

The Sermon on the Mount, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 12: Judging, Asking, and the Golden Rule

Matthew 7:1-12

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Doctrinally, this passage requires careful balance, because it is among the most misused in all of Scripture. Jesus forbids a censorious, hypocritical spirit of judgment, the habit of scrutinizing others while excusing ourselves, and warns that the standard we use on others will be used on us. But he is plainly not forbidding all moral discernment; in the same breath he speaks of removing the speck from a brother's eye (which requires recognizing it), of not casting pearls before swine, and shortly of discerning false prophets by their fruit. Help your class hold both truths: a humble refusal of the judging spirit, and a clear-eyed commitment to truth and loving correction. The popular use of judge not as a ban on all moral evaluation is a distortion the lesson should gently correct.

The passage then turns, perhaps surprisingly, to prayer, with the great invitation to ask, seek, and knock, grounded in the goodness of the Father who gives good gifts to his children. The connection is rich: the same God before whom we dare not set ourselves up as judge over others is a generous Father who delights to give to those who simply ask. A critical, grasping spirit and a small view of God often travel together; knowing the Father's generosity is part of what frees us from judging others.

Finally, the passage crowns the body of the Sermon with the Golden Rule, which Jesus says sums up the Law and the Prophets. The formational aim is to lead students to deal honestly with their own planks before addressing others' specks, to come to the Father with renewed confidence in prayer, and to adopt the active, imaginative love of the Golden Rule as the governing principle of their dealings with others. Ground it all in the Father's generosity toward us in the gospel, which both humbles our judging and fuels our love. Keep the tone humbling but warm; this passage exposes our hypocrisy in order to free us into generous love.

Question 1

Student Question:

Jesus says, "Judge not, that you be not judged," and warns that "with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged" (v. 1-2). What kind of judging is Jesus forbidding here, and how is it different from the honest moral discernment Scripture clearly expects of us elsewhere?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Begin by carefully defining the judging Jesus forbids, because this verse is so widely abused. The Greek does not forbid all evaluation; it targets a censorious, condemning spirit, the habit of

setting ourselves up as judge over others, pronouncing verdicts on their hearts and worth, while conveniently exempting ourselves. It is the posture of superiority, not the act of moral discernment.

Show that Scripture clearly expects discernment elsewhere, so Jesus cannot be banning it here. Jesus tells us to judge with right judgment (John 7:24), to discern false prophets by their fruit (verses 15 to 20 of this very chapter), and to remove the speck from a brother's eye, which first requires seeing it accurately. Paul instructs the church to judge those inside it (1 Corinthians 5:12). To make judge not forbid all moral evaluation pits Scripture against itself and, ironically, becomes its own harsh judgment against anyone who discerns right from wrong.

Teach the sobering principle Jesus attaches: with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and the measure you use will be measured to you. The censorious person is establishing the very standard by which God will measure them. The harsh, unforgiving, fault-finding critic invites harsh measurement on themselves, while the merciful will receive mercy (James 2:13). How we treat others' failures sets the terms for how ours will be treated.

Help students locate the heart issue. The forbidden judging flows from pride and self-deception, an inflated view of ourselves and a blindness to our own sin. The cure is not indifference to right and wrong but humility, a clear sight of our own need for mercy that softens how we regard the failures of others. We are to be people of conviction and of mercy at once, never one without the other.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The forbidden judging as a censorious, condemning, self-exempting spirit, not moral discernment
- Scripture's clear expectation of right judgment and discernment (John 7:24; 1 Corinthians 5:12)
- The popular distortion of 'judge not' as a ban on all moral evaluation
- The standard we use on others becoming the standard used on us (James 2:13)
- Pride and self-deception as the root, humility and mercy as the cure

Discussion Prompts

- What kind of judging is Jesus forbidding, and what is he not forbidding?
- How does the popular use of 'judge not' misread this passage?
- Why does the standard we apply to others come back upon us?

