

Simple Rules for Behavior

You may be experiencing a form of thematic whiplash. We just sang a song based on today's scripture about asking complicated questions. And now I'm going to talk about simple rules for behavior, also based on today's Bible passage. Which is it? Complicated or simple? Of course, I'm going to say it's both.

This is the last of three Sundays that we're reading from the Sermon on the Mount found in Matthew 5-7. Jesus' sermon is filled with pithy sayings that are easy to remember and repeat but are difficult to put into practice.¹

Almost 8 years ago, in the spring of 2015, we participated in the 12 Scriptures Project.² We began with a list of about 75 passages, narrowed it down to 25, and eventually settled on 12 scriptures that are important to us in worship and in our life as a congregation. (I wonder if we would come up with the same list if we repeated the process now.)

Three of the scriptures – 25% of the list – come from the Sermon on the Mount.³ One of those comes from the beginning of chapter 7.

*Don't judge, so that you won't be judged. You'll receive the same judgment you give. Whatever you deal out will be dealt out to you. Why do you see the splinter that's in your brother's or sister's eye, but don't notice the log in your own eye? How can you say to your brother or sister, 'Let me take the splinter out of your eye,' when there's a log in your eye? You deceive yourself! First take the log out of your eye, and then you'll see clearly to take the splinter out of your brother's or sister's eye.*⁴

The simple rule here is "Don't judge." Easy enough, right? But, of course, it gets complicated. When it comes to judging, it's not unusual to see two extremes. On one end, there is cheap grace – the attitude that I can do anything I want because no one can judge me. On the other end, there is a lot of judging going on in the name of Christ – in sermons, on social media, and within relationships. What is Jesus warning his listeners about?

The word he uses here for judgment could be translated as *condemn*. It refers to determining someone's final destiny. In the end, that's God's job, not ours. Jesus prohibits writing someone off based on what we think we know about what they are doing. Only the all-seeing and all-knowing God can exercise that role. Don't be hypocritical. Don't judge someone out of a false sense of self-righteousness. As harshly as you are judging is as harshly as you will be judged.

This doesn't mean, however, that Christians shouldn't use judgment. Having a moral compass and using good judgment is a good thing. However, this doesn't mean we're allowed to condemn someone and deem them unworthy of God's love.

The humorous example of the speck and log reveals how easy it is to see the faults in others. Many people who have become the judge are doing exactly what they say other people shouldn't be doing. Self-examination is important. It must be done before and along with correcting someone else. When we look within ourselves, it changes the way we see other people. As we remove the log from our

¹ Sources consulted include Glen Stassen, *Living the Sermon on the Mount: A Practical Hope for Grace and Deliverance*, 2006; Pulpit Fiction Narrative Podcast, [NL 125: The Golden Rule — Pulpit Fiction](#); BibleWorm Podcast, [Episode 427 Do Not Judge \(Matthew 7:1-14, 24-29\) | BibleWorm \(biblewormpodcast.com\)](#); and Working Preacher Narrative Lectionary Podcast, [Working Preacher's Narrative Lectionary: Narrative Lectionary 523: The Golden Rule - February 5, 2023 on Apple Podcasts](#).

² [Twelve Scriptures Project engages congregations, conferences | Mennonite Church USA \(mennoniteusa.org\)](#)

³ Matthew 5:1-12 – The Beatitudes; Matthew 6:9-13 – The Lord's Prayer; and Matthew 7:1-5 – Do not judge.

⁴ Matthew 7:1-5, *Common English Bible*.

own eye, as we align ourselves with God's way, then we will see ourselves and others more clearly. When we are aware of our own limitations, we have more empathy for someone else.

Another complication to this simple rule is that many of us are harder on ourselves than we are on others. To those for whom this is true, Jesus' advice would be to be easier on yourself.

It's interesting to note that the word *you* in this passage is plural. Jesus says, "Hey you all, don't judge, so that you all won't be judged." The culture in which Jesus' first listeners were living was an honor and shame culture. For them, rank and status within the community was based on such things as wealth, education, speaking skill, family pedigree, and political connections. Individuals would gain or lose status in the community based on how those around them evaluated their characteristics and actions.

