

The Golden Rule
Matthew 7:1-12
Key Verse: 7:12

As we live with others, we discover their faults, and inevitably conflicts arise. For example, before marriage people see only each other's good side, and they blindly love each other. But after marriage, when they live together, they begin to see their partner's faults. At first, they are surprised. Then they begin to judge each other. This leads to hurting each other, it stops real communication, and it hinders working together. This kind of judging also happens in Christian fellowships. As disciples of Jesus we are commanded to love one another (Jn 13:34). This means to understand one another deeply, and to forgive others' sins and to bear others' weaknesses. When we love one another in this way we can establish a loving, healthy community. However, when we judge one another, we hurt one another and damage our Christian community. Judging others is a very serious matter. In today's passage Jesus teaches us how to deal with this problem in order to grow as mature disciples of Jesus and build a healthy Christian community. Jesus teaches us what attitude we should have toward ourselves and toward others. This is summed up in the "golden rule." It is easy, when we study this passage, to think it applies to others, not to ourselves. But we need to examine ourselves first. Today let's learn the "golden rule" and how to practice it in our families, as well as in our Christian fellowship.

I. Do not judge (1-6)

In verses 1-2 Jesus teaches us not to judge others and explains why. Then, in verses 3-5, he illustrates by allegory what kind of attitude we should have toward others. In verse 6 he urges us to have spiritual discernment.

Look at verse 1a. "Do not judge...." Here "Do not judge" does not mean that we should eliminate the legal system with its courts and judges. In order to establish and keep order in society we need laws and judges to enforce them. Our judicial system has authority because it has been established by God (Ro 13:1,4). This week the West Warren Block Club was formed in response to gang activity in our neighborhood. We need laws and judges to deal with such things as gangs. Furthermore, "Do not judge," does not mean that we should never offer constructive criticism to others. Sometimes we need this to improve ourselves and our community. When Jesus said, "Do not judge," it means to not condemn others as though we are in the place of God. This kind of condemnation stems from one's fallen nature, with its pride and self-righteousness. It lacks love and understanding.

What is its effect? For the one who judges, it may seem harmless, but to the one being judged it may be very painful. It can crush others critically. When a child sees a frog in a pond and throws a rock at it, it may be fun for the child. But for the frog it can be fatal. Condemning others wounds others and breaks relationships between people. It plants bitterness in others' hearts and fosters a spirit of vengeance. When we have such bitterness in our hearts, we cannot grow. It damages our spirit and personality. It destroys our family lives as well as our Christian fellowship.

Since judging others is so destructive, why do people do it? Mostly because it makes us feel good for a little while, and seems to reduce our stress. We enjoy feeling a little better than the person we judge, based on our superior knowledge or experience. For some, judging others is their source of self-worth. Sometimes judging is done out of envy. Many people have judged others so much that it has become their habit. However, Jesus said: "Do not judge...." This is the command of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In verses 1b-2, Jesus explains why we should not judge others. He said, "...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." Judging others is like spitting into the wind. There is a saying, "What goes around comes around." If we have a keen eye toward others' faults, and then speak ill of them to tear them down, we can expect the same thing to happen to us. But as disciples of Jesus, we must have a keen eye to see others' good points, and say encouraging things that build them up.

Fundamentally, we should not judge others because we have no right to do so. When we judge others, we seem to be righteous, as though we are different from others. But in fact we are all sinners in many ways. When God scrutinizes our lives, we are all shown to be full of faults and weaknesses. Then we realize we have no right to judge others. Judging others is God's job. If we do so, we are usurping God's sovereign authority and office.

In verses 3-4, Jesus developed his teaching with an allegory. He said, "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?" Here, Jesus contrasts a speck and a plank. The speck represents others' wrongdoings, while the plank represents our own wrongdoings. Usually we think that our own wrongdoings are very small while others' wrongdoings are very great. But Jesus says the opposite is true. Jesus uses hyperbole--intentional exaggeration--in order to make a point. Even though we have a plank in our own eye, we want to focus on the speck in others' eyes and try to take it out. It is our sinful tendency. This comes from a judgmental spirit and ignorance. Jesus calls such a person a hypocrite. Jesus urges us to first take the plank out of our own eye, then we can see clearly to remove a speck from our brother's eye (5).

