

The Sermon on the Mount

Lesson 12: Judging, Asking, and the Golden Rule -- Matthew 7:1-12

There is a verse in this passage that the world has memorized even when it has forgotten the rest of the Bible. "Judge not, that you be not judged." It gets quoted at dinner tables and in comment sections, usually as a way of telling someone to mind their own business. But the people who quote it most loudly have often never read the next few lines, where Jesus paints one of the funniest and most piercing pictures in all his teaching: a man with a plank of wood sticking out of his own eye, squinting and fussing as he tries to remove a tiny speck of sawdust from his brother's. We laugh, and then we wince, because we recognize the man. He is us.

Jesus is not banning all moral discernment here; in the very same passage he will tell us to watch out for false prophets and not to throw our pearls before pigs, which certainly requires judgment of a kind. What he forbids is the censorious, hypocritical spirit that scrutinizes everyone else while staying conveniently blind to itself. The spirit that majors in other people's specks and ignores its own planks. Jesus says: deal with your own plank first. Then you will see clearly enough to help your brother with his speck, not as a self-appointed judge, but as a fellow patient who has been to the doctor.

Then the passage opens out in a surprising direction. Having warned us against playing judge, Jesus invites us to come to the true Judge as children to a Father. "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you." If we who are evil know how to give good gifts to our children, how much more will our Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him. The same God before whom we dare not exalt ourselves over others is a Father who delights to give good gifts to those who simply ask.

And then Jesus gathers it all into one shining sentence, the rule that sums up the whole law and the prophets: "Whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them." Not merely refrain from harming others, but actively treat them as you would long to be treated. It is the perfect antidote to the judging spirit, because the critic stands over people, while the one who lives by this rule stands alongside them, imagining their need and meeting it. Before you read another line, ask yourself which posture has marked you lately, the squinting judge with the plank, or the brother who treats others as he himself longs to be treated.

Group Discussion: Jesus warns against a hypocritical, judging spirit, then invites us to ask freely of our Father, and finally sums everything up in the Golden Rule. How are these three things connected, and why might a critical spirit toward others go hand in hand with a small view of our Father's generosity?

Personal Reflection: Examine your own heart honestly. Where have you been quick to scrutinize the specks in others while ignoring a plank in your own life, and how might Jesus be inviting you to deal with yourself first?

Read Matthew 7:1-12

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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?

6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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?
9. 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.
10. 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?

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Reflect on these passages: Romans 2:1-4, the one who judges others while doing the same things; Romans 14:10-13, not passing judgment on a brother but resolving not to put a stumbling block before him; James 4:11-12, there being one Lawgiver and Judge; Luke 11:9-13, the parallel call to ask, with the Father giving the Holy Spirit to those who ask; Galatians 6:1-5, restoring a brother gently while watching ourselves.