

Sermon Transcript
November 18, 2012



Kingdom Life is a Communal Life
The Golden Rule
Matthew 7:1-12

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on November 18, 2012, at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Pastor Scott Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio copy of the sermon on CD is available by request at (860) 563-8286.

Scripture Text
Matthew 7:1-12

¹ “Judge not, that you be not judged. ² For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you. ³ Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? ⁴ Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when there is the log in your own eye? ⁵ You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.

⁶ “Do not give dogs what is holy, and do not throw your pearls before pigs, lest they trample them underfoot and turn to attack you.

⁷ “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. ⁸ For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. ⁹ Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? ¹⁰ Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? ¹¹ If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!

¹² “So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.

Introduction

The Golden Rule. Everyone knows the “Golden Rule,” right? “Do to others what you want others to do to you.” That is the “Golden Rule.” It is what Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew 7:12, we can hear Jesus say, “*So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them.*”

As we begin this morning, I would like to make a very important observation regarding the “Golden Rule.” Notice how the entire verse reads. “*So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also for them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.*” When Jesus says, “*for this is the Law and the Prophets*” he is actually boiling down the entire Sermon on the Mount to this one statement. If you want a single phrase to summarize the essence of the Sermon on the Mount, this is it. If you want a single phrase to describe what life looks like in the Kingdom of God, this is it. If you want to boil down the teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount to one phrase, this is it. “*So whatever you wish others would do to you, do also for them.*”

It is instructive and helpful for us to pull back the lens and look at the structure of the entire sermon from Matthew 5 to Matthew 7. Now, I know literature doesn’t excite everyone. I understand that studying the composition of a paper or a speech is not everyone’s cup of tea. I get that. So bear with me, because it is essential for us this morning to consider how this sermon is put together. It is essential, because through the structure of this sermon, we discover something very important about the Christian life and life in the kingdom of God.

In very simple terms, this sermon, like many compositions, has an introduction, a body and a conclusion. The introduction to the Sermon on the Mount is the Beatitudes and the call for the citizens of God’s kingdom to be salt and light in this world. The conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount is what we will look at next week and it is found in Matthew 7:13-27. In the conclusion to this sermon, Jesus basically calls us to make a choice between two ways of life. This sermon leaves you with two ways to live and you must make a choice as to whether you will follow Jesus or go your own way. We will look at the conclusion of the sermon next week.

The main body of the Sermon on the Mount begins in Matthew 5:17 and it ends in Matthew 7:12. The main body of the sermon ends with the “Golden Rule.” “*So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also for them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.*” Take note to how Jesus begins the main body of this sermon. In Matthew 5:17, Jesus says, “*Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law and the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them, but to fulfill them.*” Can you see how these

two verses form brackets around everything that comes between them? Jesus begins by saying that he came to fulfill the Law and the Prophets and he ends by saying, *“for this is the Law and the Prophets”* So not only is everything between these two verses a description of how to live according to “the Law and the Prophets,” but the “Golden Rule” at the end of the main body of this sermon is the summary statement of all that Jesus said in this sermon. It all comes down to “doing to others what you want others to do to you.”

So here is the big take away from the Sermon on the Mount. The Christian life, life in the kingdom of God, is all about relationships. The Christian life is not primarily about “belief.” That may even sound heretical to our ears. “Belief” is important. Proper belief is essential. Creedal statements and correct doctrine is necessary. But if your “way of belief” has not made its way into a “way of life” that impacts relationships you are missing the whole thing. This is exactly the same thing Jesus said when he was asked in Matthew 22:36, *“Teacher which is the great commandment in the Law?”* What did he say to this question? Did Jesus say that the greatest commandment is that you need to believe in God? That is not what he said. He couched his answer in terms of relationships. He said, *“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it; You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”* And then he said, *“On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”* That sounds an awful lot of what Jesus is saying with the Sermon on the Mount. In fact, I have come to conclude that the Sermon on the Mount is none other than commentary on how we are to love God and love others. And so when Jesus issues for us the “Golden Rule,” he is in essence saying to us, that this is the whole thing boiled down to one concise statement. *“So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them.”*