What does it mean to take the plank out of our own eye? It begins with examining ourselves honestly before God, discovering our own wrongdoing, and realizing Jesus' grace upon us. When we truly know the seriousness of our own sin and the depth of Jesus' amazing grace, we realize that others' wrongdoing is like a speck of sawdust. For example, St. Paul once thought of himself as righteous and holy. So he condemned Stephen to death. However, when he met the Risen Christ, the light shone upon him and all his darkness was exposed. Then he realized what a terrible sinner he was. He found that Jesus was his compassionate, patient Savior and Lord. So Paul confessed that he was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man (1 Ti 1:13). He acknowledged that Christ Jesus came to save sinners, of whom he was the worst (1 Ti 1:15b). When he was humbled like this, the way he looked at others changed. He became a patient, compassionate and understanding shepherd for others.

Taking the speck of sawdust out of another's eye is a very delicate matter. We should be sensitive and very careful. Otherwise, we can make a person blind. As a young girl, Fanny Crosby had an eye problem. A quack doctor claimed he could heal her. But his careless and ignorant treatment completely blinded her. This shows us that trying to help others without sensitivity and understanding can do more harm than good. So we should be sensitive and careful in dealing with others' problems. This is not a matter of technique or skill, but of having God's heart toward others.

Look at verse 6: "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." This verse tells us that we must have a discerning heart even though we do not judge others. When we try not to judge others, it is easy to become accepting of all kinds of people and all kinds of ideas without discretion. Jesus does not want us to do this. One time a person who was sympathetic to Muslims invited some to our church. They went into the basement, unrolled their prayer mats, and began praying to Allah. Should we allow this because Jesus said "Do not judge?" One missionary with spiritual discernment escorted them out immediately. In the book of Numbers, while Israel was staying in Shittim, many men were enticed into sexual immorality by Moabite women (Num 25:1-9). Should this be tolerated because Jesus said, "Do not judge?" If so, the community would be completely corrupted and become a stench to neighbors. At that time, Phinehas acted boldly with spiritual discernment to prevent the spread of immorality.

In verse 6 "what is sacred" and "pearls" refer to the gospel and the word of God. "Dogs" and "pigs" refer to people who despise the gospel and the word of God. The gospel and the words of God are a very precious treasure. We should not treat them in a mundane manner like a product we are trying to push on others. We should not feed dogs with the words of God. Dogs should be fed with dog food. If we give pearls to pigs they will get mad and trample them, thinking, "Why did you give me this? I want scraps!" Then they turn and attack us. We need spiritual discernment that guides us to give the gospel treasure to those who recognize its value. It is not easy to have this kind of discernment. It is also not easy to understand, forgive and love others instead of judging them. How can we do these things?

II. Ask, seek, knock (7-11)

As Christians we want to help others. Helping and serving others is very meaningful and rewarding. So everyone has a desire to help others. However, it is not easy. Helping others is very challenging. One rich Christian wanted to help a needy brother by giving him money. In his heart, he thought, "As a man, you should take care of your family. But you are not doing so because you are deficient." When he tried to help him with this mindset, the needy brother felt humiliated and refused, even though he really needed the help. This soured their relationship. When the rich Christian prayed about this he received God's wisdom how to help him. First, he realized what his own problem was. He found himself a terrible sinner who was proud of his wealth. Then he began to see how precious others are and to appreciate and respect his needy brother from his heart. So he tried again, humbly asking his needy brother to allow him to share his material prosperity. Then the needy brother gladly accepted his help and their relationship began to

blossom. This attitude in helping others applies not only to material help, but also to spiritual help, intellectual help, emotional help, marital counseling, and any kinds of help.

