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Pursuing the Kingdom: The Heart of Kingdom Living

Matthew 7:1-12

Vernon Advent Christian Church

As we come to Matthew 7, we are entering the final section of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount where the text begins to get really personal because it speaks to the way we relate to people every single day. Up to this point, Jesus has been exposing the heart beneath outward religion. He has shown us that kingdom righteousness is not merely about our outward behavior, but an inward transformation of the heart. He has addressed anger, lust, revenge, hypocrisy, prayer, money, anxiety and trust. And through it all, Jesus has been pressing beneath appearances to the deeper issue of the heart and our motivations behind the things that we do.

That's important because it means the Sermon on the Mount is not just a list of "do's and don'ts." It is a description of what life looks like when we begin to truly pursue the kingdom of God. And now Jesus turns to something that reveals the condition of the heart perhaps more quickly than almost anything else, the way we treat other people.

Because if we are honest, relationships are often where our spiritual maturity is truly put to the test. It's one thing to worship God passionately in church or elsewhere. But it's another thing entirely to respond graciously when someone irritates you, criticizes you, wounds you, disappoints you or even fails to meet your expectations. Nothing exposes pride, selfishness, insecurity and impatience quite like how we treat and get along with others, especially those whom we have a hard time getting along with.

And what makes this section so powerful is that Jesus addresses two opposite dangers that people often fall into. On one side is a harsh, critical, judgmental spirit. On the other, is naive tolerance that abandons all wisdom and discernment altogether. And Jesus calls His followers to something different. He call us to a humble discernment shaped by grace and dependence on God, our heavenly Father.

Believe it or not, in our passage today, in this one passage alone, we find three of the most misquoted, misused and misunderstood verses in the entire Bible. And we will get to each of them as we move along as they for the framework of the message today.

In this passage, Jesus is teaching us that the people of His kingdom are supposed to be marked by humility, discernment, dependence on the Father and our active love toward others. So let's jump right in. If you are able, please stand with me as I read from the word of God found in Matthew 7:1-12. [Read]

Our first misunderstood verse is found in vs. 1. And the first thing Jesus shows us here is that as followers of Jesus, we are to examine our own hearts before judging others. I don't have to tell you that we live in a culture deeply confused about judgment. Again, in our world today, one of the most commonly quoted verses in the Bible, in fact I believe it's the unbeliever's favorite verse, and that is "Judge not." And people use it to mean, "We can never tell anyone they are wrong and we should never confront sin." They seem to think, or hope, that Jesus commanded a universal acceptance of any lifestyle or teaching.

But that cannot possibly be what Jesus means because later in this very chapter, in verses we're going to look at next week, He warns us about false prophets and tells us to recognize them by their fruit. That requires wisdom and discernment.

So what is Jesus condemning here? Well, we need to slow down and understand what He means. Jesus is not forbidding all forms of moral judgment. If He were, there could be no correction, no accountability, no distinction between truth and error. And over and over again, scripture consistently calls believers to discernment and even lovingly confront others when it is necessary.

What Jesus is clearly forbidding here is hypocritical, prideful judgmentalism. He is addressing the attitude that constantly elevates ourselves by tearing others down. And honestly, this comes very naturally to us. There is something in the human heart that feels strangely satisfied when we can point out someone else's flaws to deflect away from our own. It makes us feel superior, safer and more righteous by comparison.

And you can see this everywhere. Social media has almost become a factory for judgmentalism. People publicly shame others, mock other's failures and tear people apart with incredible cruelty. And, not surprisingly, the cruelest people are often the ones blinded to their own faults.

But before we criticize our culture too quickly, we need to recognize how easily this spirit enters the church as well. Sad to say, that we as Christians, have become experts at identifying the sins of others while remaining strangely comfortable with our own pride, our own gossip, our own bitterness and our own lack of love. That's why Jesus says in vs. 2, "For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you." In other words, the standard you harshly apply to others exposes the standard by which your own heart is revealed.

Then Jesus gives one of His most memorable illustrations in vs. 3-4. [Read] The imagery here is intentionally exaggerated. Imagine someone trying to help remove a tiny speck of sawdust from another person's eye while a massive wooden plank is sticking out of their own face. It's ridiculous. And that ridiculousness is exactly the point. You see, pride distorts our perspective. It blinds us. Self-righteousness magnifies the failures of others while minimizing our own.

And if we're honest, we all do this. We tend to judge others by their worst moments and ourselves by our best intentions. We explain away our own sins while viewing the sins of others critically. We excuse our anger by calling it "stress," but call their anger "sinful." We redefine our gossip by calling it "concern," but their gossip, we say, is "divisive." You see, we excuse ourselves while condemning others. And this is the judgmentalism that Jesus is calling out and saying, although this might be the way of the world, this is not to be the way in my kingdom.

