



**grow. pray. study.**

**May 17, 2026 Taylor Swift, Splinters and the Golden Rule**

**The Sermon on the Mount**

Matthew 7:1-5 (CEB), 12 (NRSV)

### **First Remove the Log From Your Own Eye**

#### **MONDAY 5.18.26 Matthew 7:1-5**

Jesus' "splinters and logs" parable clearly spoke to hypocrisy. In Greek, the word "hypocrite" meant "to act, to play a part"—like an actor wearing a mask. Christian author Jim White wrote: "We must stop presenting ourselves as the message and begin presenting Jesus as the message. There will be disappointment with Christians as long as there are imperfect people. Since all Christians are imperfect, there will always be disappointment." \* Judging others' flaws while excusing our own makes Jesus seem a partner in hypocrisy—and drives people away from him.

- Jesus' vivid imagery spoke to too many people in his day (as well as ours) (cf. [Matthew 23:1-7](#)). Here is someone who claims to be righteous, with a log in their eye, trying to remove a splinter from someone else's eye! Jesus wasn't forbidding all moral discernment—but judging others while excusing our own struggles is wrong. What types of emotional "payoff" incline most of us to criticize others rather than face our challenges? What spiritual truths, if any, can help you to resist those inner forces?
- Has someone ever judgmentally tried to remove a "speck" from your "eye"—criticizing you while seemingly blind to their own issues? How did the experience affect your desire to try to live up to what they claimed was God's standard for your life? Has anyone ever graciously, caringly offered you an insight into yourself while honestly admitting their own struggles and issues? If so, how did that experience differ from having someone judge and condemn you?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, help me live authentically in your love and grace, letting go of my need to make myself look better by judging others. Teach me to own my struggles, claim your power to transform me, and humbly help others from a place of shared brokenness rather than false superiority. Amen.

\* Jim White in Kinnaman and Lyons, *unChristian*. Grand Rapids, MI: BakerBooks, 2007, p. 66.

## Discerning When to Share and When to Step Back

### TUESDAY 5.19.26 Matthew 7:6

Scholar William Barclay saw the difficulty of this verse: “This is a very difficult saying of Jesus for... it seems to demand an exclusiveness which is the very reverse of the Christian message.” After exploring the historical context, he concluded it was most likely not about exclusiveness at all, but “the statement of a practical difficulty of communication.... It is quite true that there are certain people to whom it is impossible to impart truth—at least in that moment.” \* Jesus wasn't calling people dogs and pigs. His point was: don't force spiritual truth on those who are hostile to it.

- Commentator Michael Green said ignoring this verse can close some hearts to what you want to share. He wrote, “Disciples of Jesus are not to be storm-troopers for the kingdom of God. They should be equipped with the most sensitive radar to see where the Spirit of God is already preparing the way, and only then move in.” \*\* Jesus taught the same approach ([Matthew 10:14](#)). Can you notice when someone seems genuinely curious versus when they seem closed off? How can God's Spirit guide you to respond to what's actually in front of you?
- So, Jesus taught his followers to respect other people's choices if they do not want to hear about our faith. The same principle of respect applies if others' reject **you** abusively. Pastor Danielle Shroyer drew a parallel application, “In the same way we are not to judge others harshly, we are to remove ourselves from relationships in which we are judged harshly.” \*\*\* What's the difference between faithfully enduring opposition for the gospel and unwisely remaining in a harmful situation?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, give me wisdom and spiritual discernment to know when to speak about my faith and when to step back. Help me sense where your Spirit is preparing hearts, and grant me courage to move on when people are hostile. Guide me in all relationships to glorify you. Amen

\* William Barclay, *Daily Study Bible Series: The Gospel of Matthew—Volume 1 Chapters 1–10* (Revised Edition). Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1976, p. 267-268.

\*\* Michael Green, *The Message of Matthew*. Inter-Varsity Press, 2000, p. 107.

\*\*\* Danielle Shroyer, reflection on Matthew 7 in *The CEB Women's Bible*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2016, p. 1221.

## Wolves in Sheep's Clothing: Discerning True Teachers

### WEDNESDAY 5.20.26 Matthew 7:15-20

John the Baptist had challenged his hearers, notably the Jerusalem religious leaders, asking, “Who warned you to escape from the angry judgment that is coming soon? Produce fruit that shows you have changed your hearts and lives” (Matthew 3:7-8). Jesus echoed and expanded that imagery. We still discern a fruit tree's health not by its appearance but by the fruit it bears. What matters spiritually is not how pious we look, but whether our lives reflect the principles of God's kingdom.

