

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

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Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

**Sermon Series:** Life, the Jesus Way  
(Studies in the Sermon on the Mount)

### **Golden**

(Matthew 7:1-12)

Study #9

#### **Introduction: The greater the relationship, the fewer the rules...**

One of everybody's favorite professors when I was studying at Dallas Seminary was Dr. Howard Hendricks. Hendricks was famous for his love of family, for his wit, and for turning a phrase. In speaking about marriage, he once told us, *"In a more formal relationship, there are lots of rules. But the closer the relationship, the fewer the rules."*

He was making the point that in an intimate marriage, rules don't rule. Relationship rules. That's a great vision for a marriage and for a close friendship.

So, in our national life of three hundred and nineteen million people, there are untold<sup>1</sup> tens of thousands of laws on the books, governing our behavior. The city of San Antonio, likewise, has an extensive code of ordinances, laws, and regulations.

Those rules order our society. Not much relationship. Lots of rules.

The life of ancient Israel was governed by the Old Testament where we count six hundred and thirteen commands from God that all Jews were to obey.

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<sup>1</sup> Literally "untold" and "unknown" as some websites I checked stated that between 10-300,000 laws were in effect in the US. There are so many laws that it's possible (some say likely) we are all breaking one or more every day.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus pared that number down by six hundred and twelve to exactly one.

If Prof Hendricks was right, if it's true that the greater the relationship the fewer the rules, then a one-rule kingdom says something profound about the depth of relationship that is present where Jesus reigns.

God's plan for us is not that we would live by a code. Yes. There are a few commands that we are to heed. But He didn't give us a complex set of rules and regulations to order our lives.

Instead, He gave us a command. It's worded in slightly different ways in a few places in the New Testament, and then calls us to deep relationship with Himself, and great sensitivity to the need of the moment for the person we're with.

The religious leaders of first century Judaism had put together a burdensome system of rules and regulations that rival anything in the USA. Jesus came along and said, *"Love. Love is golden."*

*Review...*

Today brings us to our next to the last Sunday looking at Jesus' most famous sermon. Next Sunday, we'll listen to the Lord give His closing remarks. We'll hear Him warn us, His people, of the dangers of not following His commands and we'll hear Him invite us to the life of blessing that will follow if we do follow His commands.

But today, in terms of content, we come to the finale of the Sermon on the Mount. And in this final act, Jesus points us to the way of love. He calls us to balancing act that we need God's wisdom and God's strength to pull off.

His first words are among the most famous in the Bible. It's one of the most frequently quoted of all of Jesus' sayings.

As a couple of Bible scholars I read this week tell us, it's also among the most misunderstood and misapplied.

## Flee Judgmentalism (vv. 1-5)

### **The Dangerous Business of Judging (vv. 1-2)**

*“Judging” and “JUDGING”*

**[1] “Do not judge so that you will not be judged.”**

#### The kind of judging we SHOULD do

In reading that short line, I would point out that there is “judging” and then there is “judging.”

Jesus did not mean that parents and police, judges and even church leaders can’t *judge* when those under their charge go astray.

He didn’t mean that we are to live uncritically. The Bible is clear about certain things in the moral realm. And what the Bible says about right and wrong is true. We *judge* behaviors on the basis of what the Bible says.

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus refers to some people as “dogs” and “swine” and makes a *judgment* on false prophets and over in Matthew 18 He calls on us, His followers, to *judge* conduct and to confront each other when we fall into sin.

It is not wrong to correct those who are in error. Jesus’ disciple are not called to be undiscerning, all-accepting jellyfish.

But it can be a short step from agreeing with Scripture’s call on morals to becoming the morality police. And it’s not hard to move from righteous judgment and discernment to judgmentalism.

And THAT is what Jesus is warning against.

#### The kind of judging Jesus warns against

He is aiming at heart and at motive - just as He’s been doing all through the Sermon on the Mount.

He condemns a demeaning, superior attitude. He is speaking to me if I’m looking down my nose at someone else. And He’s speaking to you if you put someone else down to make yourself look good.<sup>2</sup>

This is exactly what was going on in the parable He told of the Pharisee and the tax collector. (See Luke 18)

In that story, the sinful tax collector cried out to God for mercy and received mercy.

The outwardly moral Pharisee stood in judgment of the other man. He compared virtues and vices and made himself out to be a hero. Jesus said God would have nothing to do with that man.

Judging occurred in the first century and it is just as prevalent in the twenty first.