When it comes down to it, kingdom life is a communal life. It is all about relationship. Now lets be honest. Relationships are hard and challenging. They are often filled with disappointments and frustrations. There is no formula that guarantees a good relationship. This is true even among Christians and relationships in the church. Perhaps you have heard the saying, “the church would be a great place if it weren’t for the people.” But here is the problem with that statement. The church is “the people.” “This is the church . . . This is the steeple . . . Open the door and see all the people.” If there aren’t any people, there is no church. And so as Jesus is winding down this message and at the same time climaxing with the “Golden Rule,” he gives us three important things to keep in mind when it comes to relationships and dealing with people. He is telling us here how to love others. Here is what we will hear. We must be humble. We must rely on God’s strength. We must be proactive. May these words contribute to a growing expression of God’s love among his people here at WEFC.

Humble Discernment

Relationships come in all shapes and sizes. It is natural that some relationships are closer than others and some more intimate than others. There are categories of relationships. We have family and we have close friends. We have acquaintances in the church, in our neighborhood and in the work place. There are people in your life you want to be with and there are people in your life where you have no choice in the matter. They are in your life for some God ordained reason. Each of these relationships form a context for us to demonstrate Jesus and live as people of God's kingdom. So how do I reflect Jesus in my relationships? It begins with humble discernment.

Listen to how Jesus begins in Matthew 7:1, "*Judge not, that you be not judged.*" It didn't take Jesus long to get to one of the big problems we have when it comes to relationships. He is speaking against a critical spirit that is quick to rush to judgment and leads to a condemning attitude. This is not some side issue we wrestle with as followers of Jesus. This is so central to the struggle we have in living out the Sermon on the Mount, that those outside the church perceive us to be the opposite Jesus wants us to be. The perception of those outside the church is "that Christians are prideful and quick to find fault in others." One young man said of Christians, "Christians talk about hating sin and loving sinners, but the way they go about things, they might as well call it what it is. They hate the sin and the sinner."¹ I think it is rather safe to say that people outside the church and inside the church, for that matter, have felt from time to time the condemning finger pointing straight at them from a Christian with a judgmental spirit.

Jesus says, "*Judge not.*" He couldn't say it any clearer than that. And yet a simple reading of this verse, conjures up all kinds of questions in our minds. Surely, the command to not judge does not mean that we shouldn't be discerning and that we can't judge something to be right and something else to be wrong. Even in our passage this morning, verse 5 indicates that you want to be in a position where you are able "*to take the speck out of your brother's eye.*" That requires a measure of judgment between what is good and what is not good. So when Jesus says, "*Judge not,*" what is he speaking against? He is speaking against an attitude that keeps us from expressing genuine love and compassion. It is an attitude that forgets, "*but by the grace of God.*"

So here is what Jesus rather wisely says to us, "*Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when there is the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.*" The key to not having a judgmental spirit against others is the constant reminder that you need God's grace just as much as the

next person. This is why it is good to confess your sins on a regular basis. It keeps you humble and keeps you from being judgmental. Where would your life be if you did not have the restraining work of the Holy Spirit inside of you? I shudder to think where I would be today if it were not for the Holy Spirit in my life. Even with the Holy Spirit, it can be a struggle. I can look back on my life and literally see times where the Spirit of God picked me up by the scruff of my neck and protected me from myself and the way I was going. Can we expect people without the Holy Spirit living inside of them to do anything other than what their flesh desires? And if the Spirit of God has been patient with me and the plank in my eye, can I not be patient with my brother and sister as God does his work in their life?