Jesus continues in vs. 5, [Read] Notice He says "first." And this is where, I believe, people miss the point of what Jesus is saying here. Jesus is not saying we should never help someone with the "speck in their eye," by never call out their sin or by never telling someone that they are wrong. Yes, we are called to show unconditional love, but we are not called to unconditional approval. Believe it not, it is possible to love people who do things that the word of God does not approve of.

In fact, He goes on to say in vs. 5, that its only after you remove the plank from your own eye, that you can “then see clearly to take the speck out of your brother’s eye.” So, the goal here is restoration, not condemnation. We're not meant to leave the speck in our brother’s eye. The point of calling out sin and error is meant to restore a brother or sister, or even to point an unbeliever to the Savior. But it should never be used to merely condemn and tear down another person. And that completely changes the posture of correction. We are not to approach others with the attitude of “I am better than you.” We are to approach others with humility, aware of our own need for grace.

And this becomes deeply practical for us. For, before you confront someone else, you should ask yourself, “Have I honestly examined my own heart? Am I approaching this situation out of love or irritation? Am I seeking restoration or simply venting my own frustration?” Because there’s a huge difference between loving correction and prideful condemnation. May God help us to live it such a way.

Next, Jesus goes on to balances our humility with something equally important, and that is wisdom and discernment in vs. 6. Because humility is not about being naive and gullible, but as followers of Jesus, we are to exercise wisdom and discernment.

This verse can almost feel abrupt. [Read] At first glance, it seems disconnected. But it actually balances the previous verses perfectly. Jesus has just warned us against harsh judgmentalism. But now He warns us against abandoning wisdom and discernment altogether. In other words, He did not intend to imply that the people of His Kingdom throw all discernment out the window. They must use wisdom to discern that there are some good and precious things that should not be given to those who will receive them with contempt.

In Jewish culture, dogs and pigs represented uncleanness and hostility and, specifically, they represented those outside of a covenant relationship with God. Jesus is using these images to describe people who consistently and aggressively reject the truth. The point is not that believers should look down on unbelievers and call them names. The point is that we must exercise wisdom in how we deal with outsiders. There are times when people are going to be so hardened against the truth that continuing to force it upon them only produces greater anger and rejection.

Jesus is saying that, sometimes, its okay to walk away. Jesus Himself sometimes withdrew from hostile crowds. And even the apostles occasionally turned away from those who persistently rejected the gospel. This is important to understand because some Christians confuse “unconditional love” with the absence of wisdom and discernment. But biblical love is not naive. Love does not mean affirming everything blindly. As theologian D. A. Carson has said, “Christian love is not blind acceptance of evil.” No, we are called to be both gracious and wise.

And honestly, wisdom is desperately needed today. We live in a culture where people often swing between two extremes, harsh condemnation or total compromise. Jesus calls us to neither of these two extremes. He calls us to truth shaped by humility and love shaped by discernment.

And that requires spiritual maturity. It requires being sensitive to the Holy Spirit. And it requires complete dependence on God. Which leads directly into the next section.

Because if we're going to live with humility, wisdom and love we cannot do it in our own strength. We need to be dependent on the Father through persistent prayer.

Jesus says in vs. 7, and here we find our second misused and misunderstood verse in this passage, "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you." These verses are deeply comforting because Jesus redirects our attention upward toward the Father. Notice the progression here. Ask, seek and knock. In the original language, these verbs are all present tense imperatives, which means they carry the idea of continual action as opposed to a one time request. To keep asking. Keep seeking. Keep knocking. Meaning we are to be a people who are persistent in prayer because we recognize our dependence on God and our need of Him.

And honestly, this is where many of us struggle. We often try to live the Christian life through our own willpower instead of dependence on God through persistent prayer. We want quick spiritual growth without consistent communion with our heavenly Father. But Jesus is teaching that kingdom living flows out of an authentic relationship with, and dependence on, the Father.

Think about the context here. We need wisdom to deal with people. We need humility to confront our pride. We need discernment and wisdom to navigate truth and love. Where do we get those things when we know they don't come from within us? By asking God for them. Prayer, then, is not a last resort but it's meant to be a way of life.

And notice the confidence Jesus gives: "For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds." Now this is not a blank check for selfish desires. God is not a cosmic vending machine where we pay with our good deeds, press a button and out pops every desire that we've ever wanted. No, Jesus is not promising to fulfill every one of our worldly ambitions. The context, here, is kingdom living and kingdom dependence. The focus is the goodness of the Father.

And Jesus illustrates this beautifully when He says, "Which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone?" His point is that even imperfect earthly parents know how to care for their children.

