Plank & Speck
Matthew 7:1-12

This passage contains one of the most memorized sayings of Jesus: “Judge not, lest ye be judged.” But He goes on to tell the multitude not to give what is holy to the dogs, and to do for others what you would have them do for you. How does this work, and what ties these things together? Jesus has been teaching about how to live righteously in His kingdom, to love God without hypocrisy. Now He shows us how love to others humbly and effectively.

Judge Not
Some believe that the verb in verse one ought to be translated “Condemn not.” This is at least an application of Jesus’ meaning: “For with what condemnation you condemn, you will be condemned; and with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you” (v. 2). The sin here is unequal weights and measures, rules that apply to thee but not to me. You must not judge condemningly because the same standard will be applied to you. The unmentioned judge is God; He allows the standard we apply to others to be applied to ourselves. Another way to say this is that people who condemn and refuse to forgive others will not themselves be forgiven (cf. 6:14-15). This kind of judgment is forbidden and comes with plank-speck issues, which Jesus drives home in chiastic form:

A Let me remove the speck from your eye
   B and look
   C a plank is in your own eye.
   D Hypocrite, first remove
   C' the plank from your own eye
   B' and then you will see clearly
   A' to remove the speck from your brother eye.

What keeps us from being able to help others? Right in the center is our hypocrisy, and the solution is to cast it out. The speck is piece of sawdust, something you can see but the other person has accommodated. The plank is a beam thrusting out that obscures a whole lot more. Jesus emphasizes the absurdity of trying to help someone with something small while you tolerate something large: “How can you say...?” The other person’s speck is not disputed. Nor is the desire to help get it out condemned. It’s an issue of proportion and priority, one which Jesus says falls under the category of hypocrisy. Previously He described hypocrisy as acting like you care about God (giving, praying, fasting), but really doing good works to be seen by men. This is another kind of hypocrisy. The plank image is hilarious: a person sidles up to assist with speck removal while swinging a beam from his own high. It’s obvious why it doesn’t work. You can’t give what you don’t have. The other person’s issue may be real and you may truly know it, but if you have a beam sticking out of your face, no one is going to listen. Jesus requires you to get the plank out first, and then go help with your brother’s speck—win/win (v. 5). It’s easy to see these issues in others: Christians complain about the church, and yet don’t serve the church; people care about systemic racism, and yet do not condemn abortion. But we should look at ourselves, be daily confessing our sins, and live humbly in fellowship with one another. Sometimes you get the beam out of your eye and the specks of others don’t look quite the same any more. That is, with a biblical sense of proportion, many things come into focus. Clear sight into the mirror of God’s word shapes us into humble, patient, clear-sighted, and hopeful.
Pigs & Dogs
Having removed planks and specks, we can give to others. But what if some don’t want to receive? “Now He did not do many mighty works there because of their unbelief” (Matt. 13:58). Jesus says not to give holy things to dogs nor cast pearls before swine. If pigs can’t eat it, they’re going to trample all over it, and wild dogs attack and scavenge. Obviously many people rejected Jesus, and at the cross the dogs encircled Him (cf. Ps. 22:16). We should not fear people rejecting the gospel or saying bad things about us (cf. Lk. 6:26). But Jesus is speaking strategically about how to give. If someone spits on a gift, don’t get them the same thing. If people reject and mock Jesus and resent you for representing Him, don’t worry about it, and move on: “If the household is worthy, let your peace come upon it. But if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. And whoever will not receive you nor hear your words, when you depart from that house or city, shake off the dust from your feet” (Matt. 10:13-14). Not everyone will receive help, so focus on those who will.

Ask, Seek, Knock
Whereas we have problems loving our neighbor, and our neighbor has problems being loved, God is always ready and able to love us: “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened” (vv. 7-8). Rather than change the subject, Jesus reveals the only real way to help. We don’t ask, seek, and knock because odds are decent that God will respond to one of three. Jesus reasons how much more. God gives, reveals, and opens. If a child wants bread, no father will give him a rock, or a snake instead of a fish (vv. 9-10). Even though we are evil (!), we know how to give good gifts to our children. But God is our Father in heaven, the Father; how much more will He give to those who ask (v. 11)? Is this how you think of God, ready for you to ask, wanting you to seek Him, and listening for your knock, eager to bless beyond your desire? No man or woman or boy or girl has ever sought the Lord in vain. He wants to hear from us far more than we want to call on Him. Because God hears you and answers, “Therefore, whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets” (v. 12). This is what the Bible is about. Asking, seeking, and knocking is loving God with all we have, which is the greatest commandment. Loving others as ourselves is the second greatest, which begins by seeking the Lord on their behalf. Do you want people to listen to you? Listen to them. Do you want them to love you? Love them. Do you want them to love God and seek His grace? Then do that for them, asking Him to help you be a part of it. Everything Jesus says turns us away from ourselves and our sin and to God Himself. He is all that we can give. We confess and repent to remove planks and specks. We help those who want it without worrying about those who don’t. And we seek God in order for Him to bless and change others as He is blessing and changing us.