- I judge when I presume to think I know what’s going on in another person’s heart. Only God knows.<sup>3</sup>
- I judge when I pass a verdict on someone based on appearances - clothing, piercings, hair style or color, tattoos.
- I judge when I’m hoping to find someone guilty.<sup>4</sup>
- I judge when my standards for evaluating have nothing to do with Scripture.
- I judge when I evaluate someone without paying attention to timing. Are they under stress? Are there extenuating circumstances? Has this person just suffered a loss?
- I judge when I hold someone else to a higher standard than that to which I hold myself.<sup>5</sup>
- I judge when I play favorites.

<sup>2</sup> One commentator suggested that a judgmental, critical spirit is seen in second-guessing a coach for sending in a play that doesn’t work on 4<sup>th</sup> down with inches to go - but of course the coach is a genius if the play is successful - or for criticizing a pastor for delivering a miserable message (but this seems a bit self-protective...)

<sup>3</sup> Note 1 Samuel 16:7. The Lord told Samuel that He had not chosen Eliab, David’s older brother to be king, but David, **“for God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.”**

<sup>4</sup> See John 8 and the men who had caught a woman in adultery. They wanted to throw the first stone, but Jesus pointed out their hypocrisy.

<sup>5</sup> You speed; I “redeem the time” You cheat the IRS; I practice good stewardship

Sadly, these days, we who follow Jesus are widely thought of as pretty judgmental.

Parenthetical: Tragically, we are judged as judges

Sometime soon, if you are looking for an insightful - and a devastating - read, pick up the book UnChristian, by David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyon.

The book is nearly ten years old now, but its content is probably more true now than it was when it was first published.

The authors are devout Christians and meticulous researchers. UnChristian is based on polling and interviews conducted among thousands of young adults - both those outside the Christian faith and among those who believe.

Among the most disturbing findings of the book is that 87% of outsiders and well over 50% of younger Christians believe that the church, as a whole, is judgmental. We come across as *holier-than-thou*.

That's disturbing. What's just as disturbing is that when I hear that, I'm tempted to defend. Maybe you, too.

We say, "*We love the sinner, but we hate the sin.*"

OK. So why does it come across to most people that we hate the sinner along with the sin - or at least that we don't like the sinner very much?

We say, "*Aren't we supposed to point out God's standards?*"

Well, the Bible says that the greatest need of those outside the faith is not moral improvement.

Someone who is outside looking in needs God in his life. It's God's presence and power that will enable change. People on the outside need Christ.

And, when it comes to those who are Christians, yes, we need to encourage life change. But we need to encourage that life change and that growth in holiness non-judgmentally. A lot of us have a long way to go in learning how to encourage toward change non-judgmentally.

To "judge" someone in the way Jesus is talking about here is just about the same thing as to condemn them. And condemnation is far removed from moving anybody toward God and His ways. That movement is usually prompted by way of love and grace.

So here's Jesus on what we can expect when we shower people with condemning judgment.

*Judgment to the one who judges (v. 2)*

**[2] "For in the way you judge, you will be judged; and by your standard of measure, it will be measured to you."**<sup>6</sup>

Jesus has already said in this sermon [5:7] "**Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.**"

This is a quite a bit more pointed. I believe that here, Jesus is referring to a judgment that all believers will face after this life is over, a judgment that the New Testament calls The Judgment Seat of Christ.<sup>7</sup>

Jesus says that at that judgment, God will use the same basic standard of judgment on us that we have used on others.

So, yes. People who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones. And we who will stand before God's judgment shouldn't stand as judge over others.

Let's relinquish the role of judge (or judge, jury, and executioner!) and leave the judging to God.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Some believe that Jesus was quoting a well-known proverb here.

<sup>7</sup> See Romans 14, 1 Corinthians 3, 2 Corinthians 5, Galatians 6. There are actually many, many other passages in the New Testament that mention believers' judgment where Heaven and Hell are not at issue, but reward or lack of reward, is.

<sup>8</sup> See Romans 14:10-12; James 4:11-12 for similar thoughts.

And when we see someone who needs to grow in Jesus in some specific way, maybe even in an obvious way, let's remember that we don't know everything about what's going on in this guy's life. We don't have the whole picture. So let's go slow. Let's go gentle.

And let's remember, too, that we also have far to go. Along those lines, Jesus says that the way to kill judgmentalism is to pay attention to specks and logs.

### **Taking Care of Specks and Logs (vv. 3-4)**

**[3] "Why do you look at the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? [4] "Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' and behold, the log is in your own eye?"**

*The cheap gift of seeing problems through the window*

When I see a problem in you, I'm seeing what Jesus calls a "speck."

