

It's a great time of year! And I see some really ugly Christmas sweaters! Thursday night a few of us were digging through the ugly sweater section at Target. It was a toss up for me between a sweater with a big blue Christmas shark on the front, and this one with the leg lamp. Another guy was eyeing me pretty good when I tried on a sweater with a big blue Christmas shark protruding from the front of it. So I practiced the Golden Rule: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you, and I gave him the Christmas shark sweater. I know beauty is in the eye of the beholder, but I really like the ugly sweater I'm wearing right now.

I know some of you are weighing in right now on my taste in clothes, even my taste in sermon introductions. That I would dress like this for church, let alone give a talk wearing it, let alone put it out on video for all to see! So I have just one thing to say to you: Don't judge me. Some of you are judging me right now. You have sized me up and written me off.

Jesus says, "Do not judge, or you too will be judged." Thou shall not size me up or write me off. Thou shall not judge what I say, or look like, or what I do, or how I look. Why? Because Jesus says, Do Not Judge. Outside the church and in the secular world these are likely the most quoted and most popular words of Jesus. Who here this morning has said, maybe with some attitude, Do Not Judge when you felt the sting of them judging you? And on the other hand, how many of you have had someone say to you with some attitude, Do Not Judge after you said something to them?

Most people inside or outside the church know that Do Not Judge is in the Bible someplace. And most people, whether they are inside or outside the church, know that quoting these words of Jesus are a great weapon to wield when they feel judged by someone else.

Jesus said these words in the heart of the Sermon on the Mount. It's in the section we have been working through where we see example after example of the "greater righteousness demands" or "greater ethical demands" that Jesus requires of his kingdom citizens. A greater righteousness that goes beyond the superficial meaning of the law such as, "At least I didn't murder, or at least I didn't commit adultery" to the deeper meanings that set Jesus' kingdom apart from other kingdoms of this world.

We have learned that the power to apply these deeper meanings doesn't come from our righteousness, or our hard work, or any inherent goodness we may think we have that deserves God's favor on us. We have learned that the only righteousness that

matters is the righteousness of God placed in us at the moment when we surrendered to God and accepted Jesus Christ as Savior of our sins. God's righteousness comes by grace through faith.

God in the person of the Holy Spirit is alive and well and desires to work in people who cast aside religious pretense, religious performance, and surrender their pride. The Holy Spirit is alive and well and desires to use each of us to set up a beautiful contrast between his kingdom values and the values on display by the kingdoms of this world. And the contrast between God's kingdom values and the world's kingdom values couldn't be farther apart these days.

So Jesus' teaching today is all about how we as kingdom citizens are to live in the diverse relationships in our lives. First, Jesus instructs us on how to relate to our brothers and sisters in Christ. Then he instructs us on how to relate to those whose hearts are hardened against the things of God. Then he instructs us on how we are to relate to and care for all people in general in something we call The Golden Rule. And finally, how prayer empowers us to live out the righteousness of God in these relationships. Jesus gives us four principles, four principles that are golden. And he starts with this one:

### **Not Judging a Brother or Sister is Golden**

We have known through these studies in the Sermon on the Mount that Jesus exposes the religious leaders as hypocrites, as a class of religious performers who act out a part that makes them look holy and powerful in public, while their hearts and their private devotion is far from what God loves.

Here is a question to get this going: Why do religious people seem to be so judgmental? For the sake of argument, I consider myself a religious person; I work in a church for heaven sake. I take great care to make sure I handle the truth of God's Word accurately. I want to protect people from the destruction of sin. I want to feed people with God's Word, I want to give people space and tools for spiritual rest and peace and growth. And I would think anyone here who considers themselves religious would have some of these same values.

So why are religious people so inclined to judge? Because religious people fall into something ugly called self-righteousness. What is that? It's when religious people set their own standard of righteousness and expect others to follow that same standard. So they size up and write off people as unrighteous based on their own standard of righteousness. These decisions are usually

made on what a person says or sees, or where he goes, or what he wears, or eats or drinks.

For self-righteous people to survive, they must make up a righteousness bar that they can reach. And they can perch on it and from that perch they can look down and size up and write off others who don't reach their bar.

The problem for a self-righteous person is that God always has a higher bar. The self-righteous person must believe that they have arrived to God's standard of holiness. Here is another thing: Self-righteous people are rarely self-aware. They can't see what those around them see so clearly—that they too fall short of God's holiness. This is why Jesus wants us to address this issue today. And this is why this is so important, because being religious lends itself to being judgmental.

**“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.” (Matthew 7:1-2)**

The word Jesus uses for judge is interesting. It means to condemn or avenge, which are clearly actions reserved for God alone. No one on earth is equipped or called to condemn or avenge. Yet the self-righteous see they are somehow needed to help God out as judge.

