

## The Golden Rule

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Matthew 7:12

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In May 2006, 34-year-old British Mountaineer David Sharp set out from base camp to make his third solo attempt to scale Mount Everest. Defying the odds, he successfully reached the summit, but unfortunately he ran out of oxygen while descending. Reports say that as he lay on the side of the mountain dying, more than 40 climbers trekked past him and almost all continued to the summit without offering assistance. Some say that at such oxygen-deprived altitudes, rescues are too perilous. But others say that climbers are too eager to reach the top and too selfish to help those in trouble. Mount Everest pioneer Sir Edmund Hillary said he was shocked that dozens of climbers left a British mountaineer to die during their own attempts on the world's tallest peak.

I wonder what would have happened if one of the climbers who passed David on the mountainside had thought, "I will treat him the way I want to be treated." That is exactly the teaching that Jesus confronts us with this morning. In Matthew 7:12, often referred to as "The Golden Rule," Jesus gave His disciples the secret to fulfilling the entire Old Testament relational regulations: love others and live for their benefit. Let's turn our attention to our text for this morning. Let me encourage you to stand, if you have the ability. Matthew, recording Jesus' teaching, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, pens the following words:

*So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets. Matthew 7:12*

Brothers and sisters, the grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever (Isaiah 40:8).

### **THE GOLDEN RULE IS WIDELY PRAISED BUT VASTLY UNAPPLIED**

Jesus' words in Matthew 7:12, what we commonly refer to as The Golden Rule, are some of the most universally praised, but most misunderstood words in the Bible. Martyn Lloyd Jones notes, "People hear the Golden Rule and they praise it as marvelous and wonderful, and as a perfect summary of a great and involved subject. But the tragedy is that, having praised it, they do not implement it. After all, the law was not meant to be praised, it was meant to be practiced. Jesus did not preach the

Sermon on the Mount in order that you and I might comment upon it, but in order that we might carry it out.<sup>1</sup>

Jesus speaks explicitly about the tragedy of not putting His words into practice in verses 24-27. He says, “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it.”

### **HOW DOES THE GOLDEN RULE FIT IN THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT?**

We should take note of the fact that Jesus begins verse 12 with the word “therefore”. We should ask ourselves the question, “What is therefore, there for?” “Therefore” indicates a clear connection between what Jesus is getting ready to say and what He has already said in the Sermon on the Mount. In other words, verse 12 serves as a concluding or summarize thought. Here are a couple options as to how verse 12 fits within the context of the Sermon on the Mount:

- A. It’s possible that verse 12 is a conclusion to verses 1-6 on judgment. If that were the case, it would certainly help us control an overly critical spirit because we want others to refrain from being hypercritical of us.
- B. It’s possible that verse 12 is a conclusion to verses 7-11. Jesus said, “Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him” This is the argument... God doesn’t give us what we deserve; He gives us His good things in spite of who we are. He deals with us in grace. Now Jesus says, “You deal with your fellow man in the same manner.”
- C. It’s also possible that verse 12, along with 5:16-17, serve as a set of bookends that contain the portion of the Sermon on the Mount that speak about how the King and His Kingdom citizens fulfill the Law and the prophets. Turn the page backwards and glance at 5:16-17. Jesus said, “In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven. Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.” Now, look back at our text for this

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<sup>1</sup> Martyn Lloyd Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1976), 470.

morning. Jesus, similarly, says, “So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets” Matthew 7:12.

Which is the correct answer? I think they are all the correct answer. Matthew 7:12 is the exclamation point at the end of Jesus’ lengthy teaching up to this point. It seems to follow that if God knows how to be and do good to us, then we should seek to be and do good to others. Our Heavenly Father, who makes the sun to rise and the rain to fall on both the righteous and the unrighteous, is our model (cf. Matthew 5:45).

## **THE UNIQUENESS OF JESUS’ TEACHING: HE TOOK THE NEGATIVE AND MADE IT POSITIVE**

It’s important to note this principle existed before Jesus spoke these words. Similar language to Jesus’ teaching in verse 12 is found all throughout religious and philosophical writing. The Jewish Rabbi Hillel said, “What thou would not wish for thyself, do not unto thy neighbor. This is the whole law.” The ancient Athenian philosopher Socrates said, “What stirs your anger when done to you by others, that do not do to others.” The Chinese philosopher Confucius said, “What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others.” The Stoics of Jesus’ day said, “What you do not want to be done to you, do not do to anyone else.”