Question 2

Student Question:

Think about your own tendency to evaluate others. Where do you find yourself harshest in judging people, and what would change if you measured yourself by the same standard you apply to them?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question invites students to locate where they are harshest in judging others, since we all have particular targets. For some it is people whose sins differ from their own; for others it is those who have wronged them, those of a different group, or those whose failures they find contemptible. Naming the target is revealing.

Help students apply the measure-for-measure principle to themselves. What if they were evaluated by the same standard, with the same lack of charity, the same assumption of bad motives, the same refusal of excuse, that they apply to the people they judge most harshly? Usually this exercise produces a healthy and humbling discomfort.

Move toward the mercy that flows from honest self-knowledge. The point is not to stop caring about right and wrong but to extend to others the same charity we instinctively want for ourselves: the benefit of the doubt, awareness of circumstances, room for growth. Encourage students to choose one person they have judged harshly and to begin regarding them with the mercy they themselves would hope to receive.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Locating where we are harshest in judging others
- Applying the measure-for-measure standard to ourselves
- The humbling discomfort of being judged as we judge
- Extending to others the charity we want for ourselves

Discussion Prompts

- Where are you harshest in judging others?
- What would change if you were measured by the standard you apply to them?
- Whom could you begin to regard with the mercy you would hope to receive?

Question 3

Student Question:

Jesus pictures a man trying to remove a speck from his brother's eye while a plank juts from his own (v. 3-5). Why does Jesus call this person a hypocrite, and what does the image teach us about the order in which we must deal with sin, ours first, then others?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Linger on the comedy and the sting of Jesus' image: a man with a plank, a roof beam, protruding from his own eye, attempting delicate surgery on the speck of sawdust in his brother's. The exaggeration is deliberate and meant to make us laugh and then squirm. The absurdity exposes the absurdity of our own habit.

Define why Jesus calls this person a hypocrite. It is not that he sees the brother's speck wrongly; the speck may be real. It is that he is blind to the far greater problem in himself. Hypocrisy here is the self-deception that scrutinizes others' small faults while ignoring our own large ones, that is exacting toward others and lenient toward self. It is the precise opposite of the order Jesus requires.

Teach the order Jesus prescribes: first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's. Self-examination comes before correction of others, always. This is not a permanent disqualification from ever helping a brother, but a required sequence. We deal with ourselves first, honestly and thoroughly, and only then are we fit to help another.

Show why this order matters practically. The person who has wrestled with their own sin approaches a brother's fault with humility, gentleness, and fellow-feeling, as one beggar telling another where to find bread. The person who skips self-examination approaches as a superior, a judge, and does more harm than good. The plank must come out first, not so we may finally judge, but so we may truly help.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The deliberate absurdity of the plank-and-speck image
- Hypocrisy as self-deceived scrutiny of others while ignoring ourselves
- The required order: deal with our own sin first, then help others (v. 5)
- Self-examination as preparation for humble, gentle correction
- The difference between approaching a brother as a superior and as a fellow beggar

Discussion Prompts

- Why does Jesus call the speck-inspector a hypocrite?
- What is the order Jesus prescribes for dealing with sin?
- How does dealing with our own plank change the way we help a brother?

Question 4

Student Question:

Be honest about a "plank" in your own life that you have been ignoring while focusing on others' faults. What is it, and what would it look like to take the log out of your own eye first this week?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question asks students to name a plank in their own life that they have been ignoring while focusing on others' faults. The difficulty of the question is part of its value; planks are, by definition, the sins we are blindest to. Encourage honest, prayerful self-examination, perhaps asking God to reveal what we cannot see in ourselves (Psalm 139:23–24).

Help students notice that our harshest judgments of others often point to our own planks. We are frequently most critical of the very faults we are blind to in ourselves, or of sins that mask our own. Paying attention to where we are most condemning can be a clue to where our own log lies.

