

**Foundations: OUR POTENTIAL**  
**Matthew 7:1-12 (AFBC 4/2/17)**

This morning, we come to the final chapter of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. We've spent eight weeks looking at chapters 5 and 6 of Matthew—nine, if you include the Sunday when we did an overview of the Beatitudes as a way of assessing our spiritual growth.

In the Sermon on the Mount, we've encountered teachings of Jesus that are foundational to the Christian life: what we believe and how we live because of what we believe and in whom we believe. Our lives need to be built on the strong foundation of Jesus Christ; but we learn about Christ from these foundational Scriptures.

Only three weeks remain in our study now: today, Palm Sunday, and Easter Sunday. Our passage today is Matthew 7:1-12. It contains several of the best-known and most-quoted verses that we find in this sermon. Please listen and follow along as I read, and ask yourself which of these verses you know best.

**Matthew 7:1-12 "Do not judge, or you too will be judged.  
2 For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.  
3 "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?  
4 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? 5 You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.**

**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 then turn and tear you to pieces.**

**7 "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. 8 For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.**

**9 "Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? 10 Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake?**

**<sup>11</sup> If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him! <sup>12</sup> So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.**

So, which verse is best-known and most often quoted? How many of you have a little 12-inch measuring stick at home that you call "a ruler?" Perhaps you also have a three-foot long measuring device called a "yard stick." That's because it's... one-yard long.

So why isn't this called a "foot stick" or a "footer?" Instead, it's called a ruler. The one I had as a boy had words printed on it—the words of Jesus that we know as the "Golden Rule." (re., Coca-Cola Bottling Co. Field Trip—Greenville County Schools)

How many of us had a ruler that said **"Do unto others as you would have them do unto you?"** If for no other reason, this could well be the best-known verse in this passage and the one that gets quoted most.

But I don't think this verse about prayer would be far behind: **"Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you."**

As Christians, we love this verse and often remember its message as we pray. It's certainly a very well-known verse.

I have a hunch, though, that there's another verse that gets used more often than either of these first two, even as important and well-known as they are. It's the very first verse in this passage: **"Do not judge,"** which is often shortened to **"Judge not."**

I hear Christians using it; but this, friends, is one verse that you hear lots of non-believers quoting. It may be the only "Jesus quote" they know, in fact; but they love this verse and employ it often: "Do not judge."

Today, we're talking about "Our Potential." All that Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount is intended to help us understand what true righteousness is (vs. self-righteousness, legalism). With the help and guidance of our Lord, we can experience abundant living personally, while becoming salt and light--faithful witnesses for Christ.

But if we take what Jesus says here and reduce it down to a mere “judge not”—and, granted, it’s so tempting to do this—but if we do, I don’t think we will have much of an impact on the lives of others—and such a narrow view may even get in the way of what the Lord wants to do in us! So nobody changes—nobody improves--no one reaches his or her potential!

As I wrestled with the meaning of this passage, I began to see it more in light of the “golden rule”: again, “do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”

It’s not about doing nothing--“Judging not,” in other words—but, instead, it’s about doing something... in the right way; in a way that can actually be received—because... it’s being done with a sensitivity that you yourself would appreciate if the tables were turned. Or to put this another way, even when confronting sin, we should “do unto others as we would want them to do unto us.”

There’s a story about an Asian girl named Li-Li who just couldn’t get along with her Mother-in-Law. This would never happen in our culture, of course—but evidently in-law problems do arise in some distant places.

By the rules of her culture, Li-Li was supposed to honor and bow before and be obedient to her mother-in-law; but the two of them were always quarreling instead.

Li-Li decided she couldn’t stand it any longer. She went to a friend, Mr. Won, who sold herbs. She told him her predicament. She asked him for some poisonous herbs to slip into her mother-in-law’s food. Reluctantly, he agreed to give these to her, but he cautioned her to be patient--they would work very slowly.

He also told her that in order to remove all suspicion, she would need to treat this woman she despised with kindness, refusing to argue with her, while being very respectful and obedient. The plan sounded good to Li-Li, and she followed his instructions carefully.

Li-Li prepared meals for her mother-in-law daily, each time adding in the poison herbs. All the while, she controlled her temper and treated this woman as if she were her own mother. She was consistently kind and considerate... as she waited for her to die!

But Li-Li began to notice that her mother-in-law was also acting differently toward her. She was rarely upset now and often quite pleasant and affirming. They were growing close to each other. Soon, Li-Li returned to her friend, and in tears pleaded for something that would reverse the effects of the poison. She now loved this woman and could not believe she had ever wanted to harm her.

“Don’t worry, Li-Li,” Mr. Won said. “I never gave you any poison, just some herbs and vitamins to improve your Mother-in-law’s health. The only poison was in you, and now that’s gone.”

It’s interesting how this works: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” But here’s what I struggled with: how do we apply the golden rule when we see something that’s poisonous in the life of another person—something we know to be wrong, sinful, and deadly (for the wages of sin is death)?

We know the “judge not” part very well—but that’s not all that Jesus says here. To stop there is just an “easy out” for us—whether we happen to be the guilty party insisting that others not judge us; or, on the other hand, we are concerned about someone else who is caught up in a harmful lifestyle, and they are insisting that we not pass judgment on them.

