“DO TO OTHERS WHAT YOU WOULD HAVE THEM DO TO YOU”

Matthew 7:1–12

Key Verse: 7:12

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

In today’s passage Jesus sums up the main teachings of his Sermon on the Mount, before he begins the last section, where he urges us to put what he says into practice. The teachings of Jesus in 7:1–12 have become so famous that they’re now part of our Western culture. They’re so familiar, they can sound like mere common sense. But they are the powerful teachings of Jesus, and they help us live out our lives as children of God and as members of his kingdom. Earlier, he said to be salt and light in the world, and here he shows us how to do it. Living by these teachings makes Christianity attractive and draws people to God. May God open our hearts and speak to us through his living word today.

So far, Jesus has been teaching how to truly practice and teach God’s commands (5:17–48), how to live before God, not people (6:1–18), and how to overcome our materialistic tendencies and worries (6:19–34). If we follow what he says, our righteousness will be better than the hypocritical Pharisees and teachers of the law (5:20). Now, he gives us positive direction in our daily relationships.

Read verse 1. Our common tendency when we’re trying to follow God’s word and be devoted to him is to start judging the people around us who’re not doing what we’re doing. We judge others not just on religious standards, but by all kinds of standards—political, moral, ethical, educational, economic, racial, even physical appearance. We say, “I’m trying so hard!” and we’re implying, “Why aren’t you?” Judging others is really a form of pride. It’s trying to take the place of God, to do what only God can do, for we can never see the full picture of people’s lives to know how to judge them rightly. But we still do it.

Here, to judge others is to be obsessively critical about everything others are doing. It’s what the Pharisees were doing to Jesus and his followers, who were living by grace. They found fault when Jesus didn’t teach his disciples to ceremonially wash their hands or fast. They found fault when he healed on the Sabbath. They found fault when he allowed his disciples to eat heads of grain on that day, which looked like working. They especially didn’t like it when Jesus freely associated with tax collectors and sinners. They wanted to enjoy their own outwardly righteous party with their familiar traditions and people just like themselves, and they were frankly too selfish and too self-absorbed to ever really relate to people struggling with sin. It was much easier just to judge them.

Sadly, even though Jesus says plainly not to do it, so-called Christians have become known as some of the most intensely judgmental people in the world. To them, everyone who’s sinning, making mistakes, or even having a little fun, are unspiritual and destined for hell. So many so-called Christians only want to associate with other Christians and don’t have even one non-Christian friend. So many non-believers don’t ever want to even be around Christians because they sense they’ll only be judged by them. When we’re judgmental, we’re useless to God and getting in the way of what God wants to do.

Loving money and worrying about money might be our strongest human tendency; judging others comes in a close second. There’s even an idiom about it: “rush to judgment.” We’re so quick to judge, to jump to conclusions, based on superficial information and outward appearances. So, to keep us from doing it, Jesus commands us and warns us about the consequences. Read verses 1,2. Here, he’s implying that this time, the judging will be done not by weak people but by God. When we’re strict and harsh with others, God will be strict and harsh with us. Jesus said earlier, “For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins” (6:14,15). The Apostle James said the same thing: “…because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment” (Jas2:13). Basically, Jesus wants us to be merciful and forgiving, not judgmental.

It’s such a problem that Jesus goes on further about it. He wants us to see how foolish judging others is, and at the same time, what we can do to see ourselves and others rightly. Read verses 3–5. Judging others is as foolish as obsessing about others’ speck of sawdust while ignoring our own plank. It means our sins are much more serious than others’. We tend to treat our own sins very lightly, but then get very serious about others’ sins. We have a high view of ourselves and a low view of others. This is the reason why we get judgmental. Instead, we should take our own sins most seriously, and see others’ sins as their merely suffering from a speck of sawdust in their eye. We’re the ones who need to go to the emergency room and be admitted for major surgery; others don’t even need an outpatient clinic, just a little help from a friend. In other words, instead of being quick to criticize, we should be quick to admit our own sins and put all our focus and energy on repenting of our own problems. Read verse 5 again. Here Jesus is saying that when we see our own sins as the real plank and work to root them out, then our spiritual eyes open to see how to help others well.

