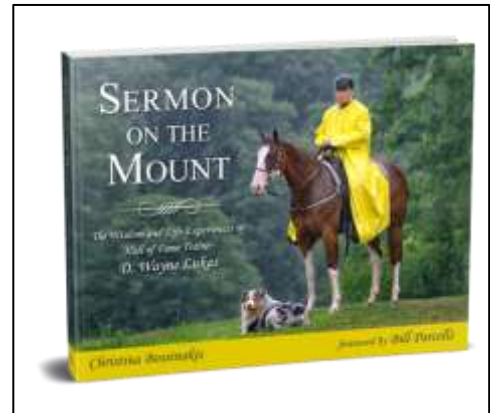


Alright...so today we continue in our series called “What If Jesus Was Serious?” where we are going through Jesus’ teaching that is known as “The Sermon on the Mount.” It’s not called that because Jesus **preached from a horse**...but because Matthew tells us that he went up on a mountainside and began to preach. And today’s passage is in two distinct sections, and there are a couple main points that come from these verses I want to highlight for us.



The first part of what we read this morning is all about judging. This might be the most frequently quoted section of Scripture by non-Christians. Maybe Christians, as well. I don’t know. I just know that we hear it and read it quite a bit, and is just sort of the pervasive attitude in today’s world: Don’t judge...Don’t proclaim something as universally true and right and the standard that God sets. The problem is that it’s usually just the first verse that’s quoted or paraphrased in just three words: “Don’t judge others.” So, what does Jesus mean by this teaching?

First, we need to recognize that there are two kinds of judgment. **One kind of judgment is what we might call “discernment.”** This is simply assessing a situation, or a person, or an organization, or...the list goes on. It’s figuring out what is good, right, appropriate...for us Christians it’s also what is godly and holy. We do this all the time in every day situations. You have to discern – or judge – how close to be to the car in front of you as you’re driving; you have to judge how you’re going to spend your money – do you buy the \$30 shoes that aren’t quite as comfortable as you’d like and cheaply made, or the \$100 ones that are comfy and made of more durable materials? (If you’re like me, you get the \$100 ones on clearance at the Rack, so they only cost \$40.) Are you going to let your kids go over and spend an afternoon at someone’s house when you’ve never met the parents or been to their home? Those are all discernment things. God gave us brains, and he wants us to use them, and

a lot of life is using our brains to make these kinds of decisions. There are judgments like these that we make every single day. **Jesus is not saying to avoid these kinds of judgments.**

In fact, next week we're going to look at Jesus' teaching to watch out for false prophets. We have to judge/discern who is false and who is genuine: listen, engage our brains, compare it to Scripture, and make the call on who's false and who isn't. So, Jesus is inviting us to judge in this discerning kind of way here in the Sermon on the Mount.

What he's steering us away from is judgmentalism: "holier than thou" superiority that belittles and condemns. That's what Jesus is telling us not to do. When we engage in that, we're being hypocrites. This is the third time (other two are in chapter 6) Jesus uses the word in the sermon on the mount, though we haven't really talked about it much yet. According to what Jesus teaches each time he uses the word, hypocrites are those who live their faith – or to use the words that Jesus uses: "practice their righteousness" – in such a way that it elevates themselves to be more than they really are. It's a hollow kind of faith that seeks to look better than it is.

You know how at Easter a common treat is chocolate bunnies, or chocolate eggs, that are big and look good and you think, "How can I ever eat this, it's so much chocolate?" Then you bite into it and it's hollow? It's so disappointing. They're fake. They look good on the outside, but there really isn't much too them. They're misleading...they're hypocritical chocolate bunnies. **Jesus is saying that our faith is not to be a hollow chocolate Easter bunny faith.** That's not a genuine faith. So, don't be hypocritical, and specifically here he says, "don't be judgmental."

And then he uses this speck of sawdust and plank illustration to help us understand what he means, but there's also a shift here. Rather than judging a person, Jesus ends this little illustration with helping the other person. Take care of the plank in your own eye, but even then don't judge someone else because of their faults and sins. It's not like being "perfect" gives you a platform from which to judge (not that we are perfect, of course). That's God's job, not ours. **Instead, help the person get the "sawdust" out of**

their eye. A person with unmanageable debt, like credit card bills that continually aren't paid off each month, shouldn't be criticizing the person who manages their money well but takes out a loan to buy a car or something like that. But maybe once that person who struggles with debt has gotten out of their burden of debt they can lend some insight to the one who bought the car – like how to get it paid off quickly so they don't also end up in more and more debt. Or even better: encourage the person to save their money (once the loan is paid off) before the next car they buy, so they don't have to go into debt at all next time. That's what a lot of wisdom is: lessons learned the hard way. And we can share that with others to help them. So have a long look in the mirror and take care of your own business...let's take the planks out of our eyes, so we can help someone else with their issue.