Jesus is asking his listeners to build community based on the reality of God's grace. Everyone is an equally beloved child of God and worthy of God's grace. Everyone is to be treated equitably. There needs to be accountability and mutuality. But don't judge or condemn someone in such a way that it cuts off relationship. (Except, of course, if the relationship is abusive and harmful.) Look at yourself and at your neighbor. Be aware of your own faults and frailties and then start a conversation with them about their faults and frailties.

I wonder. What aspect of this passage were we thinking of when we chose it as one of the most important scriptures for us? How have we lived this out throughout the life of this congregation?

The next verse is related to this topic. *Don't give holy things to dogs, and don't throw your pearls in front of pigs. They will stomp on the pearls, then turn around and attack you.*⁵ The simple rule here is "Don't throw your pearls before swine." And it's not really all that complicated. In Jesus' time, dogs were scavengers. They weren't cute, lovable pets. Calling someone else a dog was an insult. Also, for Jews, pigs were unclean and were to be avoided.

The instruction here is to not give corrections to opponents or those who don't want to hear it. There's no point in offering valuable instruction when it will be despised and rejected. The one providing it could even be in danger. This was true for Jesus' disciples. His instructions to them when they were driven out of a town, was to dust off their feet and move on. They were not to condemn the townspeople by calling down fire and brimstone on them.⁶

A modern application might be to leave a relationship that's constantly abusing you. Don't try to maintain a relationship in which you are constantly being trampled on and harmed. You can move on. Don't judge people, but also don't let them keep hurting you.

Even when abuse isn't present, exercise caution about who you share things with – both material and emotional. Don't share what is precious to you with someone who won't see or care about it. They won't appreciate the gift or you.

The next simple rule is, "Ask God for what you need."

*Ask, and you will receive. Search, and you will find. Knock, and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives. Whoever seeks, finds. And to everyone who knocks, the door is opened. Who among you will give your children a stone when they ask for bread? Or give them a snake when they ask for fish? If you who are evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give good things to those who ask him.*⁷

It's obvious that this is more complicated than it might appear on the surface. Often, this is incorrectly interpreted that you will get whatever you ask for – *if* you pray in exactly the right way and *if* you have enough faith. Prayers are like coins in a vending machine. Put in the right ones and out comes exactly what you requested.

⁵ Matthew 7:6, *Common English Bible*.

⁶ Matthew 10:14-15

⁷ Matthew 7:7-11, *Common English Bible*.

But we know that prayer doesn't work that way. Jesus prayed, "Let this cup pass from me," but was still arrested and killed.⁸ Paul prayed for his "thorn in the flesh" to be removed, but it didn't happen.⁹ Paul concluded that God's grace is sufficient for him. He relied on God's power to help him endure his hardship. As Jesus asked to avoid what was about to happen, he also prayed that what God wanted to happen would happen.

Prayer isn't intended as a means of manipulating God into satisfying our desires – the selfish ones, of course – and also some that aren't so selfish. Faithful interpretation of this passage connects it with the rest of the Sermon on the Mount. Everything Jesus says about how to live according to the way of God's kingdom – not retaliating, not judging, loving our enemies, forgiving others, forgiving ourselves – is impossible to do all on our own. We need God's help. We need the help of the faith community. Only by persistently pursuing God – asking, seeking, and knocking at heaven's door – can we find the grace to obey these impossible demands.

In Jesus' illustration of family life, the children are seeking sustenance for the day, a basic necessity of life. They aren't asking for superficial things. And even those considered to be the most evil are often generous and kind to their own children. In comparison, how much more generous is God in helping those who want to do what is right. God gives us the strength, will, and desire to live out the teachings found in Matthew 5-7 and throughout the rest of the Bible. Even with the best of intentions, we won't always get it right, but God is generous with love, mercy, and grace.

The "ask, seek, and knock" section of the sermon ends with one of the most well-known verses in the Bible, commonly known as The Golden Rule. *Therefore, you should treat people in the same way that you want people to treat you; this is the Law and the Prophets.*¹⁰ Versions of this simple rule of treating others the way you want to be treated are found in the tenets of most religions and creeds. This universal ethic rightly expresses the wish that all people be treated with decency and justice. But again, it can be misinterpreted if not put into the context of the entire sermon. And complications arise when putting it into practice.