Some people think not judging others means ignoring all realities. But Jesus says that’s not so. Read verse 6. While he tells us not to judge, he doesn’t mean not to be discerning. Dogs and pigs, unfortunately, represent people who don’t value sacred things. We should patiently share God’s word with people, but we should be wise to share it with those who value it.

Jesus doesn’t want us to get stuck in struggling with people, or even with our own sins. He doesn’t want us to settle for comfortable traditions or give up in despair about things that seem impossible to change. He wants us as God’s children and as kingdom members to press forward. Read verses 7,8. These verses teach us about the spirit of faith required in prayer. Sometimes we don’t have something because we haven’t asked God about it (Jas4:2b). We get too complicated, too full of self-doubt, calculations, and basically, unbelief. Our pride is often our main problem. We try to be self-sufficient. But God wants us to ask him for anything we need. It’s an essential part of having a real relationship with God. Jesus taught us to ask for daily bread, for forgiveness, and to be led away from temptations. He taught us to seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and we can do this in prayer. The image of knocking means to be patient and persistent, waiting for the right door to open. To ask, seek and knock all require faith that God is there, listening and ready to respond. To pray the way Jesus teaches us, we need to believe that God exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him (Heb11:6). We should even be asking for impossible things. Jesus challenged his disciples to the impossible task of throwing a mountain into the sea. We can do this when we pray with faith.

Jesus especially emphasizes that we need to trust God our loving heavenly Father. Read verses 9–11. God is better than even the best human father. He made us and loves us so much, and he wants to give us good gifts. If we really believed this, we would talk to God much more. We would come to him about all our needs, all our struggles, all our secret worries. The Bible says, “Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you” (1Pe5:7). What a shame that we have such a loving heavenly Father, but we don’t trust him or come to him for what we need!

Read verse 12. Here Jesus summarizes not just what he’s been saying here in chapter 7, but in this entire Sermon. It’s known as the Golden Rule. It’s mentioned in many religions, in the negative: “Don’t do to others what you wouldn’t want others to do to you.” For example, we shouldn’t judge, because we don’t want to be judged. But in verse 12 Jesus isn’t emphasizing what not to do, but positively, what we *should* be doing. We would want others to pray for us, so we should be praying for others. In everything, we should be doing to others what we would want others to be doing to us. It’s an all-encompassing statement, and it means several things.

**First**, Jesus wants us to treat each and every human being with respect. People deserve respect not because they have a good record, but because they’re made in God’s image (Ge1:27; 9:6). To respect people means to recognize that, despite our differences, despite whatever weaknesses or problems they may have, they are human beings just like we are. Their lives matter. Their feelings matter. Their problems matter. Their struggles matter. When we disrespect people, we cannot practice what Jesus is teaching us here.

**Second**, Jesus wants us to empathize with people. Before we speak or do anything, we should pause and try to put ourselves in the other person’s place. What is this person going through? We should use our imagination to try and think what it would be like to be that person. What is this person facing that may be hard, painful, challenging or scary? We should take the time to ask ourselves how we would handle that. A little empathy goes a long way in curing us of being judgmental. Sometimes we need to experience a similar problem to truly understand what others are dealing with. Often, hostility comes from a lack of understanding. As St. Francis said, we should seek not to be understood, but to understand. If we don’t understand people, we can’t empathize with them.

**Third**, Jesus wants us to love our neighbor as ourselves. Read verse 12 again. To treat others this way is the same as loving our neighbor as ourselves. What sums up the Law and the Prophets, Jesus says later, is to love our neighbor as ourselves (Mt22:39,40). Apostle Paul taught this, too (Ro13:8–10; Gal5:14). Jesus wants us to be known not as people of strict religious rules and traditions but as people of active love. We should always be thinking of how we can show God’s love, God’s kindness, God’s mercy, to all kinds of people. Hebrews 13:1–3 reads, “Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters. Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it. Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.” Jesus wants us to care for the hungry and thirsty, the lonely, the naked, the sick and the imprisoned, out of love, as if we were serving Jesus himself (Mt25:35,36).

What happens when we treat people like this? We glorify God. We help people to see that God is real. We advance his kingdom in this fallen world, not through talk, but through deeds of love and mercy.

Read verse 12 again. May God help us to repent of being judgmental, and learn to love others the way Jesus wants. May he also help us learn how to pray with faith and ask God to help us.