What do we do? Let me suggest three insights that I believe are true to what Jesus tells us here:

**1. Don’t Be Judgmental.** In the first church I pastored, there was a man who joined our church. A short time later, I noticed the license plate on his truck. It consisted of six letters in this order: IBIUBU. This was a good man who took his faith seriously. When I asked him about his tag, he said it was his simple witness to the fact that we should not try to judge each other.

Part of me resonated with that sentiment; but something about it didn’t feel quite right. He meant it in the right way. But it seemed to me that his tag could also be interpreted to mean: “I’ll take care of me, you take care of you.” Or even, “I’m only concerned about me—the heck with you.” That’s certainly not what Jesus taught.

It sounds okay if you lift “Do not judge” out of context and don’t consider the rest of what Jesus says here, including that part about “Do unto others...”

Jesus never suggested a kind of individualism that turns a blind eye to the lives of others, not even to the evil in the lives of others. He simply insists that we not fall into the self-righteous trap of seeing so clearly the evil in others while being blind to the evil in ourselves. There's a big difference between the two!

Jesus finds a little humor in the way we so easily see sin in the life of our brother, but miss it in our own lives. Drawing upon his work as a carpenter, he says: 'we see a speck of sawdust in our brother's eye while missing the 2x4 in our own.'

But then Jesus gets serious again when He says, **"You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye."**

But notice—and this is what we miss--there *is a time* to deal with our brother's sin, to help him get the speck out of his eye—but only with the full awareness that we have specks in our eyes too; and the very same speck in our own eye should appear much bigger to us than when we see it in our brother's eye. The sawdust in his eye becomes the whole plank in mine—looking at it from a much closer perspective.

So we're to exercise good judgment without being judgmental. We should help one another remove those irritating specks from each other's eyes without ever becoming condescendingly critical.

God is well-qualified for the job of Judge. We aren't. And Jesus warns us that if we do try to take over God's job, then He will adopt the same standards we use in judging others to judge us. Friends, I don't want that, do you? So, again, what do we do?

**2. Practice Discernment.** Don't be judgmental, but do be discerning when it comes to the lives of others.

The Lone Ranger and Tonto were riding across the plains. It was getting late, so they set up their tent, settled in, and quickly fell fast asleep. Hours later, Tonto wakes up and says, "Kemo Sabe, open eyes. Look up, what you see?"

"I see millions of stars, Tonto. Isn't it beautiful? It speaks to me about the vastness of the universe and causes me to wonder about what lies beyond those stars.

It speaks of a God who is an all-powerful Creator. And, the clarity of the sky tells me that we should have nice weather to resume our travels when the sun comes up. So, Tonto, what does all this say to you?"

"Huh," Tonto grunts, "Tells me Kemo Sabe dumber than rock. He not notice somebody stole tent."

Tonto was being discerning. Now, the "dumber than rock" part sounds a bit judgmental; but here's the point.

What are we to make of the fact that Jesus follows His words about not being judgmental by telling us in 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 then turn and tear you to pieces." By the way, Jesus was talking here about wild dogs and pigs—not your family pet.

Jesus is encouraging us here not to miss the obvious. Don't be judgmental, but don't put your mind in neutral either. Be discerning. Use good judgment. For Christ's sake, don't be "dumber than rock!"

Here's an example. A young man shows up at your house to see your daughter. His appearance is suspect. You learn he's had several run-ins with the law. He's living with a cousin now because his parents threw him out of their house.

Meanwhile, your sweet daughter who's been raised right and knows just enough Scripture to be dangerous—when you object to her dating this young man, she decides to tell you off Biblically: "Don't judge, lest you be judged."

Well, if you know Jesus' teachings here, you have some ammunition to defend your decision. It might go something like this: "That pig's not going to get this pearl without a fight!" To not take such a stand as a Christian parent would be "dumb as a rock"—speaking in a non-judgmental way, of course!

Granted, finding the balance between judging and discerning is not easy. It's bound to be imperfect because you and I must decide where the balance is. So there's one other thing we need to do:

**3. Be Prayerful.** Jesus follows these instructions with some very timely teaching about prayer: **"Ask...seek...knock..."** and trust your Heavenly Father to respond to your need by helping you find the guidance you're looking for and the right responses to make.

With God's help—with the wisdom He provides--you can trust your judgment. This is what I think Jesus is saying to us here:  
"Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? (Matthew 7:9-10)  
"You'll know what to do, and do the right thing," Jesus assures us.

Again, don't be judgmental. A critical, self-righteous, condemning spirit is destructive toward others and usually it's just a cover-up for one's own sins. It has no place in our lives as Christians.

Jesus often accepted people whom others condemned. It was not a blind acceptance, though; His loving embrace set them on the road to transformation—new life—a big change for the better!

Jesus encourages a wise, discerning spirit that is steeped in prayer. Many of us love the Serenity Prayer. It speaks to this balance that Jesus wants us to experience:

"God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; the courage to change the things I can; and the wisdom to know the difference." That's discernment!

It's not our place to judge anyone. It IS, however, our calling to be part of what God wants to do in His world—transforming lives for His Kingdom.

If we ask, and seek, and knock (i.e., pray), God will give us the wisdom to know the difference, to be wise and discerning, that we may be effective as His agents of change—in our own lives first, and perhaps in the lives of others as well.

Done right—following the path Jesus prescribes for us—He can help us to help one another reach the full potential that God has placed in each of our lives! Thy will be done, Lord, in my life, and in the lives of others--on earth (right where we live), even as it is in heaven. Amen.