I'm exercising the cheap gift of seeing a problem in someone else. This is not an impressive gift. But it is one that C.S. Lewis wrote about in a short essay titled, "*The Trouble with 'X'*".<sup>9</sup>

In this essay, "X" is a person you know who is a problem. He or she is an insufferable gossip, always complains, is never satisfied, is a hypochondriac, or is bossy, jealous, lazy, fickle. Probably not "all of the above" but any could apply.

In fact, as I just gave that list you may be thinking of someone in your life who fits at least one of these categories.

Lewis points out that there is someone else in your world who fits in this group of awkward and difficult people: YOU.

He writes, "*It is important to realize that there is some fatal flaw in you, something which gives those around you the same feeling of despair which their flaws give you...Everyone notices it about you.*"

Lewis' advice for killing the problem of over-noticing the faults of others draws exactly from Jesus in Matthew 7.

Again, "*Abstain from all thinking about other people's faults, unless your duties as a teacher or a parent make it necessary to think about them...Instead, think of your own faults. For there, with God's help, you can do something. Of all the awkward and difficult people in your home, school, or work, there is only one you can improve. You.*"

The gift of looking out the window and seeing problems in others is a cheap gift. The gift of looking in the mirror and seeing problems is priceless.

*The priceless gift of seeing problems in the mirror*

G. K. Chesterton was a British author, poet, philosopher, and theologian. He died in 1936 and was a very articulate spokesman for our faith.

One story about Chesterton has is that the London Times was running a series of stories under the headline, "*What's wrong with the world?*"

Evidently having had enough of the series, Chesterton wrote this to the Times: "*What's wrong with the world? Dear Sir, I am. Sincerely, G.K. Chesterton.*"<sup>10</sup>

That's what Jesus is talking about. The way to live is to be self-aware, reflective, to have a clue about our own personal weaknesses.

<sup>9</sup> In Lewis' collection of essays, God in the Dock.

<sup>10</sup> Alexander Solzhenitsyn wrote in his book, The Gulag Archipelago, "If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?"

If we are ever to be of any real help to someone else, we will need to approach the person in need as a fellow struggler. Stop judging. And follow Jesus' next advice.

### **Judge, Judge Thyself... (v. 5)<sup>11</sup>**

***[5] "You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.***

My friend's struggle is a speck. My problem is a log. So, first things first. Identify and remove the log, or logs, as the case may be.

One of my many logs is an insatiable appetite for the approval of people. It's incessant and it is ugly. Another of my logs is impatience. It is amazingly easy for me to become impatient with traffic and trials, people and problems.

So I suffer from multiple-log-syndrome. Those who know me best know that I'm a mess, in desperate need of God's amazing, sustaining, life-changing grace.

Jesus says that when I'm conscious of this - my messed-up-ness - I am most likely to be of some help to someone else. That's true for all of us. If we would be the tools God might use to bring restoration to a struggling brother or sister, we will give lots of attention to the logs in our own eyes.

Then, when we turn to our friends and their specks, we'll be gentle, just like we want people to be with us; just like anyone is when working on someone who has a speck in their eye.

We'll use tweezers, not a pickaxe. We'll work as tenderly as possible. We won't rush. We'll take our time.

That's how we come alongside someone who's struggling with a speck that's keeping them from being all that Jesus wants them to be.

<sup>11</sup> See Luke 4:23 where Jesus' imagines His opponents telling Him, "***Physician, heal yourself...***" when He did no miracles in His hometown of Nazareth.

We use the tools of grace, mercy, kindness, just as grace has been lavished on us. Grace worked for us and grace will work for our friend.

Jesus isn't finished. If His first words are about how to deal with struggling people we know and love without being judgmental, to be gracious and kind, His next words tell us how to deal with some others.

### **Embrace Discernment (v. 6)**

***[6] "Do not give what is holy to dogs, and do not throw your pearls before swine, or they will trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you to pieces.***

Clearly, Jesus' reference to "dogs and hogs" is not positive.

Today we love our pet dogs. We love pigs, too, as pets and for breakfast. But in Jesus' day, both were known as unclean and dangerous animals. And we understand that.

If you're walking in the woods and come across a pack of wild dogs or feral hogs, you back away. You don't mess with them. They'll turn on you and kill you.

Jesus has used the terms "dogs" and "swine" to characterize certain people. And the "pearls" and the "holy" things you have to share are not fit for them.

