

**Easier Said Than Done**  
**Sermon 171 | Greystone Baptist Church | February 12, 2023**  
**Matthew 7:1-14, 24-29**

In many ways, today's selection of verses can feel like a collection of Jesus' greatest hits. It definitely reads differently than the carefully crafted prose we have come to love in the Gospels. This last section of the sermon on the mount feels different from the beatitudes we found at the beginning or the parables that will follow in Matthew's Gospel. Here Jesus' words are less like a story and more like a bullet point list beginning with "do not judge others" and then jumping from profaning the holy, asking God for what we want, to the golden rule, and so on and so forth.

Scholars agree that each little section of this chapter could produce its own sermon. And many of them think each section probably was its own sermon at some point. The earliest churches, those that were forming in Matthew's community 60 to 70 years after Jesus' death and resurrection, wanted to preserve and remember and honor all the teachings of Jesus and so they might have brought them all together here, as the final chapter of the Sermon on the Mount.

If this is true, then the Sermon on the Mount is not just one of the sermons Jesus preached, but it is the ultimate sermon containing and summarizing all of his sermons, setting the stage for the ministry that would follow in the unfolding narrative of Matthew's Gospel.

Either way - whether Jesus delivered this sermon in its entirety, or if Matthew's community compiled these as a group of sayings, there is plenty of wise instruction to keep our attention. I do not know about you, but whenever I read scripture like this, lists of dos and don'ts, I begin to feel a little overwhelmed.

Reading these portions is not like reading a nice, cohesive story that takes us on a narrative journey all leading up to one main point or theme. No, this reading feels different, like more things to add to the moral checklist, a list that is already quite full.

And these are not simple things like some of the commandments may seem. Do not steal, do not kill, do not lie, those which seem kind of basic and already fill our minds as we try our best to live faithfully. But this new list feels harder, more complicated, more vulnerable.

Do not judge others, so that you may not be judged.

Do not profane that which is holy, giving what is holy to the dogs or throwing it to the swine. Ok, that one is going to require some thought and probably a high level of exegesis.

Ask, search, and knock. Ok, that feels within reach. And it comes with a hopeful promise.

Then the Golden rule. A concept so familiar it isn't quite as daunting as the others.

Still, even the golden rule is easier said than done. But then there's that narrow gate and the reminder that the path toward God can feel like an obscure and lonely walk.

So maybe taking these things one at a time would feel more doable than attempting to achieve them all at once.

"Do not judge others." Let's start there... This one is probably going to take all of our attention because judgments are so prevalent in our society today.

We are hard-wired to judge based on race, gender, money, status, ability, work experience, and education (just to name a few). We encounter people who look different from us, who think differently from us, who live differently than we do and we make judgments about them based on what we think we know.

If we want to truly rid our lives of judging others, it is going to take a constant and intentional effort to re-program our minds so that we are not always pointing out the proverbial speck in our neighbor's eye, while avoiding the log in our own (just trying to stick with the biblical language there). Nothing could make this more clear than our current political climate.

See what I mean about how each little piece could be its own sermon? This is just the first in the long list from today's reading. It is just one of the characteristics of kingdom living. Just one instruction in the list of things that will make God proud. Just one... and I'm already feeling overwhelmed. Are you?

There are some who would like to reduce Christianity to a list of moralistic dos and don'ts that are often harmful and dehumanizing. When used in such a way, the Bible can become a tool, misapplied to make others feel guilty, and at times to even doubt their own salvation. These interpretations of biblical living equate righteousness with a kind of timeless, cross-cultural legalism. They reduce the mystery of God's spirit at work in the world and steal the power of the Gospel to transform our lives and our communities through grace and love.

To further the point, two well-known authors have experimented with these ideas about biblical living and written books about it so that we could all come along for the ride. Journalist, A.J. Jacobs wrote his best-seller, *A Year of Living Biblically*, in 2008, it is a memoir of his 365 days trying to adhere to every single rule included in the Bible. The well-known ones like the ten commandments and the lesser-known ones like, "do not wear clothing of mixed fibers", "do not shave your beard", and "pummel all the idols", one he found particularly difficult to carry out living in Manhattan.