Philip Yancey, in his book *What's So Amazing About Grace*, talks about how many AA meetings take place in the basement of a church. An AA meeting begins with admission. "My name is so and so and I am an alcoholic." And around the circle the same admission is confessed. Because there is a shared admission around the circle, they don't feel judged. Rather, there is the feeling of compassion and shared struggle and hence the hope that there is someone there who can help take the "speck out of my eye." Now here is the problem, Yancey observes. Few in AA make it from the basement of the church up to the sanctuary of the church. Often, rightly or wrongly, the reason is because they don't feel accepted. Instead, they feel judged. Somehow, what is communicated in the basement of the church, needs to be openly communicated in the sanctuary of the church.

I say to you this morning, I hope you find this to be a place where you feel you belong, with all your baggage and all your struggles. "My name is Scott Solberg and I am 'sin-a-holic.' I struggle to be the husband and the dad I want to be. I struggle to love people the way I should. I struggle with attitudes and resentments and lustful thoughts, just like the next person. Like Paul, I find that I do what I don't want to do and I don't do what I want to do. *"Wretched man that I am! Who will save me from this body of death? Thanks be to God, through Jesus Christ our Lord!"* So you are welcome here with your struggles. We are "fellow-strugglers" and we can empathize with your challenges. We want to help you take *"the speck out of your eyes."* But we do so, knowing that we have our own junk to deal with and in fact, we need you to help us. Can you imagine how patient we would be with those around us if we just reminded ourselves on a regular basis, *"but by the grace of God."*

Jesus warns us, *"Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you."* Every time you point the finger, there are three pointing back at you. Name the sin and the judgment and it is coming right back at you. Do you want to judge someone

for not telling the truth? Right back at you! Do you want to judge the adulterer or the murderer? Right back at you. Do you want to judge the man who exploits the poor? Right back at you! Be careful about casting judgment on others. The warning is that “*the measure you use - it will be measured to you.*” It doesn’t mean sin should not be addressed. But even in issues of discipline, Paul warns in Galatians 6:1, that one be restored with a spirit of gentleness and to “*Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted.*” Instead of judging, look for the good in others and see the potential for them to be followers of Jesus.

Where there is relationship and respect, generally input is welcomed and appreciated.

- Learn to listen
- Don’t put labels on people
- Don’t act like you have an answer for everything
- Put yourself in the other person’s shoes - often there are circumstances that explain a person’s struggles
- Be genuine by acknowledging the hard realities of life
- Be a friend for no other reason and without strings attached²

If I could just make a passing comment about verse 6. It seems to be saying the opposite of the first five verses. “*Do not give dogs what is holy, and do not throw your pearls before pigs, lest they trample them under foot and turn to attack you.*” This is where discernment comes into play. Sometimes there are people who want nothing to do with the kingdom of God and spurn any attempt for you to speak godly things into their lives. In some cases, you just need to back off and let them in God’s hands. It doesn’t help to keep hitting them over the head with the gospel. James Boice said, If there is hope for hardened people, it lies in the sovereignty of God and in the demonstrable reality of true Christian living.”³ Just live it in front of them and turn them over to God.

The kingdom of God is about relationships and all relationships require us to live with humble discernment. Often issues are not always black and white. You can’t control how others respond to you. Just keep in front of you the reality that God has been incredibly gracious to you and that will give you the power to be compassionate to those around you and will keep you from developing a judgmental spirit.

God’s Strength

When I first read our passage for this morning, I felt as though there were three unrelated topics in these twelve verses. It almost felt like Jesus was coming to the end of the message and so he wanted to throw in a few more things that he thought we

should know before he finished his message. So he started by telling us not be judgmental. Now in verses 7-11, we are encouraged to be persistent in prayer and then he concludes with the “Golden Rule.” Initially, they seemed like unrelated and unconnected topics. I no longer feel that way about this passage. It makes a lot of sense to me now to call us to a lifestyle of persistent prayer in the middle of a conversation about relationships. If there is anything we need prayer for, it is how to conduct ourselves as followers of Jesus in the context of relationships. After all, it is “*the Law and the prophets.*” Even the way verse 12 begins shows that it is connected to what comes before it. It is a concluding thought. The power to not judge and the power to do to others what we would like them to do to us comes from a lifestyle of dependent prayer. We need God’s strength.