Then Jesus says, "How much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!" That phrase "how much more" is powerful. If flawed human parents can love generously, how much more can the perfect Father be trusted?

And this matters because anxiety, fear, pride and control often grow when we lose sight of God. But prayer reminds us who God is. We are to pursue the Father not merely to get what we want, but because we trust His heart and all of our desires are satisfied in Him.

And now Jesus brings this section to a powerful close as we makes the point that, as followers of Jesus, we are to actively pursue the good of others in vs. 12, "So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets."

And here we find our third misunderstood verse of this passage. This verse is what we often call the Golden Rule. But we need to hear it this morning in a fresh and new way because it's easy to reduce it to another cliché that gets put on a poster. Jesus is not merely saying, "to be nice," but He is summarizing for us the kingdom ethic.

Notice the command is active, not passive. Meaning, it's something that we must do. You ever notice that we tend to use the negative version of this principle, "Don't do to others what you don't want done to you." But Jesus goes much further. Instead of waiting to

be loved first, we need to take the initiative to love. Instead of waiting to be forgiven first, we need to be a people who forgives. Instead of waiting to be encouraged first, we need to be the ones who first encourages others. Why? Because this reflects the heart of God Himself.

And Jesus says this summarizes “the Law and the Prophets.” And, if this phrase sounds similar, its because Jesus uses it during his answer when asked about which is the greatest commandment in Matthew 22:36-40. And His answer, “The first and greatest commandment is to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. And the second is like it, love your neighbor as you love yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” (Matt. 22:37-40) In other words, this captures the essence of what God has always desired from His people.

Imagine how different our relationships would be if we actually lived these verses out. Our marriages would change. Our families would change. Our church would change. Our communities would change. You see, much of our conflict grows out of self-centeredness. Because we naturally ask, “How am I being treated?” and then respond in kind. But Jesus teaches us to ask a different question instead, “How can I reflect the love and grace of God toward others regardless of how I'm being treated?” In other words, “How can I live out the gospel?” As C. S. Lewis once said, “Humility is not thinking less of yourself, but thinking of yourself less.” That is what kingdom living is all about.

So how do we apply this passage to our lives today? First, once again, we need to examine our hearts honestly. Is there a critical or condemning spirit growing in you? Have you become more focused on the sins of others than your own need for grace? If so, you need to repent and ask God to remove the plank from your own eye so that you can see clearly to lovingly help with the speck in someone else’s eye when that is necessary.

Second, we need to ask God for wisdom and discernment. We need grace and truth together. More and more, everyday we are bombarded with decisions, namely, in the are of our relationships with others and how we treat them. Our actions need to reflect Christ and we need to let His love flow through us to those who are in need of it.

Third, this point is related to the last one but different in that in general, we need to deepen our prayer life. Kingdom living is impossible apart from dependence on the Father. We need to keep asking, keep seeking and keep knocking, not for all our selfish desires and wants, but for our daily needs, all the while knowing that our greatest need is Him.

And finally, we need to actively pursue the good of others. Not just avoiding harming others, although that is a good thing to do, but to intentionally look for ways to encourage, to serve, to forgive and to bless others. That is what the “Golden Rule” is really all about.

So, as we close this morning, we need to step back and notice the beauty of this entire passage. The kingdom of God reshapes how we see ourselves. It reshapes how we see others. And it reshapes how we approach the Father. The proud heart condemns others while excusing itself. But the heart that follows after Jesus walks humbly because it knows how much grace it has received.

So may we be a people who truly pursues the kingdom of God. Not only through our own personal worship, but through transformed relationships marked by humility, wisdom, prayer and love. And may the world see in us a reflection of the gracious King we follow.
Let's Pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank You for Your word today. We confess how easily pride, criticism, selfishness and impatience rise within our hearts. Too often we are quick to judge others while remaining blind to our own need for grace. Forgive us, Lord, for the ways we fail to reflect Your mercy.

Teach us to walk humbly before You. Remove the planks from our own eyes so that we may see clearly and respond to others with gentleness, wisdom and truth. Guard us from harsh and condemning spirits and help us to pursue relationships marked by love and humility.

Father, we thank You that You invite us to ask, to seek and to knock. Remind us that we are not left to live this life in our own strength. Draw us into deeper dependence upon You through prayer. Help us to trust Your goodness and rest in the care of our heavenly Father who gives good gifts to His children.

And Lord, shape us into people who actually live out the "Golden Rule," actively pursuing the good of others. May our words and actions encourage and reflect kindness to others and may our lives display the grace we ourselves have received through Christ. We ask all of this in the name of Jesus our Savior and King. Amen.