So we Christians are not to condemn or avenge one another in the body of Christ. If we do we in turn will be judged by the same strict standards we used to judge others. Now Jesus gives us an illustration from the absurd to drive home the importance of “judge not.” Jesus says,

**“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?” (verses 3-4)**

Jesus paints a picture out of his life as a son of a carpenter. It's an illustration through the absurd. Jesus is pointing out the stark contrast between a speck of sawdust and a plank of wood. He reminds us how easy it is for us to notice the speck in someone else's eye and miss the plank in our own eye.

We are great at noticing specks in others. It's more fun to find the speck in our neighbor's eye than it is to find the plank in our own eyes. For some of us seeing the speck in others is our spiritual gift. We can be great at seeing the specks in others that we don't even see the plank in our own eyes.

A man wanted to impress his friends with his eye for art as they went to an art gallery together. He forgot his glasses, was nearsighted, and could hardly see his hand in front of his face; he figured he could wing it with any abstract comments and observations he wanted to make. He approached a frame and began criticizing: “Why would anyone want to paint something so hideously ugly? I mean, it's a true rendering of the object,

but why waste time with painting such a disgusting subject?” Everyone was laughing by this time as his wife whispered into his ear, “John, you're not looking at a painting, you're looking at a mirror!”

A healthy outlook on judgment begins each morning as we look into the mirror of God's Word. Our time is better spent dealing with our own shortcomings, and then we won't have so much time to be tempted to focus on the faults of others.

Commentator Kent Hughes said, “We find it so easy to turn a microscope on another person's sin, but we look at ours through the wrong end of a telescope. We easily spot a speck of phoniness in another, because we have a logjam of it in our own lives.”

An interesting twist is that speck and plank are from the same original word, meaning they are of the same substance. In other words, Jesus was saying the reason some people are so adept at finding fault in the lives of others is because they are so familiar with it themselves. We can spot certain things in another person's life because they are guilty of the same sin.

But if we know anything of being forgiven by God, then we will be forgiven people. As forgiven people we are called to be **forgiving** people. Here is where most of us stop with this lesson on judging. We conclude that the moral of the story is that Jesus is telling us to mind our own business. Lesson over. Right? Wrong.

### **Helping a Brother or Sister is Golden**

**“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.” (v. 5)**

When I address the plank in my own eye I see how messed up I am. Only then am I able to see more clearly how messed up you are. Understanding my messed-up-ness helps me understand your messed-up-ness.

So if that is first, then what is second? If you are new to Christianity it's important to understand that these lessons never end with “what's in it for me.” These are heart issues, obedience issues, following Christ issues. Christianity is never about minding my own business. The problem with minding our own business is that it does nothing for the person whose business needs minding. The center of this lesson is to love one another.

The moral of the story is not to disengage. It is ultimately about engaging and addressing the sawdust in other people. It's ultimately about the command to love one another. I found Paul's words in Galatians 6 verses 1-2 to be especially encouraging to help me when my self-righteousness is running amuck. **“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).

"Judge not" does not mean care not or act not. Love forbids me from sizing you up and writing you off. And love forbids me from walking away and minding my own business. So judge not is golden, and helping our brother in need is golden.

But now Jesus warns us that not everyone is grateful for the help. In warning us he gives us an example of exercising the right kind of judgment. When we see clearly through a plank-free eye, we may also see people who don't just reject the message of Jesus, they are defiant and hardened. They show contempt for God. In these relationships Jesus tells us to use good judgment and be wise.

### **Being Wise with Hardened Unbelievers is Golden**

**"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." (v. 6)**

Why did Jesus use the terms dogs and pigs? He is not speaking literally of animals but humans who behave more like animals. Dogs were not pets, but wild dogs that roamed the countryside who scavenged and endangered people. Remember, the Jews called Gentiles dogs. And pigs were unclean animals to Jews.

No one would think to throw valuable pearls to pigs; they would probably think they were food and try to eat them, and then when they couldn't chew them up, they would spit them out and trample them under their feet and turn on you because you didn't feed them enough real food!

So what does Jesus mean when he says, "Do not give to dogs what is sacred?" It's best to link sacred and pearl together in Jesus' wonderful parable "The Pearl of Great Price," where the pearl is the kingdom of God that is so valuable, so sacred, that it's worth sacrificing everything on earth to gain. Jesus is saying treasure the good news of the gospel which allows entrance into the kingdom, share the gospel this Christmas with your neighbor, hear the gospel preached. Treasure his kingdom.

