this:

Latin

inter spem curamque, timores inter et iras  
omnem crede diem tibi diluxisse supremum:

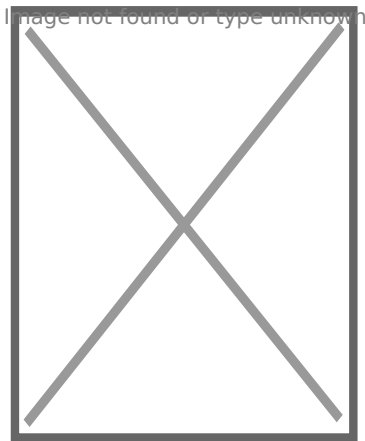
English (Loeb Classics)

Amid hopes and cares, amid fears and passions,  
believe that every day that has dawned is your last.

---

### **Post by “Don” of January 22, 2025 at 6:53 AM**

Here's the commentary on those verses from the Jesus Seminar 's The Five Gospels:



[The five Gospels : the search for the authentic words of Jesus : new translation and commentary : Funk, Robert Walter, 1926-2005 : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive](#)

A Polebridge Press book.  
archive.org

(Read with free account)

The saying is preserved in Matthew and the Gospel of Thomas. Here the end of that section in the book:

contact with. Dogs and pigs are symbols for whatever is socially and religiously impure. For Judeans, gentiles were unclean and could therefore be called dogs and pigs. For the author of 2 Peter and other Christian groups, backsliders and apostates were dogs and pigs. To the author of the first Christian instructional manual, known as the Didache or the Teaching of the Twelve Apostles, the unbaptized are dogs (9:5, citing Matt 7:6, but with a specific reference). In general, the proverb in all its forms indicates disdain and contempt.

To most Fellows the sayings in Matthew and Thomas seemed inimical to Jesus. The immediately preceding context in Matthew calls for self-criticism rather than the slander of others. A few Fellows thought Jesus might have used the images in Matt 7:6 in a metaphorical way to encourage a certain amount of discrimination in choosing an audience for his aphorisms and parables. (His enigmatic sayings and stories *were* readily misunderstood and often provoked strong negative response.) The compromise was a gray designation.

---

**Post by “Kalosyni” of January 22, 2025 at 8:17 AM**

Regarding Horace, I posted over in this thread:

Thread

[Meaning behind Horace's Quote](#)

(This must have been discussed some time ago at length, but could not locate it.)

As Don quoted (from this [thread](#))

Horace for reference:

Latin

inter spem curamque, timores inter et iras  
omnem crede diem tibi diluxisse supremum:  
grata superveniet quae non sperabitur hora.  
me pinguem et nitidum bene curata cute vises  
cum ridere voles, Epicuri de grege *porcum*.

English (Loeb Classics)

Amid hopes and cares, amid fears and passions,  
believe that every day that has dawned is your last.  
Welcome will come to you...



Kalosyni

January 22, 2025 at 8:16 AM

---

**Post by "Cassius" of January 22, 2025 at 8:31 AM**

So these "Fellows" are who?

And I see - you are saying that because the statement is interpreted as a demeaning reference to other human beings (outsiders to the religion?), there was a reluctance to attribute it to Jesus (?)

Ha!

---

## Post by “Don” of January 22, 2025 at 8:48 AM

Fellows are the Fellows of the Jesus Seminar who were/are scholars who met in the 1970s/80s(?) to literally vote on whether Jesus said what the gospels say he said.

Grey means it was a toss up. Red would mean they agreed Jesus said it. Black, he didn't. (I think there is a pink category, too: red, pink, grey, black.

---

## Post by “kochiekoch” of January 22, 2025 at 1:11 PM

[Quote from Al-Hakiim von Grof](#)

Matthew 7:6 “Do not give dogs what is holy; do not throw your pearls before swine. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and then turn and tear you to pieces.”

I never gave it a thought, but that's an intriguing find. I wonder if the dogs and swine really do represent Stoics and Epicureans, who, if you argue with them, will take your ideas and crush them and tear them to pieces? It must have been a pretty common thing for a Christian, very confident of this faith, to go to philosophers and challenge them.

There might have been a lot of deconversions that way. 😊

---

## Post by “Don” of January 22, 2025 at 2:09 PM

"most modern scholars hold that [the book of *Matthew*] was written in the last quarter of the first century by a male Jew who stood on the margin between traditional and nontraditional Jewish values and who was familiar with technical legal aspects of scripture being debated in his time." (Wikipedia)

So, written 75 to 100 CE.

Both things could technically be true: dogs and swine as regular literary metaphor; it's use as a stand in for Cynics and Epicureans depending on the demographics where the writer was living. I'm skeptical that Jesus would have used it to refer to the philosophical schools since I'm not sure there would be many from those two schools in Galilee and Jerusalem at his time. But I'm

still intrigued by this line of inquiry.

---

### **Post by “Al-Hakiim von Grof” of January 22, 2025 at 4:34 PM**

Lots of awesome ideas here!

Given that the New Testament explicitly states Paul interacted with epicureans ( [Don](#) , good tie-in reference. I had completely forgotten the interaction of Paul with philosophers in Athens), and the fact that Matthew is reasonably dated to the end of the first century, which is fairly soon after Paul’s execution and at the tail end of him founding churches throughout the empire, I believe it’s a significant possibility that whoever authored the text was using dogs and swine both as an easily recognized (to Jews) example of the “unclean” AND as a reference to certain philosophical schools which stood at odds to Christianity and were thus “unclean” people with “unclean” ideas.

If so, it’s a brilliantly layered passage that conveys the author's meaning in a way that would easily be recognized by both Jew and Gentile converts without changing the words used. Quite clever.