Move toward concrete self-dealing this week: confession, repentance, perhaps seeking the help of a trusted believer to see what we cannot. The aim is not morbid self-focus but the honest, humbling work of removing our own log so that we can see clearly, both to walk rightly ourselves and to help others rightly.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Naming a plank we have been ignoring
- Asking God to reveal what we cannot see in ourselves (Psalm 139:23–24)
- Harsh judgments as clues to our own blind spots
- Concrete self-dealing: confession, repentance, trusted help

Discussion Prompts

- What plank in your own life have you been ignoring?
- Might your harshest judgments point to your own blind spots?
- What would it look like to remove your own log first this week?

Question 5

Student Question:

After dealing with our own plank, Jesus says we will “see clearly to take the speck” out of our brother’s eye (v. 5), and he warns against giving what is holy to those who will only trample it (v. 6). How do these verses show that Jesus is calling for clear-sighted discernment and humble correction, not the abandonment of all moral judgment?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Draw out the positive goal of the self-examination Jesus requires: then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother’s eye. Jesus does envision us helping our brother; he simply insists we be fit to do it. This verse decisively refutes the idea that Jesus forbids all involvement in one another’s spiritual lives. Loving correction, rightly done, is part of Christian fellowship (Galatians 6:1; James 5:19–20).

Pair this with the puzzling verse about not giving what is holy to dogs or casting pearls before swine. Whatever its precise application, it plainly requires discernment, the ability to evaluate how people are responding to holy things and to act wisely. Jesus, having warned against hypocritical judging, here assumes we will exercise careful spiritual judgment about people and situations. The two are not in conflict.

Teach the balance your class most needs: neither condemnation nor indifference, but humble, clear-sighted, loving discernment. The judging spirit errs by condemning; a false tolerance errs by refusing to recognize sin or speak truth at all. The path between them is to deal with ourselves first, then to help others gently, truthfully, and humbly, as those who know our own need for grace.

Apply this to the practice of correction. When we do help a brother with a genuine speck, it must be after self-examination, in a spirit of gentleness, with the goal of restoration rather than condemnation, and from a posture of fellowship rather than superiority. Galatians 6:1 captures it: restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, keeping watch on yourself. This is the opposite of both harsh judging and cowardly silence.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Jesus envisioning us helping a brother, not abandoning involvement (Galatians 6:1; James 5:19–20)
- The pearls-and-swine saying as a call to discernment, not indifference
- The balance between condemnation and false tolerance
- Correction done gently, truthfully, and for restoration
- Keeping watch on ourselves even as we help others (Galatians 6:1)

Discussion Prompts

- How do these verses show Jesus expects discernment, not its abandonment?
- What is the difference between humble correction and condemning judgment?
- How can we help a brother with a speck in the right spirit?

Question 6

Student Question:

Where might God be calling you to help a brother or sister with a genuine “speck,” humbly and after self-examination, rather than either condemning them or ignoring the issue entirely? How could you do that with the right spirit?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question asks students to consider whether God is calling them to help a brother or sister with a genuine speck, after self-examination and in the right spirit. Many believers fall into one

of two ditches here: they either condemn freely or, fearing the charge of judging, say nothing while a brother is harmed by sin. The question invites the harder, more loving middle path.

Help students discern a situation where loving correction may be called for, a friend caught in something destructive, a relationship being damaged, a believer drifting. Then help them examine themselves first, check their motives, and consider how to approach with gentleness, humility, and the goal of restoration rather than the satisfaction of being right.

Encourage one concrete, prayerful step where it is genuinely warranted, undertaken in the manner Galatians 6:1 prescribes. At the same time, caution against using this as license for the very fault-finding Jesus condemned; the call is to humble, self-examined, restorative love, exercised carefully and not as a hobby of correcting others.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Discerning where loving correction is genuinely called for
- Avoiding both free condemnation and cowardly silence
- Self-examination and pure motives before correcting
- Gentleness, humility, and restoration as the manner and goal (Galatians 6:1)

Discussion Prompts

- Where might God be calling you to help someone with a genuine speck?
- How would you examine yourself before approaching them?
- How could you do it with gentleness and the goal of restoration?