- These verses, expanding on Matthew 7:6, apply when we hear another story about a religious leader whose integrity falls short, whether sexually, financially or in some other way. Jesus' principle helps locate leaders to trust, too. What kind of “fruit”—character qualities, consistent patterns of behavior—do you find most valuable and nourishing in a spiritual leader or teacher? What red flags warn you that someone's fruit is bad?
- It may seem like a fairy tale image: a wolf dressing like a sheep? Scholar William Barclay said Jesus drew on an Old Testament image: “[A shepherd's] garment was a sheepskin, worn with the skin outside and the fleece inside.... sometimes that garb was worn by those who had no right to wear it. Zechariah in his picture of the great days to come says, ‘He will not put on a hairy mantle in order to deceive’ (Zechariah 13:4).” \* How can you assess if a would-be “shepherd” aligns with Jesus? Do they display humility or arrogance? Do they serve or seek power?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, in your day, there were people who claimed great holiness yet hated and crucified you. Give me wisdom to discern true teachers from false ones. Let your Spirit guide me to recognize good fruit and help me flee from wolves in sheep's clothing. Amen.

\* William Barclay, *Daily Study Bible Series: The Gospel of Matthew—Volume 1 Chapters 1–10* (Revised Edition). Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1976, p. 282.

## God Gives Good Gifts Always

### THURSDAY 5.21.26 Matthew 7:7-11

Scholar N. T. Wright knew how these verses may make you feel. “When I read a passage like this I find it very hard to believe.... Does Jesus really mean that God is going to answer every request we make?” \* Maybe you’ve been disappointed: “I tried it—it didn’t work. I really needed that job I prayed for, and I didn’t get it.” Maybe it seems absurd to pray for impossibilities, like the student unready for a geography test who prayed, “Lord, please make Bogota the capital of Poland!” Jesus was not giving us a formula for getting whatever we want but teaching that God is a generous Father.

- William Barclay knew why prayer may seem to “fail”: “God will always answer our prayers... in God’s way, which will be the way of perfect wisdom and of perfect love. Often if God answered our prayers as we... desired it would be the worst thing possible for us. In our ignorance we often ask for gifts which would be our ruin. Jesus tells us, not only that God will answer, but that God will answer in wisdom and in love.” \*\* Can you say of any of your letdowns, as Garth Brooks sang, “Some of God’s greatest gifts are unanswered prayers”? \*\*\*
- Is disappointment a reason not to pray? Wright said no, calling this “one of the most sparkling and generous sets of promises anywhere in the Bible.” He noted that [James 4:3](#) has “stern warnings about asking for the wrong sort of things,” and any full discussion of prayer needs to consider this. But Jesus taught us to pray for God’s will AND for what we need here and now. Wright asks: “So: what’s stopping us?” \*\*\*\* Can you trust God’s goodness enough to keep praying? What would it be like to view prayer as a relationship rather than a transaction?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, you promised that when I ask, God will give “good things” in answer. I realize there are times when I define “good” differently than you do. Grow my trust so I keep an ongoing, honest prayer conversation with you always active, even when answers don’t come as I expect. Amen.

\* Wright, N. T., *Matthew for Everyone, Part 1: Chapters 1-15* (The New Testament for Everyone) (pp. 71-72). Westminster John Knox Press. Kindle Edition.

\*\* William Barclay, *Daily Study Bible Series: The Gospel of Matthew—Volume 1 Chapters 1–10* (Revised Edition). Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1976, p. 272.

\*\*\* [Click here](#) for information about the Garth Brooks song.

\*\*\*\* Wright, *ibid.*, pp. 72-73.

## Jesus' Ethical Summit: Love Fulfills the Law

### FRIDAY 5.22.26 Matthew 7:12

Our world is more connected than ever, yet often that just makes us more divided. That makes Jesus' famous "Golden Rule" vital. It's a simple idea—treat others the way you'd want to be treated—but it has the power to draw people together, even when we disagree. Scholar William Barclay called this "the capstone of the whole discourse... the topmost peak of social ethics, and the Everest of all ethical teaching." \*