Now, since Jesus has just been talking about brothers and sisters we should not judge, people we should not condemn, people with whom we should be gentle and whom we should restore, I take it that here, He is telling us that there are some people we would best back away from. Don't mess with them. They'll turn on you.

And these are people - very likely brothers and sisters in Christ - who are not struggling with sin.

They are embracing it. They are not seeking to have a speck removed from their eye. They are in open rebellion against God and His ways. They love that polluting speck.

Jesus doesn't want us to waste words and effort trying to help these because these don't want our help. They are closed. They are shut tight against God's truth. They are not interested in restoration.<sup>12</sup>

Which leaves us with a very challenging dilemma...

We want to be used by God. We want to share our "pearls" with others. Some will be receptive and some won't be. We are to gently remove the specks from the eyes of the receptive and, while being loving, we are not to "engage" with the non-receptive.

So where will we get a sense as to who to invest in and who to respectfully not invest in? Where will discernment come from? How will you and I determine who needs what in this or that case? Frankly, this is a puzzle that is beyond us!

So, isn't it fascinating that as we come to grips with the need for wisdom and discernment, Jesus now directs us to prayer?<sup>13</sup> Clearly, we need God's wisdom. Clearly, we need to pray.

### **Turn to God in Prayer (vv. 7-11)**

#### **Fervent Prayer (vv. 7-8)**

***[7] "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. [8] "For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened.***

This is not prayer for daily bread (as in the Lord's Prayer, Matthew 6:9-13). This is prayer to God for wisdom to know how to involve ourselves with the people in our world.

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<sup>12</sup> Jesus Himself lived out this wisdom. Herod (Antipas) heard John the Baptist gladly - and then beheaded him. When Jesus stood before this Herod at trial, He didn't say a word to him.

<sup>13</sup> Earlier, I will admit to seeing very little tie-in between verses 1-6 and verses 7 and following. After a week's worth of study, though, I'm persuaded that the passage (vv. 1-12) is of one piece and that verses 7-11 follow logically the prohibition of judging with a positive exhortation to pray to God for wisdom.

Some people need our non-judgmental help. Some, we will love, but won't get involved with at deep levels.<sup>14</sup>

Asking, seeking, and knocking all bring to mind the idea of going to God in prayer.<sup>15</sup> **"Asking"** is what all children do of all fathers. It's also what children of God do with their heavenly Father.

**"Seeking"** and **"knocking"** ramp up the intensity. There is desperation in the person who is pursuing God's wisdom so fervently that they are turning over rocks to seek wisdom and pounding on the door for help.

Jesus wants to convince us of God's willingness, His eagerness, to give us the wisdom we are so desperate to receive. He convinces us of that eagerness by pointing to the human family.

#### **Confident Prayer**

*The goodness of (fatally flawed) parents (vv. 9-10)*

***[9] "Or what man is there among you who, when his son asks for a loaf, will give him a stone? [10] "Or if he asks for a fish, he will not give him a snake, will he?"***

So, children (and grandchildren...) make their requests to us. And assuming that their requests are for something safe, legal, and affordable, we begin plotting as to how to make the gift a reality.

That's because we love to thrill our kids' hearts. And if you'll think back to the last time you gave a gift that make your child's eyes sparkle, you know that you were even happier than your kid was.

You wouldn't dream of purposefully disappointing your children. You'd never give them something harmful or potentially dangerous.

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<sup>14</sup> James 1:5 invites believers in Jesus to pray for God's wisdom to navigate challenging times.

<sup>15</sup> All three verbs are present imperatives. Continual activity.

And if that is the way parents deal with their kids, is it conceivable that God would deal with us any less beneficially, any less lovingly, any less eagerly?

*The GOODNESS of our heavenly Father (v. 11)*

***[11] “If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him!”<sup>16</sup>***

God responds to our requests with more eagerness than a loving human father responds to the wishes of his children.

So, what is fundamentally at stake here is our understanding of God. What kind of a God do we conceive God to be?

Is He a vicious tyrant who delights in deceiving and cheating us out of what we need? Is He a reluctant or distant Master who has to be bothered or bullied into giving us what we need?

Or is God the ultimate wise, protective, strong Father who is eager to give us what we need?

THAT is our God. And you can count on your heavenly Father to give you the wisdom you need.

He will nudge you toward non-judgmental, active involvement with a view to restoration with one struggling friend. And He will prompt you to do nothing but pray for another.

How God’s “nudges” come will vary, but I’m coming to learn to identify some of the many forms they may take.

- He may prompt you by a comment from your struggling friend that will help you decide to move in one way or the other.
- You may receive wise counsel, advice, from a trusted friend.

