

The text we're looking at today begins, "Do not judge, or you too will be judged." Some of you may have fallen into that very trap when you judged me for my sacrilegious ugly Christmas sweater! I wore it just to test you a little bit. How many of you thought, "That's a little over the top? Where's his respect for the Lord? I mean, he's a pastor!" We all make judgments all the time. Just calling a sweater "ugly" is making a judgment about the sweater. Some of you will go home today and watch a football game, and at some point you'll say, "When are the 49ers going to get rid of so-and-so? He's terrible and he's overpaid." That's a judgment. You even make a judgment when you choose to go to Peet's instead of Starbucks because you like the coffee there better. We all make judgments all the time.

So what does Jesus mean when he says, "Do not judge"? These words are from the Sermon on the Mount, found in the Gospel of Matthew. In order to understand what Jesus means here we need to read the entire paragraph.

"Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.

"Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.

"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.

"Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.

"Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him! So in everything, do to others

what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets." (Matthew 7:1-12)

This whole section deals with relationships: In verses 1-6 he deals with our relationships with people, especially those we're prone to judge. In verses 7-11 he deals with our relationship with our heavenly Father to whom we come in prayer. Finally, in verse 12 he offers a governing principle for all relationships. And this is where I want to start today—with v. 12 at the end of our passage.

Jesus Teaches a Governing Principle for All Relationships

"So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you..." This is Jesus' summary statement, not only of the law and the prophets, but really of the entire Sermon on the Mount. It's probably the most widely known thing Jesus ever said. We call it the Golden Rule.

What's interesting about this is that the same idea, expressed in negative form, was stated by many teachers and philosophers before Jesus. The great Rabbi Hillel said, "What is hateful to yourself, do to no other; that's the whole law; the rest is commentary." In the apocryphal book of Tobit, written years before the time of Jesus, the hero tells his son, "What you hate, do to no man." The same idea is seen in Confucius and Buddhist writings. But they're all in the negative, saying, "Do **not** do to others what you'd **not** want them to do to you."

But when you think about it, that's very different from what Jesus says. The negative version simply prohibits hurtful behaviors. So we say things like, "Don't do anything to hurt people. Don't say mean things. Don't physically harm others. Don't break a promise. Don't steal from them."

If you do nothing you can satisfy the negative form of this! But the way Jesus states this is far more demanding. Later in Matthew Jesus tells a parable about the final judgment. He said on that day the Son of Man will separate the sheep from the goats. The sheep are invited into the kingdom because of the good they did—they fed the hungry, cared for the sick, and visited those in prison. But the goats are cursed because they did nothing for those in need. As far as we know they really didn't hurt anyone,

but they didn't help anyone either. So they fulfilled the Golden Rule in its negative form—by doing nothing!

Jesus calls for more than just not hurting people; he calls for doing good to them. What he calls for has endless possibilities, and it calls for creativity. "What would I want others to do for me? How can I bless others in the same way I want to be blessed?"

Of course we have to be careful how we apply this. I heard a story about a seminary student who wanted to have a Bible verse for everything he did. He did fine with that until he began to fall in love with a beautiful fellow student. The relationship progressed and he really wanted to kiss her, but he just couldn't find a Bible verse to okay it. He'd walk her to the dorm each night, look at her longingly, and then say, "good night." This went on for several months, and all the time he was searching the Bible, trying to find a verse to justify kissing her good night. But, one night, as he walked her to the dormitory, she pulled him toward her and planted a serious kiss right on his lips. At the end of the kiss, he gasped for air and stammered, "bible verse, bible verse." Before kissing him again, she said, "Do to others what you would have them do to you..." Okay, that might not be the best application of the Golden Rule but it's pretty creative!

I want you to think about this command as we go back up to the start of this passage in verses 1-6 where Jesus talks about judging others: Do to others what you would have them do to you...do not judge...

Jesus Teaches Us the Proper Attitude Toward Others

First of all, let's clarify what he means when he says, "Do not judge." Like I said, he doesn't mean to totally suspend our critical faculties in relation to others, to turn a blind eye to their faults, to never make any moral judgments and refuse to discern between truth and error.

We know he can't mean that because much of his teaching right here in the Sermon on the Mount is based on the assumption that we can and should use our critical powers. He's already told us our righteousness must surpass that of the Scribes and Pharisees. That's a value judgment saying something is wrong with their version of righteousness and yours must be different. And right down in v. 6 he says to avoid giving sacred things to dogs and pearls to pigs. That requires some judgment. Later he'll say to beware of false prophets; that's a judgment.

So what did he mean? He's not talking about assessing people critically, but judging them harshly. He's talking about being self-righteous, a fault-finder who enjoys uncovering the failings of others. He's talking about making yourself the ultimate lord and judge. Paul says in Romans, "*Who are you to judge someone else's*

servant? To their own master, servants stand or fall. And they will stand, for the Lord is able to make them stand" (Rom. 14:4).