But use your discernment. Don't keep going back again and again to those who reject the gospel with hatred and contempt. Don't let them trample it under their feet like dogs or pigs; move on and share your pearls with others. This teaching of Jesus is the exception, not the rule. I can remember only once in my life when it felt like my message was getting this kind of hateful response. Don't let this teaching keep us from persevering. I encourage you to persevere this Christmas season with family, friends, co-workers and neighbors.

And just when we are thinking, man, I can't live to this high standard, I can't do this, he tells us you are right, you can't. Apart from me you can do nothing and that is why you need me and my promises and the connection I offer you with prayer. So he says, "Don't grow faint from doing good. When situations are hard, trust in my promises and let them shape your prayers."

### **Trusting in the Promises of Our Heavenly Father When We Pray is Golden**

**"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." (verses 7-8)**

Jesus makes it clear that persistent prayer can expect answers that align with his heart and kingdom values. And it's clear to me that without these kinds of prayers I can't possibly live in the way Jesus wants me, his kingdom citizen, to live. He says, be at peace, your father in heaven is a good, good father.

**"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!" (verses 9-11)**

If I a father who is sinful and selfish by nature will give my kids bread and fish to eat, how much more will our heavenly father who isn't sinful give good things to those who keep asking, seeking, and knocking? To understand how transforming this was, we need to understand that Jews didn't address God as Abba or Loving Father. Jesus did and he tells us to address him as Father as well.

Prayer sounds pretty simple when Jesus teaches it. What are these good gifts that Jesus promises? These good gifts are according to his will, so they align with his values and not our values. We have our ideas of good gifts, and Jesus is opening our eyes to the idea that our ideas of good gifts are different from our heavenly Father's good gifts.

These prayers are to be prayed in faith. We can't expect these good gifts according to his will come to pass unless we surrender and place our confidence in him to deliver. I think this is why he stresses persistent prayers, which show faith.

Also, these prayers must reflect our desire for God's will to be done. We may know God's will and believe it can be done, but still not desire his kingdom to rule in our hearts and in our minds.

It takes a movement of God in our hearts through prayer to align with what's important to our heavenly Father who forgives us totally so we will want to forgive totally those who have hurt us.

It takes a movement of God in our hearts through prayer to align with what is important to our heavenly Father who is generous with us so we will want to be generous to others.

It takes a movement of God in our hearts through prayer to align with what is important to our heavenly Father who doesn't judge us harshly but loves us and gently helps us to see ourselves clearly and become better followers of Jesus so we can see others clearly and love them instead of judging them and help them become better followers of Jesus.

And it takes a movement of God in our hearts through prayer to align with what is important to our heavenly Father who wants us to follow the Golden Rule and do to all people everywhere what we would have them do to us.

### **Following the Golden Rule with All People is Golden**

**“So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.” (v. 12)**

I remember reading where a professor of world religion had put together an argument that what Jesus teaches here was not original with Jesus because other religions had their own older versions of the Golden Rule.

It's true that Confucius (some 500 years before Jesus) said: “DO NOT do unto others what you would not wish done to yourself.”

It's true that the Buddhists (who also existed before Christ) have a saying, “Putting oneself in the place of others, KILL NOT, nor cause to kill.”

It's true that the famous Rabbi Hillel (20 B.C.) said: “What is hateful to you, DO NOT DO to anyone else. This is the whole law; all the rest is only commentary.”

Does anybody hear the subtle difference between what Jesus taught and what these human teachers taught? All the human teachers said, “**do not.**” Jesus said, “**do.**”

The world focuses on the **do not** negative. The letter of the law always sets rules of what you shouldn't do. And that's not all bad. But Jesus goes further than that by focusing on something far beyond the thinking of mortal men like Confucius, Buddha, and Rabbi Hillel. Where men merely say **don't** do something, Jesus

goes further and tells us we need to **do** something! No need to remember 600 negative laws; just do good and you sum up the entire law and the prophets.

I read this week a fascinating behavior study on the principle of the Golden Rule. I think it's especially right to share it this Christmas. It was conducted by Bernard Rimland, director of the Institute for Child Behavior Research. Rimland found that “The happiest people are those who help others.”

Each person involved in the study was asked to list ten people he knew best and to label them as happy or not happy. Then they were to go through the list again and label each one as selfish or unselfish, using the following definition of selfishness: **a stable tendency to devote one's time and resources to one's own interests and welfare--an unwillingness to inconvenience one's self for others.**

In categorizing the results, Rimland found that all of the people labeled happy were also labeled unselfish. He wrote that those “whose activities are devoted to bringing themselves happiness... are far less likely to be happy than those whose efforts are devoted to making others happy” Rimland concluded: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”

*“Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers” (Gal. 6:9-10).*

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