Many people have tried to help others and failed. They often conclude that the problem lies with their Bible students or the environment, or the time period they live in. Some people living in America think that if they lived in a third-world country they would be fruitful. They never think the problem is within themselves. When I was a young shepherd serving UIC ministry, God entrusted me with one Ph.D. student who had lots of problems. Unaware of this, I expected him to work hard to build up our fellowship. When he did not do so, I thought he was lazy and burdensome. He was so stressed out about this that he finally complained to our senior pastor about me. Our senior pastor counseled me, saying, "A shepherd should be compassionate. First and foremost, you should be compassionate." This struck my heart. Since then I tried to help this person with a compassionate heart in many ways, investing my time and energy. Then our relationship became loving and fruitful. Before trying to help others, especially with Bible teaching, we need heavenly wisdom. How can we have this wisdom?

In verse 7, Jesus said, "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you." This verse is very famous. It has been quoted many times, mostly out of context. It is frequently claimed as a basis to pray for one's own personal needs and desires without giving up. But in the context of this passage, Jesus gave this word so that we may help others effectively. The phrase "Do not judge" was given in the context of helping others. Jesus' allegory clearly tells us how to help others.

Now let's look at verse 7 again. "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you." The words, "ask," "seek," "knock," mean to pray persistently, sincerely and earnestly without ceasing. It means not only to ask with words, but also in our actions and deeds. The words "Ask, seek, knock" are present tense. The phrases "...it will be given," "...you will find," and "...the door will be opened to you," are future perfect tense. This means that if we keep praying, God will surely answer our prayers in his right time.

Verses 9-11 tell us about our Father God to whom we pray. Our prayer is not just babbling like pagans who have no relationship with God. But our prayer expresses the intimate love relationship we have with our Father God. When we pray, we need to know who God is. Jesus teaches us by comparing our heavenly Father to human fathers. If a hungry son asks his father for a sandwich, who would give him a rock? If a hungry son asks his father for a fish, who would give him a rattlesnake? Even though human fathers are evil, they know how to give good gifts to their children. How much more will our Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him! Our Father in heaven hears our prayer and is ready to answer. Our Father in heaven is good. He is willing to give good things freely to his children. God loves us so much that he freely sent his one and only Son Jesus as our ransom sacrifice. He gives us eternal life freely. He gives us the kingdom of God freely. How much more will he give us what we need in order to help others? Paul said, "He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all--how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?" (Ro 8:32) He is the source of wisdom, compassion, love, understanding, material things, and everything we need to help others in a way that bears good fruit.

In verse 12, Jesus summarizes this passage about how to help others. He says, "So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets." This is the "golden rule." It is most valuable to consider in terms of ethics in helping others. So Jesus said it sums up the Law and the Prophets, which is the entire Bible. In Matthew 22:37-38, Jesus gave the greatest commandment, saying, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind...And love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments." So people take this greatest command very seriously. According to Jesus in verse 12, the "golden rule" is equally as important as the greatest commandment.

The golden rule is found in one form or another in a variety of religions. Most of the time, it is stated in the negative. The great Jewish Rabbi Hillel said, "Do not do to others what you would not like them to do to you." In contrast, Jesus' teaching is very positive. When we discover what we would like others to do for us, we should take the initiative and do it for them first. We all want to be loved by others. We desire real respect from others. We need others' understanding and forgiveness. And most of us crave recognition. Do you want to be recognized by others? Then recognize others. Do you want to be understood and forgiven? Then understand and forgive others. Do you want to be loved and respected? Then love and respect others. If we understand, respect, recognize, forgive and love others, then we will also be understood, respected, forgiven, and loved by others. It is like an echo. If we shout at the top of the mountain "I understand you. I forgive you. I respect you. I love you," then these words will come back to

our own ears. Actually we cannot do this with our own strength. We need the strength and wisdom that come from God through prayer.

If we practice this golden rule our lives will be greatly changed and we will have true joy and happiness. We will grow in the image of our Father God, who practiced this golden rule. When we were enslaved by the power of sin and death, God did not condemn us. Rather, he understood, forgave, and restored us by sending his one and only Son Jesus Christ. Jesus bore all our weaknesses, forgave all our sins, and gave us eternal life in his kingdom. Let's remember this grace and practice the golden rule.