The bottom line is, we just don't always know what's in another person's heart because we're not God.

Several years ago I was moved by the writings of three well-known Christian authors, one of them being Eugene Peterson who wrote the Bible translation called *The Message*. I wrote each of them a letter expressing my appreciation for their insights into spiritual formation. I also mentioned that I'd love to spend some time with them if there ever might be an opportunity to do so. Within a few weeks I received gracious letters back from two of the authors, but I waited for a reply from Eugene Peterson. Months passed, and it never arrived. My cynical mind concluded he was just too busy (or too self-important) to write me back. In short, I judged him.

A year later, I was speaking to a small group of people and I mentioned the three letters I'd written and the results, including Peterson's non-response. Little did I know that one of the women in the audience that night happened to be a friend of Peterson. She told me she was going to see him the following week and she'd ask him about my letter.

A few weeks later, a hand-written letter arrived from Eugene. He explained he'd received my letter a year earlier but lost the envelope with my return address. To my surprise, he'd kept the letter on his desk for an entire year, praying somehow he'd discover where to send his response. A few weeks later when we met for lunch, we both marveled at God's providence, and he kindly accepted my apology for presuming I knew why he'd not written.

Sometimes we presume to know why people don't meet our expectations and we judge them for it, but so often we don't know the whole story. John Stott writes, "The secret of our relationships with one another in the Christian Church, especially when we have our differences, is 'Jesus Christ is Lord.' To despise or stand in judgement on a fellow Christian isn't just a breach of fellowship. It's a denial of the Lordship of Jesus. I need to say to myself, Who am I, that I should cast myself in the role of another Christian's lord and judge? I must be willing for Jesus Christ to be not only my Lord and Judge, but also my fellow Christians' Lord and Judge. I must not interfere with Christ's Lordship over other Christians."

There are several things Jesus says about this that should help us avoid this kind of judgment of others. First, he says do not judge because you yourself will be judged by the same standard and measure you judge others. He's talking about being judged by God here. Earlier in this sermon Jesus indicated those who forgive will be forgiven and those who don't forgive will not

(6:14-15). So often we're harsher with others than we are with ourselves, but Jesus says God will judge us by the same standards we judge others.

Second, he says do not judge because you can't see clearly enough to do a good job. Jesus uses a bit of humor here. If you have a plank in your own eye, how can you see a speck in your brother's eye? The plank is literally a beam or a rafter, while a speck is a tiny splinter of wood or straw. Imagine that! It's a rather ludicrous picture Jesus paints here. But more often than not we tend to exaggerate the faults of others and minimize our own faults. We see a plank in their eye and not more than a splinter in our own.

John Wooden, former basketball coach at UCLA, was unique among coaches in that he seldom left his seat on the Bruins bench or lost his temper during a game. He said, "I tried to teach players that if they lose their temper or get out of control, they will get beat." In one interview he was pressed to be critical of former Indiana University coach Bobby Knight, who was known for his terrible temper during games. All Wooden said was, "I think Bob Knight is an outstanding teacher of the game of basketball, but I don't approve of his methods. But I'm not a judge, and I'm not judging Bob Knight. There's so much bad in the best of us and so much good in the worst of us, it hardly behooves me to talk about the rest of us." That's the kind of attitude Jesus is calling for.

Third, he says once you've dealt with your own stuff then you're in a position to help someone else. It's very important to notice here that once you deal with the plank in your own eye, you actually have a responsibility to your brother or sister in Christ to help them deal with the speck in their eye. This is consistent with the rest of the NT. Later in Matthew, Jesus says, "***If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over***" (Matt. 18:15). He doesn't say, "Don't judge that person." He says to go privately and point out their fault.

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul says more, "***Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ***" (Gal. 6:1-2). When Paul says they're "caught" in a sin, he doesn't mean they were caught in the act. He means they're "caught" in the sense they're stuck and trapped and can't get out. They need our help. That word "restore" was used to mend a broken bone. Our purpose is to gently and firmly restore, not to reject. Don't go with a condemning attitude. Go

with gentleness and humility, knowing how weak we are as well. We're to do what we can to bear their burden.

Again, think of this in relation to the Golden Rule. First of all, deep down we all know we have faults. We all know we're a work in progress. We all sin and sometimes we don't even know it. The last thing we need is someone judging us for every wrong move we make. We need people to show us grace every day. Certainly, if we have a massive blind spot in our lives, one that's hurting ourselves and others, we'd want a good friend to come along and point that out to us, and help us deal with it as well. That's what Jesus is saying here in these verses about judging others. When it comes to judging, do to others what you would have them do to you.