Question 7

Student Question:

Jesus urges, "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened" (v. 7-8). What does this teach about the kind of persistence and confidence God invites in prayer, and what does it assume about the character of the One we are asking?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Turn now to the great invitation to prayer, and note the rising intensity of the three verbs: ask, seek, knock. Asking is the language of request; seeking adds active pursuit; knocking adds persistence at a closed door. Together they call for a confident, persevering prayer that keeps coming to God rather than giving up. The present-tense force is keep asking, keep seeking, keep knocking.

Teach what this assumes about God's character, which is the real ground of the promise. We can ask boldly and persist confidently only because of who God is. Jesus immediately makes the point: if sinful human fathers know how to give good gifts to their children, how much more will

the heavenly Father give good things to those who ask him. Persistent prayer is not nagging a reluctant God; it is the natural confidence of children before a good Father.

Address the obvious pastoral question, since every honest class will feel it: what about prayers that seem unanswered? Help students see that the promise is not a blank check for whatever we want; it is the assurance that the Father gives good things to those who ask. A good Father sometimes gives differently or later than we ask, and sometimes withholds what would harm us, precisely because he is good. The parallel in Luke 11:13 specifies the supreme good gift: the Holy Spirit. God always answers the asking child with good, even when the good differs from our request.

Encourage perseverance grounded in the Father's goodness. The danger Jesus addresses is not over-asking but under-asking, giving up, growing discouraged, ceasing to bring our needs and desires to God. Jesus urges us to keep coming, confident not that we will always get exactly what we name, but that a good Father will always answer his asking children with good.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The rising intensity of ask, seek, knock as confident, persevering prayer (v. 7–8)
- The Father's goodness as the ground of bold prayer (v. 11)
- Persistent prayer as the confidence of children, not the nagging of a reluctant God
- Unanswered prayer and the good Father who gives wisely (Luke 11:13)
- The danger of under-asking and giving up rather than over-asking

Discussion Prompts

- What kind of prayer do ask, seek, and knock describe?
- What does this invitation assume about the character of the One we ask?
- How do we hold this promise together with prayers that seem unanswered?

Question 8

Student Question:

Reflect on your own prayer life. Have you stopped asking, seeking, or knocking about something because you grew discouraged or assumed God was not listening? What would it look like to come to the Father with renewed confidence this week?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question asks students whether they have stopped asking, seeking, or knocking about something, perhaps from discouragement, weariness, or the quiet assumption that God is not listening. Many believers carry a prayer they have given up on, a desire they no longer dare to bring, a door they have stopped knocking on.

Help students name what they have stopped praying for and why. Sometimes the discouragement comes from a distorted view of God as reluctant or indifferent; sometimes from a season of unanswered prayer; sometimes from simple weariness. Bringing this honestly into the light, alongside Jesus' invitation, can rekindle hope.

Move toward renewed asking, grounded not in a guarantee of getting exactly what we want but in the Father's proven goodness. Encourage students to return to the Father this week with the specific request they had abandoned, trusting him to answer with good even if the answer differs from their asking. The aim is to recover the confidence of an asking child.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Identifying a prayer we have given up on
- Naming the source of our discouragement
- Distorted views of God that silence our asking
- Renewed asking grounded in the Father's proven goodness

Discussion Prompts

- Have you stopped asking God for something, and why?
- What assumption about God lies behind that discouragement?
- What would it look like to come to the Father again with renewed confidence?