- Various thinkers wrote "negative" forms of the Golden Rule (e.g., "Don't do to others what you don't want them to do to you"). Barclay said Jesus shifted that: "The attitude which says, 'I must do no harm to people' is quite different from the attitude which says, 'I must do my best to help people.'" \*\* The negative is passive—avoid bad. Jesus' positive is active—do good. How might seeing others through the "Golden Rule" change your dealings this week? When has someone else treated you the Golden Rule way? \*\*\*
- Jesus said the Golden Rule summed up all his teaching in the Sermon on the Mount and throughout Israel's history: "This is the Law and the Prophets"—all the Hebrew Scriptures. The apostle Paul echoed this in Romans 13:8: "Whoever loves another person has fulfilled the Law." Both knew love is not just a feeling but active care for others' well-being. How can taking the Golden Rule seriously replace division and bitterness with unity and reconciliation? Where in your life—family, work, church, community—could applying the Golden Rule heal division?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, "love is what fulfills the Law" sometimes feels too easy—until I try to do it. Then I realize how high and hard a standard it is. Teach me how to love actively, practically, the way you love. Help me treat others as I long to be treated. Amen.

\* William Barclay, *Daily Study Bible Series: The Gospel of Matthew—Volume 1 Chapters 1–10* (Revised Edition). Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1976, p. 273.

\*\* *Ibid.*, p. 276.

\*\*\* One caution: The Golden Rule doesn't mean accepting abuse or enabling harmful behavior. If someone is hurting themselves or others, they may not want the loving response in the moment. Sometimes love says hard truths or establishes boundaries.

## The Golden Rule Defined Jesus' Whole Mission (and Ours)

### SATURDAY 5.23.26 Matthew 7:12, Mark 10:35-45

Jesus said, “You will drink the cup I drink and receive the baptism I receive, 40 but to sit at my right or left hand isn’t mine to give. It belongs to those for whom it has been prepared.”

41 Now when the other ten disciples heard about this, they became angry with James and John. 42 Jesus called them over and said, “You know that the ones who are considered the rulers by the Gentiles show off their authority over them and their high-ranking officials order them around. 43 But that’s not the way it will be with you. Whoever wants to be great among you will be your servant. 44 Whoever wants to be first among you will be the slave of all, 45 for the Human One [or *Son of Man*] didn’t come to be served but rather to serve and to give his life to liberate many people.

Jesus didn't just mention the Golden Rule once and then return to “business as usual.” We find it everywhere in his life and example. James and John expected Jesus to set up an earthly political kingdom and thought it wise to apply for the top jobs in that kingdom. Jesus didn't just say they should have been more tactful. He said sharp-elbowed human status-seeking utterly missed what his kingdom is about. As he explained that serving others defined his entire mission and is the path to greatness in his kingdom, one scholar noted, “Jesus is redefining power itself.” \* How did Jesus' teaching to James and John connect to the Golden Rule? Jesus lived the Rule by treating us far better than we deserve—serving rather than demanding service, giving his life rather than taking ours. He called his followers to the same radical other-centeredness.

- In law, business or politics (and much too often in committed personal relationships), we most often hear the idea that we ought to treat people according to **what they deserve**. Jesus spoke of treating people as God treats us, with grace and generosity even when we don't deserve that (cf. [Romans 5:6-8](#), [2 Corinthians 5:19-21](#)). What good things can happen in a marriage or other close relationships when love and grace replace “deserving” to guide us in **mutual** love and sharing? An essential clarification: “**mutual**” is key here. Grace doesn't mean accepting abuse or control. As Pastor Hamilton wrote, “Harming our mates, physically or emotionally, or controlling and demeaning them, is the exact opposite” \*\* of Christ-like love. Grace in relationships means both people treating each other with undeserved kindness, not one person endlessly absorbing harm.
- One scholar noted, “God's power is at its greatest not in his destruction of the wicked but in his taking all the wickedness of the earth into himself and giving back love.” \*\*\* How might that model of servant leadership shape your approach to settings where you can lead or influence others? (Jesus was likely drawing on [Isaiah 53](#) here, as he also did in [Luke 22:37](#).) Can you choose a specific way to lead or influence this week that aligns with Jesus' Golden Rule?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, you redefined power itself by serving rather than dominating, giving your life rather than taking others' lives. Help me live less in “demand” mode and more in “serve” mode. Help me consistently treat others the way I wish to be treated—with grace, generosity, and love. Amen.

\* N. T. Wright, *Mark for Everyone*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011, p. 144.

\*\* Hamilton, Adam. *Love to Stay* (p. 75). Abingdon Press. Kindle Edition.

\*\*\* T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner, ed. *The New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000, p. 222.

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