What is interesting about each of these statements is that they are all *passive* and *negative*. In other words, do not do something bad to others so that you avoid having bad things done to you. The negative form of this rule makes it possible for us to do nothing. Furthermore, those are all statements that self-righteous people can live under. But Jesus’ words are uniquely different in comparison – they are *active* and *positive*. Jesus doesn’t instruct us to simply refrain from doing bad to others to avoid the repercussions, He challenges us to intentionally do good to others in the same way you would like them to do good for you. This is a position of love. God’s standard is not just avoiding evil, but actively practicing righteousness.

## **A SWEEPING STATEMENT**

The Golden Rule doesn’t merely forbid all petty malice and revenge, all cheating and overreaching: it does much more. It settles a hundred difficult points, which in a world like this are continually arising between man; it prevents the necessity of laying down endless little rules for our conduct in specific cases. It sweeps the whole debatable ground with one mighty principle; it shows us a balance and measure, by which everyone may see at once what is his duty. Is there anything we would not like our neighbor to do to us? Then let us always remember that these are the things we ought not do to him. Is there anything we would like our neighbor to do to us? Then this is the very

thing we ought to do to him. How many intricate questions would be decided at once if this rule were honestly obeyed.<sup>2</sup>

Why do we struggle to live out the Golden Rule? The answer to that question isn't *relational*. All the great textbooks on ethics and social relationships begin at the wrong starting block when they consider why the world cannot seem to get along. The reason we struggle to carry out the Golden Rule is theological. The first statement of the gospel is that man is sinful and perverted. We are, by nature, selfish to the core.

## **WHAT IS JESUS NOT TEACHING?**

In order to avoid mistakes in applying the Golden Rule, we must be clear about what it doesn't say.

- A. First, the Golden Rule does not teach that we are to do to others what we would like them to do to us in order that they will do it to us. The Golden Rule is an expression of unconditional love. When we do good to others, we do it expecting nothing in return.
- B. Secondly, the Golden Rule does not teach that we are to treat others the way they treat us. That is an "eye for an eye" and a "tooth for a tooth". The Golden Rule is the opposite of the vindictive spirit we see operating in the world.
- D. Lastly, the Golden Rule does not teach that we are to treat others the way we think they should be treated. What do we mean by that? You see, we all have the tendency of having a more favorable opinion of ourselves than we do of others. And therefore, because of this inconsistency to be totally objective, it is not a good idea to treat other people on the basis of how we think they should be treated.

We are to do to others as we would like to have done to ourselves if we were placed in their condition. If you do that, you fulfill the Law and the prophets.

## **WHERE DO WE START?**

### **1. We must have a right view of God.**

When we see God as holy, righteous, pure, worthy of honor and praise, it changes the way we see ourselves. We begin to understand something of our vileness, uncleanness, unworthiness. The response is humility. We become less and less preoccupied with our own rights.

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<sup>2</sup> J.C. Ryle, *Matthew: Expository Thoughts on the Gospels* (Carlisle, PA: banner of Truth Trust, 2012), 54.

## **2. We must have a right view of man.**

Sinclair Ferguson says, “Only the person who sees that he is a beggar before the Lord, and has nothing to offer, but has discovered that he is the heir of the grace of God, will be sufficiently set free from self-centeredness of character to put others first, and to do to them, what he would appreciate receiving from them.” We must see others as being in the same predicament that we are in: in need of the same grace.

Jesus’ words emphasize a very important point. The point is that it matters how you treat other people! Christianity isn’t just about your personal vertical relationship with God. It’s also about your horizontal relationships with other people. Remember the Greatest Commandment? Jesus said, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets” Matthew 22:37-40. In other words, Christianity isn’t just about you and God. It is also very much about your fellowship with other Christians, and the way you treat other people.