And so Jesus says, “*Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened.*” The words “*ask, seek and knock*” are imperatives in the present tense. So you translate it this way. “Keep on asking . . . Keep on seeking . . . Keep on knocking.” It is a picture of persistent prayer. And prayer for what? Carson says it this way, “The answer is persistence in prayer—not prayer for an occasional blessing here and there—but in the context of the Sermon on the Mount, prayer that is a burning pursuit of God. This asking is an asking for the virtues Jesus had just expounded; this seeking is a seeking for God; this knocking is a knocking at heaven’s throne room.”⁴

Let me put it this way. This Sermon on the Mount ought to be a template for your prayers. I would encourage you to pray through it. That is what I have been doing. Start with the Beatitudes. Pray that you would be humble and poor in spirit. Pray for a heart that mourns over your sin and that you demonstrate meekness and that you would hunger for what is good and right. Pray that you would be merciful and pure in heart and a peacemaker and able to endure suffering for the sake of Jesus. Ask God to help you be salt and light to the people of this world.

Pray that God would help you control your anger, resist lust and honor your marriage and your home. Pray that your words would be honorable and that you would not retaliate against the one who does you wrong and that you would be willing to go the extra mile with the one in need. Pray that you would even be able to love your enemy.

Pray that your religion would be pure and that it would result in caring for the one in need. Pray that you would use your wallet and your resources to be a blessing to others and that you would learn to trust God to meet your needs. Pray that you would resist a judgmental spirit and that you would do others what you want them to do to you. Can

you see how much of the Sermon on the Mount is centered around relationships? If you persist in praying through this sermon, Jesus says, that prayer will be answered. *“Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father, who is in heaven, give good things to those who ask him!”*

If you would commit the Beatitudes to memory and pray through them on a regular basis, you would begin to see God form your heart around these things and consequently impact your relationships. Or perhaps each day, take a section of the Sermon on the Mount and pray through it. It is all about relationships. The premise is this. These virtues are God-given. They come through persistent prayer. You can not manufacture them on your own. They are formed in our hearts by God’s Spirit. God gives us the strength to love others as he calls us to. Keep asking. . . Keep seeking . . . Keep knocking.

I challenge you this week to at the very least, pray through the Beatitudes on a daily basis. I am not talking about praying them in some kind of rote fashion as though they were a magic formula. Rather, pray thoughtfully through them. Bring specific relationships to mind in your prayers and ask that that these values be on display in those relationships. Maybe one day you apply them to your marriage or to your family. Maybe one day you apply them to a few difficult relationships. Confess where you fall short. Ask for grace where you need to overcome. But be persistent and the promise that God will answer these prayers and you will see God strengthen you and give you supernatural ability to love.

Proactive Love

Finally, we end where we started. We find ourselves at the concluding thought for this passage and for the entire Sermon on the Mount. We are back at the “Golden Rule.” *“So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also for them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.”*

Eric Metaxas wrote a rather comical critique of the New York Times at the end of last year and the title of the article was, *Does Anyone in the Media Ever Read the Bible?*⁵ What spurred his critique was an obituary in the New York Times for a 98 year old man, who once ran a famous bookstore in Paris. In the obituary, was a quote that was attributed to Yeats. Here is the quote: “Do not be inhospitable to strangers lest they be angels in disguise.” Metaxas said, when he read it he almost choked on his toast. That is not a quote from Yeats. It is from the Bible. It is a quote from the book of Hebrews.

To his dismay, he wondered out loud how the fact checkers at the New York Times missed this altogether. It reminded him of a secular friend who was quite surprised to find out the Jesus is the one who came up with the Golden Rule.