- Or, as you are asking, seeking, and knocking, striving to stay spiritually sensitive, a thought may come to you “out of nowhere.” “Give your friend a call, write a note, pay a visit, wait and pray.” I believe that these “out of the blue” thoughts that come to your redeemed mind may often reflect reliable wisdom from God.

And you move. You take a step of faith toward your friend. No judging. Your own “log” is acknowledged and all you want to do is help with his speck, her speck.

Or, you don’t move. You trust God that the best, most hopeful, redemptive thing to do with your friend is to be friendly, to not spiritually engage - and to keep praying like crazy.

Now Jesus’ final words about this matter of dealing with the people in our personal world are about as well known as “Judge not.” It’s so well-known that it’s named. We call it “The Golden Rule.”<sup>17</sup>

### **Lavish Sacrificial Love (v. 12)**

***[12] “In everything, therefore, treat people the same way you want them to treat you, for this is the Law and the Prophets.***

### **Stated Negatively**

In another place, Jesus said that the two greatest commands God ever gave were to love God with your heart, soul, mind, and strength AND to love your neighbor as yourself.

Here, He very helpfully summarizes all the commands that relate to “**love your neighbor**” into one.

That second greatest command - love your neighbor as yourself - is somewhat abstract. The Golden Rule is not abstract, and it’s also not completely original with Jesus.

<sup>16</sup> Strengthening the thought that Jesus is talking about wisdom and guidance, the parallel passage in Luke 18 includes Jesus’ words about God giving the Holy Spirit to those who ask.

<sup>17</sup> The Roman Emperor Severus (AD 222-235) was not a Christian, but he was so impressed by these words of Jesus that he had them inscribed in gold on a wall in his palace.

The Chinese philosopher, Confucius, had a more negative version of it that went like this:

IN EVERYTHING, DON'T DO TO OTHERS WHAT YOU WOULD NOT WANT THEM TO DO TO YOU.<sup>18</sup>

Now, putting the Golden Rule in a negative form is certainly a step in the right direction. It rules out taking offending action. And that's a good thing.

Society runs well when we don't violate each other's personal rights to life and liberty, property and wealth - the pursuit of happiness.<sup>19</sup>

It's sort of like the physician's Hippocratic Oath - "*First, do no harm.*" But medical care doesn't end with "not doing harm." Physicians are to actively promote health and healing. And the negative way of stating the Golden Rule doesn't at all capture the spirit of the positive.

Listen again to Jesus.

**As Jesus Said It...**

***[12] "In everything, therefore, treat people the same way you want them to treat you, for this is the Law and the Prophets."***<sup>20</sup>

He's not commanding that we refrain from offending action. This is a command to take positive, loving, gracious action.

There's nothing abstract here. This is "***love your neighbor as yourself***" in concrete.

And Jesus' wisdom is that He doesn't give dozens of situation-specific commands as to how to love well. No, He boiled it down to one governing rule that will guide us in a thousand real-time scenarios.

### **Conclusion:**

The "Golden Rule" requires that I:

- *LOVE and ACCEPT as I would wish to be loved and accepted*  
Think back to a time when you were lonely and scared. You realized that you were different, didn't fit in. You wanted to be accepted. Welcomed. Invited. Cheered for.
- *FORGIVE as I would wish to be forgiven*  
When you have sinned, you wanted your sin to be acknowledged, taken seriously. And you wanted others to still take you seriously, to see you, not as a lost cause, but as healable person. You wanted forgiveness. Restoration. Redemption.
- *HELP as I would wish to be helped*  
When you were last in trouble - with money or career, with kids or a marriage, with extended family or health - you wanted someone to offer help with no strings attached. You wanted someone to get their hands dirty in your mess.
- *UNDERSTAND others as I would wish to be understood*  
When you are confused and lost and at the end of your rope, you want your friend to understand that your current mess is not the end of the story. They "get" you. They understand. They assure you of their prayers for you.

Jesus doesn't give us a long list of rules. He calls us to life of love and says that what you want someone to do for you at your moment of brokenness and despair, confusion and need, is exactly what you are to do for them.

<sup>18</sup> The ancient Stoic philosophers and certain Rabbis had similar rules.

<sup>19</sup> Often referred to simply as, "common law."

<sup>20</sup> The reference to "the Law and the Prophets" here concludes the major content of the Sermon on the Mount, where the point has been to rightly interpret and explain the Old Testament Law. The two references (5:17 and 7:12) mark the start and finish of the body of the Sermon.