If I only choose my behavior towards you based on how I want to be treated, I could be ignoring the fact that we are different people with different personalities. What I want done to me might not be what you want done to you.

It gets more complicated in cross-cultural contexts. What is right for me may be offensive or hurtful for someone of a different culture – or even from a different family within the same culture.

If I choose my behavior towards you based only on how either of us wants to be treated, we could be aiding each other in harmful practices and even in creating systems of oppression. I don't want to say what you're doing wrong because I don't want you to say what I'm doing wrong. An extreme example is: I won't confront you or report your illegal or abusive behavior because I don't want you to confront me or report my illegal or abusive behavior.

The Golden Rule is useful, but it's surrounded by many sentences that bring out the deeper understanding of Jesus' vision of an alternative way of life. This verse serves as a summary of the teachings about the kingdom of heaven, that upside-down world that includes love of enemies and non-retaliation. The Golden Rule is a guide for interpreting all the laws and all the writings of the prophets. All of these together teach about living in righteousness – in right relationship with God, with others, and with ourselves. Treat others in the same way as you would like to be treated as the salt of the earth, as the light of the world, as one who forgives, as one who doesn't retaliate, as a beloved child of God.

Don't forget the communal nature of this. When you know what your neighbor needs, try to fill the need of your neighbor because you hope they'll do the same for you. Pay attention to the needs of others. Do your part in the community of God and the community will do the same for you.

⁸ Matthew 26:39, 42

⁹ 2 Corinthians 12:7-10

¹⁰ Matthew 7:7-12, *Common English Bible*.

The final teaching in The Sermon on the Mount is a story about buildings and foundations.

*Everybody who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise builder who built a house on bedrock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the wind blew and beat against that house. It didn't fall because it was firmly set on bedrock. But everybody who hears these words of mine and doesn't put them into practice will be like a fool who built a house on sand. The rain fell, the floods came, and the wind blew and beat against that house. It fell and was completely destroyed.*¹¹

This is the final example in a series of four illustrations Jesus uses to urge his listeners to give proper attention to his teaching. The three preceding episodes are the broad and narrow path,¹² the good and bad fruit,¹³ and lawlessness and righteousness.¹⁴ The choice between two ways is a common theme throughout the Old Testament, in Jesus' teaching, and in early Christian writings. In this illustration, Jesus focuses on the urgency of action in light of the kingdom's presence and the certainty of trials and tribulations.

The simple rule is, "Build your life on Jesus." Those who listen to Jesus' words and follow his teachings are building their lives on a rock-solid foundation. Those who don't listen and don't follow are building their lives on shifting sand. The complication is life itself – things you imagine you can control and things you know you cannot. It's not about avoiding the storm. Whichever foundation you choose, you're still going to get hit by the storm. If you're as faithful as possible or if you're completely the opposite, you'll still get slammed by rain, floods, and wind. It's not about the craftsmanship of the house. Eventually, if you don't build on a strong foundation, it doesn't matter how sturdy your house is.

What will help you endure the storms of life? What will help your relationships endure the storms? What will help our congregation endure the storms? God will.

We have a solid foundation in the long history of stories and teachings about the way God relates to God's people with love, faithfulness, and steadfastness. Of course, sometimes building our lives on scripture feels more like shifting sand than solid bedrock. In most, if not all, of the debates among Christians, people on both sides (or should I say all sides) of the issue claim a relationship with Christ and sincerely want to follow him in their conduct and lifestyle. They use scripture as the foundation of their opinions. Who is right? On which rock are we supposed to build?

Build on Jesus. Rely on the entire word of God. Build on a foundation of truth, grace, love, justice, and righteousness. Admit that our interpretation of a particular biblical passage may be unreliable. Believe that God continues to speak to us. Resilience and endurance come from our continuing relationship with God and with each other, not from nitpicking and proof texting. Build on the simple rules of not judging, asking for what you need, treating people right, and trusting God.

You are not alone. God is with you. The community is with you. Thanks be to God.

¹¹ Matthew 7:24-27, *Common English Bible*.

¹² Matthew 7:13-14.

¹³ Matthew 7:15-20.

¹⁴ Matthew 7:21-23.