A few years later, Rachel Held Evans wrote her own best seller on the same subject. In her *Year of Biblical Womanhood*, she found herself engaging in some very interesting behaviors like calling her husband "master", covering her head any time a prayer was being said, sitting on the roof for penance, and strangest of all: having to keep quiet during football games because First Peter describes the godly women as "having a gentle and

quiet spirit". Remember this women, tonight - in case you find yourself watching a high-stakes football game.

This specific task was a big deal for a girl who grew up in Alabama where the third most important question after "What's your name?" and "Where do you go to church?" was "Alabama or Auburn?" (Isn't that right, Anna Beth?)

Both books were widely read and widely loved by people inside and outside of the Christian faith. I suspect they were so popular because somewhere deep down inside we are all trying to get it 100% right 100% of the time. But before too long (whether reading one of these memoirs or holding ourselves to these impossible standards) we begin to see that this whole "biblical living" thing is easier said than done. It can be absolutely overwhelming.

Jacobs and Evans each came to their work from different places and faith backgrounds. Jacobs, a reporter, a secular Jew (his own designation), who really thought that his work would highlight the ridiculousness of religion in our modern world.

Evans was beginning to break away from her conservative, evangelical Christian upbringing and she thought that this project might expose some of the trouble with biblical literalism and that it might even make her want to take a break from the Bible altogether.

But here's the thing, despite their assumptions or fears or feelings of overwhelm... they both were surprised by grace along the way. At the end of her year-long experiment Rachel Held Evans realized that she couldn't walk away or take a break from the Bible, instead she resolved to (in her words) "Keep loving, studying, and struggling [with it] – because no matter how hard I fight it, it will always call me back." And as she kept on, she discovered that... somewhere between the rooftop and the red tent, [she'd] learned to love the Bible again — for what it is, not what [she wanted] it to be.

The Bible isn't an answer book. It isn't a self-help manual. It isn't a flat, perspicuous list of rules and regulations that we can interpret objectively and apply unilaterally to our lives.

The Bible is a sacred collection of letters and laws, poetry and proverbs, philosophy and prophecies, written and assembled over thousands of years in cultures and contexts very different from our own, that tells the complex, ever-unfolding story of God's interaction with humanity.

When we turn the Bible into an adjective and stick it in front of [other] loaded [words] like manhood, womanhood, politics, economics, marriage, and even equality, we tend to ignore or downplay the parts of the Bible that don't fit our tastes.

In an attempt to simplify, we try to force the Bible's cacophony of voices into a single tone, to turn a complicated and at times troubling text into a list of bullet points we can put in a manifesto or creed. More often than not, we end up more committed to what we want the

Bible to say than what it actually says. Which is why we all need the grace-filled invitation found at the very end of the sermon on the mount. The final movement of the Sermon on the Mount is a parable that goes like this:

Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock...

Jesus could have said everyone who hears these words and follows these instructions to a tee... or, everyone who hears and gets it all right afterward, or, everyone who hears and goes and tells others they'd better straighten up!

But he doesn't say that at all. He simply says, everyone who hears these words and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on a rock.

Everyone who hears and acts...

Do you hear the grace in this?

We are not "off the hook" so to speak with the sometimes overwhelming requirements of faithful living but we are also not expected to get it all right all the time. Rather, we are invited to love, study, and struggle with the Bible so that we can use it as our solid foundation upon which everything else is built.

It reminds me of what Jesus calls the greatest commandment: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your might and love your neighbor as yourself.

It is a summation of the law which feels a little less overwhelming than trying to keep every law. And yet, it is not a reduction or diminishment of the law because we could spend our whole lives just trying to figure out how to love.

Maybe we won't get everything right all the time. Maybe we can't follow all the rules, never messing up.... Maybe we can't solve every major crisis, prevent all the bad things from happening, show up at all the bedsides, right all the wrongs and heal all the pain of this broken world... Maybe we can't even mend our own brokenness all the time.

But if we build our lives on love, like a house built on solid rock... Surely grace and wisdom... and perhaps even Spirit of God too, will meet us there and guide our steps forward.

I don't know about you, but when I think about it that way, it feels a little less overwhelming. Less like an impossible summation of times we got it right and times we got it wrong. And more like an invitation to come and see, not to let go but to come and wrestle, to come and grow...to come and dwell with a God whose grace is spacious enough for us all.