Actually, there were variations of the “Golden Rule” floating around rabbinical literature prior to Jesus. But Jesus put a new twist to it. It is a revolutionary twist, albeit. The common rabbinical saying of the day went like this, “Don’t do anything to anyone that you would not want him to do to you.” It is the “Golden Rule” stated negatively. We say this to children all the time. When they hit someone and get hit back, they discover an important lesson in life. “If I don’t want to be hit, maybe I shouldn’t hit.” Rabbi Hillel summarized it this way, “What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow creatures. That is the whole Law. All else is explanation.”⁶ And yet this falls short of how Jesus presents the “Golden Rule” because it does not require that I do anything positive for someone else. It simply requires me to offend no one, but it does not move me to action.

Jesus comes along and states it in the positive. Instead of just trying not to do what you don’t want others to do to you, Jesus calls us to action. He calls us “to do” to others what we would want others to do to us. If you like to receive things, give to others. If you like to be appreciated, appreciate others. If you like to be forgiven, forgive others. If you enjoy being loved, love others. When it comes to relationships, Jesus is calling us to be proactive and is calling us to action.

It is what the writer to the Hebrews says when he tells us “*to spur one another on to love and good deeds.*” It is what Paul is after, when he tells Titus to instruct the church at Crete to “be a model of good works” . . . “to be ready for good works” . . . “to be devoted to good works” . . . and “to be zealous for good works.” In other words, they are to be proactive in doing the very things they would want to have done to them. This is love. In this you have the summary of the “Law and the Prophets.”

I think of some of the ministries we have here, like Parents Night Out, that provides free childcare one Friday night a month to families inside and outside of the church and Hands Opened Wide, which distributes food to those in need one Saturday a month. They began with a small group of people asking the simple question, “What can we do to show love to people in need?” It was a proactive approach to meeting needs. Both of these ministries were birthed out of lives that sought to live by the “Golden Rule.” What would I want done for me if I were a young parent with kids? Go and do what you would like done for you! What would I want done for me if I were in need of basic supplies for life? Go and do what you would like done for you. That is a great way to live life and engage in relationships.

If you offended someone, what would you like done for you? You would like to be forgiven. Then go and do likewise. If you were discouraged, what would you like done for you? You would like someone to comfort you. Then go and do likewise. Make it your prayer that God would give you a heart to be proactive in extending grace and love to the people in your life.

Conclusion

Can we put the “Golden Rule” in context today? It is the summary of everything Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount. It has really been elevated in my mind through this sermon. You can’t get any higher than the summary of God’s Law. It is the summary of the way of life Jesus invites us to. It is the summary of “the Law and the Prophets.” Do to others what you would want them to do to you. It sets the tone for how to love God and love others. It sets the tone for how we engage in relationships.

Life in the kingdom of God is a relational and communal life. We are called to live in community with each other. It is not always easy. We don’t do it perfectly. But it is also a blessing and we are called to pursue community. I believe community is essential to God, forming his heart in my heart.

What does it require of us?

Humble discernment: Seeing your own need for grace and therefore you are free to extend compassion to the one who struggles. There is no place for a judgmental and condemning spirit. “*But by the grace of God!*”

God’s strength: Persisting in prayer and calling on God to form these virtues in your heart so that you might love as God calls you. “Keep on asking . . . Keep on seeking . . . Keep on knocking!” Pray the Sermon on the Mount!

Proactive love: Doing to others what you would want done to you, in doing so you are actively seeking to love the people in your life. This is the summary of the whole sermon! Love God and love others.

¹David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons *UnChristian* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007) 181

²Ibid., 194-195

³D. A. Carson *The Sermon on the Mount: An Evangelical Exposition of Matthew 5-7* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1978) 107

⁴Ibid., 108

⁵Eric Metaxas “Does Anyone in the Media Ever Read the Bible?” <http://www.foxnews.com/opinion/2011/12/23/does-anyone-in-media-ever-read-bible/> December 26, 2011

⁶Carson, 112

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