

Question: I find the golden rule, “Do unto others as you would have them do to you,” a little idealistic. What makes you think this rule is practical for the real world in which we live?

The golden rule as given by Jesus was part of his instructions on life in the kingdom of God. Apart from that context, a person still may derive benefits from living by considering the needs of others; but the real value of this principle can come only when everyone lives by it. In a sinful world outside the reign of God, those who do not honor this ideal have often taken advantage of those who do live by it. However, by comparing the message of Jesus with alternative standards by which we live our lives, we can see its value even in an imperfect world. Three alternatives to this principle are the iron rule, the brass rule and the silver rule.

The iron rule says, “Do unto others whatever you have the power to do,” sometimes expressed as “Might makes right.” Under this rule, whoever has the greater strength, influence or authoritative position determines what happens. This is the rule by which the tyrants of history like Hitler lived. In the old west, this rule meant that the fastest gun determined the laws. In today’s world, we may see politicians, preachers or employers become addicted to their power and sometimes misuse it to enrich themselves and treat others unjustly. But the power a person gains by using the iron rule lasts only until someone arrives with greater power.

The brass rule says, “Do unto others as they do unto you.” This rule implies that it would be wrong for you to initiate evil and harm another person but that you should not allow anyone to harm you and get by with it. It’s payback time; retaliation reigns. Sometimes appeal is made to the Old Testament teaching of “an eye or an eye and a tooth for a tooth,” a principle given to protect against excessive and unjust punishment. “Eye for eye” was not intended as justification for an individual passing judgment and retaliating against another individual. The brass rule turns life into a destructive cycle with no way to stop it. Ghandi, a leader for change in India, once said that if people operated on the “eye for an eye system” eventually the whole world would be blind.

The silver rule says, “Do nothing to others you would not have them do to you.” This sounds better, but it is a negative rule that does not require you to do good toward others. Under this rule, you must not kill or destroy; but neither must you save those in danger of being killed. It would be wrong to hinder someone from doing good, but you are not required to assist him. The silver rule means that if you have been offended by someone you will not strike back, but neither will you do that person any favors. Most likely you will avoid the offender instead of seeking to make peace with him.

In contrast to the above, the golden rule of Jesus says that whatever you want others to do for you, do it for them first (Matthew 7:12; cf. James 2:8). This rule not only eliminates evil actions but also requires preemptive, positive good. If the world could ever learn to live by this rule, many problems between individuals and within nations, families and communities could be solved. It would stop the mouth of the tale-bearer, the slanderer and the unfair critic. Universally accepted, the golden rule could eliminate the need for police, jails and our court system. Living this way would mean that the Kingdom of God is filling the earth, and God’s will is done on earth as in heaven.

However, God’s reign has not yet been fully established. The kingdom of heaven has come, but it is still in the process of overcoming Satan’s kingdom. Many people continue to live by the iron, brass or silver rules. Those who have surrendered their lives to the reign of Jesus Christ and now live by the golden rule have faced attacks from those who do not live by this rule. However, as God’s kingdom people living under his reign, they have assurance of the final victory over the world of evil. Then, all who did not surrender to God’s kingdom will perish forever. In the end, all who have ever lived will see that in reality the golden rule was the only workable rule for life.

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