When we don't do that, when we live as hypocrites, then our faith (we ourselves, even) gets torn to pieces. That's giving to dogs what is sacred and casting our pearls before pigs as he says in verse 6. People see right through us when we live like hypocrites, and it discredits our faith. Your faith and this thing called "Christianity" is a gift, it's special, it's valuable, and so we want to treat it well by living a life of integrity. Jesus is not saying, "Don't hang out with non-Christians or with people who revel in their sin and think it's ok." That's exactly who we *should* be hanging out with. Simply live with integrity rather than hypocrisy, because otherwise you, your faith, and the Christian faith, will be torn to shreds.

So: If Jesus is serious, then it's important to make sure that what the world sees about our faith lines up with what's on the inside. And the inside is where we start. This takes self-awareness and evaluation. It takes reflection and confession. So, have humility, take a look in the mirror, and take care of your own business so you can live your faith well, helping others rather than judging them.

Jesus then shifts gears a bit in this next section about asking and receiving. I think Skye Jethani has a good point in his book that this part serves as a bridge between our relationships with others and our relationship with God. He writes, "The invitation to ask-seek-knock comes first within the context of how we relate to our brothers and sisters, and only after that is it applied to

how we relate to our heavenly Father.” Rather than “asking” someone to help with something, or do something for you, or give you something: the way of the world tends to be to manipulate them into doing it. But in the Kingdom of God, we just ask. It makes for genuine dialog and brings people together rather than pulling them apart.

For instance, if a CEO of a company wields his or her power and manipulates an employee to do something then it creates fear and forms cracks in the relationship. Unfortunately, it’s not uncommon. But if the CEO lets go of that power and simply asks the employee if they might do something, or asks for their genuine opinion on something, then it builds trust and grows the relationship. The employee feels valued and appreciated rather than feeling used like a pawn. And it’s a two-way street, where the employee can ask the CEO, too...and of course, applies to other situations too. Either way, it cultivates relationship. So, there’s this very human element about “asking.”

Jesus does then take this asking and speaks of it in terms of asking things of God. And his point is that: **God will give good gifts to those who ask.** It doesn’t mean God always grants every wish. Sometimes “No” is actually the better gift. I keep asking God for a Lamborghini, but the answer is continually “no.” Truth be told, that’s actually my wife’s answer speaking on God’s behalf. But God’s gifts are always a blessing. He seeks to bless and encourage us. Sometimes the blessing is a challenge...there might be some sharpening and refining and pruning...but it’s a blessing in the long run.

So, a week ago or so I was looking at this passage with a few people in a Bible study and the opening question just to get us thinking and talking was: **What’s the best gift that your parents ever gave you?** You can think about that for a moment...(Background: all of us have been Christians since at least college, and 3 of us since we were kids.) So, one person said, “Teaching me to ski” (that was not me, by the way); Two of us said “Time together with them (memories of trips together, activities together, etc.);” One guy said, “Teaching me about the power of compound interest.” Spiritual giants, right? Then we realized 15 or 20 minutes later, as we continued into our study, that the best gift our parents had given us – at least for those of us who grew up in a Christian home – is our gift of faith. Raising us up with the opportunity to

know Jesus, and trust in him. We all agreed that THAT is really the best gift. So, we redeemed ourselves. 😊

And the best gift that God gives us is the gift of Jesus. That's the ultimate gift, this gift of Jesus. Talk about a blessing, right? I mean, it's unbelievable! This gift, when we receive it with gratitude from our Heavenly Father...this gift of Jesus makes us righteous in God's eyes. This gift gives new and abundant life. This gift gives eternal life. That's Jesus. But too often, we're so focused on much lesser "asks." We don't ask God for faith, but for more finances. We don't ask God to fill us with the Spirit, but to fill us with steak and lobster – though, steak and lobster does sound good. We don't ask God to help us forgive others, but to get even. We don't ask for more humility, but more power. We could go on. It's like the treasures on earth vs. treasure in heaven that Jesus spoke of earlier. **Are we asking God for earthly treasure or eternal treasure?**

Now, Jesus wraps this section up not with further teaching about our relationship with God, but getting back to our relationships with people. This is something that always really strikes me about the Sermon on the Mount: So much of it is about how we relate to other people, how we live our faith out in the world. That's a big reason I decided to go through this stretch of Scripture, because we've got a lot of broken human relationships in the world right now.