Question 9

Student Question:

Jesus grounds our asking in the Father's goodness, then sums up the whole law in the Golden Rule: "Whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them" (v. 11-12). How does knowing God as a generous Father free us from a judging, grasping spirit and empower us to treat others as we would want to be treated? Connect the Father's generosity toward us to the way we are called to treat others.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the doctrinal climax, and it brings together the threads of the whole passage: the Father's generosity and the Golden Rule. Start with the Father's character as Jesus presents it. The argument moves from lesser to greater: if you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask. The foundation of everything is a Father who is generous, good, and delights to give to his children.

Show how knowing this Father frees us from the judging, grasping spirit the passage opened with. The censorious spirit often grows from insecurity and scarcity, from a heart that must prop itself up by looking down on others, that grasps because it does not trust that it is provided for. When we know ourselves to be the children of a lavishly generous Father, we no longer need to

exalt ourselves over others or grasp anxiously, and our hearts are freed to be generous in turn. A small view of God breeds a judging heart; a true view of the generous Father breeds a merciful one.

Now bring in the Golden Rule as the crown of it all: whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets. Note its active, positive form. Many teachers before Jesus had said, in effect, do not do to others what you would not want done to you. Jesus makes it active: do for others what you would want done for you. It is not mere restraint from harm but the positive, imaginative pursuit of others' good.

Explain why this is the perfect antidote to the judging spirit. The critic stands over others, measuring and condemning; the one who lives by the Golden Rule stands alongside them, imagining their needs as if they were his own and acting to meet them. The rule requires us to put ourselves in another's place, which is precisely what the hypocritical judge refuses to do. It transforms our default posture from evaluation to empathy, from suspicion to love.

Finally, ground the rule in the gospel, for it is more than a clever maxim; it is the shape of how God has treated us. The generous Father did not merely refrain from harming us; he actively sought our good at the cost of his Son, doing for us, while we were undeserving, the very thing we most needed. We love and serve others this way because we have first been loved and served this way by God (1 John 4:11). The Father's generosity toward us is both the freedom and the fuel for treating others as we would be treated. Send your students home humbled out of their judging, confident in their asking, and freed to live the Golden Rule as children of a generous Father.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The Father's generosity as the foundation of the passage (v. 11)
- A small view of God breeding a judging, grasping heart; a true view breeding mercy
- The Golden Rule's active, positive form: doing good, not merely avoiding harm (v. 12)
- The Golden Rule as the antidote to judging, replacing evaluation with empathy
- The gospel as God doing for us what we most needed, the ground and fuel of our love (1 John 4:11)

Discussion Prompts

- How does knowing God as a generous Father free us from a judging, grasping spirit?
- Why is the active form of the Golden Rule the perfect antidote to judging?
- How has the generous Father already treated us according to the Golden Rule?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back over the whole passage. Jesus has confronted your critical eye, invited you to ask boldly, and called you to the Golden Rule. Where is he putting his finger most directly, and what is one specific way you will deal with your own heart and treat others differently this week?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The capstone asks students to name where Jesus is putting his finger most directly and one specific way they will deal with their own heart and treat others differently this week. The passage has moved through judging, asking, and loving, and the application should touch at least one of these concretely.

Help students choose a fitting step: removing a particular plank through honest repentance, extending mercy to someone they have judged, returning to the Father with a prayer they had abandoned, or performing a concrete act of Golden-Rule love toward a specific person. Press for one nameable action rather than a general resolve.

Close on the generous Father. Send students home humbled but not crushed, freed from the exhausting work of judging others, confident to ask of a good Father, and empowered to treat others as they themselves long to be treated, because they have been loved this way first. Remind them that the Golden Rule is not a heavy law but the natural overflow of a heart that knows the generosity of God.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Choosing a concrete step in judging, asking, or loving
- Removing a plank, extending mercy, renewing prayer, or an act of Golden-Rule love
- One nameable action over a general resolve
- Living the Golden Rule as the overflow of knowing God's generosity

Discussion Prompts

- Where is Jesus putting his finger most directly in this passage?
- What is one way you will deal with your own heart this week?
- What is one Golden-Rule act of love you will show a specific person?