But what are we to do with this statement about dogs and pigs? Jesus says don't give dogs what's sacred or throw pearls to pigs. It sounds so harsh. But this isn't the first or last time Jesus called a spade a spade. He called Herod a "fox" and the Pharisees a "brood of vipers." In Jesus' day, Gentiles were called "dogs" and pigs were unclean animals Jews had nothing to do with. If you're a dog lover don't be offended because the dogs of Jesus' day were mongrels that scavenged in the city's garbage dumps. So a Jew would never take sacred food that had been offered to God in the temple and feed it to dogs. And he'd never dream of throwing valuable pearls to unclean pigs.

Jesus is saying be discerning about who you try to help. You may go and try to help a brother or sister who's caught in sin, and if he's truly a brother in Christ he'll appreciate your concern and listen. But not everyone is like that. There are some with very hard hearts who don't want to hear it. Proverbs says, "***Do not rebuke mockers or they will hate you; rebuke the wise and they will love you***" (Prov. 9:8). So the idea here is to be careful and discerning in who you try to help. Not everyone wants to be helped.

Later, the disciples would apply this to who they shared the gospel with. When Jesus sent out the Twelve on a mission, he said, "***If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, leave that home or town and shake the dust off your feet***" (Matt. 10:14). That's one application of what Jesus is saying here. Don't throw the pearl of the Gospel to those who defiantly and continually reject it.

Jesus Teaches Us the Proper Attitude Toward Our Father

But all of this is not easy. How do I pull this off? "Treat others the way I want to be treated." I fail at that every day! "Do not judge." That's hard! "Take the plank out of my own eye before I

try to take the splinter out of someone else's." Again, I fail at that every day.

I believe that's why sandwiched in the middle of this paragraph is this business about prayer in verses 7-11. Jesus is saying,

"Do you find this difficult? Ask, seek and knock. Ask the Father to help you, and keep at it. Keep asking, keep seeking, and keep knocking at his door. He loves to give good gifts to his children. What father doesn't? What kind of father would fool his son with a stone when he asks for bread? What kind of father would fool his son with a snake when he asks for a fish? You people, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children when they ask for good things. Don't you think your heavenly Father will give good gifts to those who ask?"

This isn't a blanket promise that we'll get everything we ask God for. What kind of God would that be who just caters to any and all of our selfish needs? Besides that, we don't always know what we need. We don't always know what's best for us. So, yes, there are times when he does **not** give us what we ask for, but not when what we ask for is good and according to his will. If you ask him to allow you to see the plank in your own eye, he'll do it. If you ask him to help you strip away a condemning, fault-finding, censorious spirit, he'll do it. If you ask him to help you gently and humbly approach a brother or sister about a splinter in their eye, he'll do it.

And here's the best thing: When you know that you have that kind of Father in heaven—One who is kind and gracious and generous—you'll find living out the Golden Rule will be much easier. Having experienced grace, you'll be able to show grace. That's why Jesus goes right from talking about our heavenly Father who loves to give good gifts to those who ask, to talking about how we treat others. The Golden Rule flows right out of our experience of the gracious generosity of God. That's why apart from the Gospel we can't do any of this. It's like, *If you know him as this kind of Father, act like it. If you know him as the Father who sent his Son to die for you, you can do this. Be like him. He wants to give you more than you can even imagine.*

In his book *The Divine Commodity* Skye Jethani shares a story from a trip he took to India with his father. While walking the streets

of New Delhi, a little boy approached them. He was skinny as a rail and naked but for tattered blue shorts. His legs were contorted and he could only waddle along on his calloused knees.

He made his way toward Skye and his father and cried out, "One rupee, please! One rupee!"

Skye describes what happened when his father eventually responded to the boy's persistent begging: "What do you want?" Skye's father asked.

"One rupee, sir," the boy said while motioning his hand to his mouth and bowing his head in deference.

The father laughed. "How about I give you five rupees?"

The boy suddenly became defiant. He retracted his hand and sneered. He thought the father was joking, having a laugh at his expense. After all, no one would willingly give up five rupees. The boy started shuffling away, mumbling curses under his breath.

The father reached into his pocket. Hearing the coins jingle, the boy stopped and looked back over his shoulder. The father was holding out a five-rupee coin. He approached the stunned boy and placed the coin into his hand. The boy didn't move or say a word. He just stared at the coin in his hand. They passed him and proceeded to cross the street.

A moment later the shouting resumed, except this time the boy was yelling, "Thank you! Thank you, sir! Bless you!" He raced after them once again—but not for more money but to touch the father's feet.

Sometimes we don't ask God for enough. We ask for a little, but he wants to give us so much more. He wants to transform us into people who are like him; people who love the way he loves; people who aren't defined by what we do **not** do, but by what we **do** for others; people who are agents of redemption rather than judgment in peoples' lives. So ask him. Ask him to make you that kind of person, and just as surely as a good father will give good gifts to his children who ask, he'll answer your prayer to become more like him.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC South. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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Catalog No. 1434-13S