And so after this little bit about God's good gifts, he says in verse 12, **“So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 7:12).** Remember how at the very beginning of the Sermon on the Mount we noted that when Matthew says that Jesus began to teach the crowds, that the past-tense is a form that is incomplete? It's not that he taught this once, but that it was stuff he taught more than once...it was stuff he regularly taught.

Well, you may recall that later in Jesus' ministry (Matthew 22) a guy comes up and asks him about what's the greatest commandment, and Jesus says “Love God with all you've got, and love your neighbor as yourself...all the law and prophets hang on these two commands.” Here, Jesus gives a similar

kind of teaching and says that the law and prophets are summed up in just this one. This is something he taught regularly. We know it here in Matthew as the Golden Rule. A lot of other religions have something similar, like “Do no harm to others” or something along those lines. Jesus even taught “Don’t pass judgment on others” just a moment ago. That’s a “do no harm” kind of teaching. But Jesus then takes it a step further: *it’s not just the absence of harm Jesus advocates for here, it’s actively loving others.*

And he makes it very easy to figure out how to do this: **Put yourself in the other person’s shoes, and ask yourself, “How would I want to be treated?”** That, then, is how you should treat others. Notice: it’s not even, “What Would Jesus Do?” which is kind of what you might expect...but “what would I want in this situation? How would I like to be treated if the roles were reversed?” If I were of a different skin color, how would I want to be treated? If had a child die, what would I need from others? If somebody wronged me and sinned against me, what would I want them to do or say to me to make things right? Whatever your answers are, that’s the kind of thing Jesus is saying we are to do to others. It’s really quite simple...but it’s hard to do.

And it’s not fool-proof. We’re all different. It takes some wisdom and discernment about how to live this out. We come back to that topic that we began this message with. **It takes some judgment, in the sense of “discernment,” about how to apply the Golden Rule.** For instance, if you’re a husband who would like a new ginormous flat screen television for your birthday, that doesn’t mean you should get that for your wife for her birthday. There’s some wisdom you will gain the hard way if you do that.

On a more serious note: A person who doesn’t see their sin as sin probably wants to be treated differently than someone who does see it as sin and wants help getting out from its grip. Someone who wants their sin blessed needs a different response than someone who sees their sin as wrong. You’re going to have to start in a different place with that person than you might with someone who sees it as sin that they’re struggling with or stumbled into. But there is common ground: we all want to be heard. We all want people to empathize with us. We all want people to understand things from our

perspective...we want to be known – especially before someone delivers us a hard truth, even though that hard truth may be the exact good gift we need to hear. We would all like to be treated that way, so let's treat others that way as well.

So, how we go about living out our righteousness...how we go about living out our right relationship with God...our faith...that is a big part of the whole Sermon on the Mount; and Jesus drives it home with both of these points: **Be discerning but not judgmental toward others, and do unto others as you'd have them do unto you.** Acknowledge your own sins and shortcomings even as you lovingly help others see and deal with theirs.

And if Jesus is serious, then this stuff matters. More than ever, people are observing how you and I, as Jesus followers, live our lives. Do we live with integrity? Do we live out Jesus' teaching not to be judgmental? Do we take the planks out of our own eyes? Do we treat others as we would like to be treated if we were in their shoes? This stuff matters today more than ever, because the world is watching more closely than ever. How you treat someone in the grocery store or at a park or walking down the sidewalk can literally end up being seen by millions and millions of people. Of course, all that should really matter is that God sees it...Jesus said earlier that our Heavenly Father sees what is done in secret; so of course he sees what we do in public. But: **Our witness to the world *does* matter and *is* important.** And how we relate to others has a huge impact on our witness to Jesus. In fact, in many ways, *how we relate to others is our witness to Jesus.* How we treat others is proof of our own transformed heart. Living our faith rightly is a high calling for us, and it's not easy...but we can do it, with God right beside us every step of the way. And when we do: God the Father will be glorified, Jesus will be magnified, the Spirit will be amplified, the lost will be evangelized, and the Church will be edified. Let's pray...Amen.