Observe too that this command isn’t just how you are to treat “some” people, but rather how we are to treat all people. The word “others” in verse 12 is the Greek noun (ἄνθρωπος). It means a human being or a man – it’s people in general. Jesus’ words apply to everyone you meet. There is no one you know or come into contact with to whom this verse does not apply!

Paul said it this way, “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others” Philippians 2:3-4.

## **3. We must be thankful that God doesn’t treat us as our sins deserve.**

*He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us. As a father shows compassion to his children, so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him. For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust. Psalm 103:10–14*

## **WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE TO LIVE OUT THE GOLDEN RULE?**

We could say that the Golden Rule is the opposite of self-centeredness. To live out the Golden Rule is to be others-centered. We are to consider the way we wish others would treat us in every situation and every circumstance and we are to intentionally treat others in the same manner.

## **A. Be Genuine and Honest**

We want others to be truthful, sincere, and not hypocritical toward us. We want them to be trustworthy, reliable, and full of integrity (keep their word).

## **B. Be Gentle**

We want others to be pleasant, easy to entreat (approachable), not severe, or harsh. Jesus was always gentle. His call was, “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” Matthew 11:28-30. One chapter later it was said of Jesus, “A bruised reed he will not break” Matthew 12:20. Paul challenges us when he says, “Let your gentleness be evident to all” Philippians 4:5.

## **C. Be Gracious and Understanding**

It interesting to note that the word for “gentleness,” ἐπιεικῆς, in Philippians 4:5 was used in Greek literature to describe a situation where instead of throwing the book at someone or charging them to the fullest extent of the law if you had the chance, instead, you let them free. That’s mercy – withholding what a person may rightly deserve. We all love mercy, we are so thankful when it is shown to us, but how quick are we to extend mercy to others? Instead of throwing the book at someone, making them pay, rubbing their nose in their wrong, how about remembering that love keeps no record of wrongs (cf. 1 Corinthians 13:5)? Love covers a multitude of sin (cf. 1 Peter 4:8).

This doesn’t mean we turn a blind eye toward sin. Jesus never turned a blind eye toward sin, but he was quick to show mercy, grace, and forgiveness to a repentant sinner. Remember the woman caught in adultery, who had the books thrown at her by the hypocritical Pharisees who wanted her stoned, Jesus said, “Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her.” John writes that the religious leaders went away one by one, beginning with the older ones, and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. Jesus looked the woman in they eye and said, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” She said, “No one, Lord.” And Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more” John 8:7-11. Here are three gracious principles (1) be gracious in private – set a person at ease, (2) be gracious in public – don’t smear a person’s sin all over town, and (3) be gracious in prayer – pray that the person who sins against you will be dealt with by God in the same manner that you would want God to deal with you. Friends, it is never wrong to be gracious.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> R.T. Kendall, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Minneapolis, MN: Chosen Books, 2001), 374.

#### **D. Be Kind and Considerate**

Gossip, pettiness, unkindness, jealousy and envy. All of these things are ruled out by the simple statement, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." We are to manifest God's character in our relationships with one another.

#### **E. Be Thankful**

God hates unthankfulness. In Romans 1:21 Paul took the Jews to task saying, "Although they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks to Him." To be thankful is to show appreciation. It's interesting that even unthankful people have a keen awareness when they feel unappreciated. As recipients of God's undeserved grace, believers should be the most appreciative and thankful people on the planet. How are we doing at communicating thankfulness to others? Young people, do you thank your parents for the too numerous to count ways they take care of and serve you? Are you showing appreciation for your spouse? How about to your coworkers or your boss? As believers, we realize we don't deserve anything good. Be appreciative and thankful.

#### **F. Be Generous**

Be willing to give of your time, your energy, your resources, and your counsel. If you are a business owner, take care of your employees the way you would want to be taken care of.

#### **G. Be Compassionate and Empathetic**

Compassion and empathy are like a soothing balm to a hurting soul.

#### **H. Be quick to give the benefit of the doubt**

Because we are selfish, we are often suspicious of others. We question their motives and put them on trial before we know all the facts.

#### **I. Be Patient and Longsuffering**

*Love is an attitude, Love is a prayer,  
For someone in sorrow, a heart in despair;  
Love is good will for the gain of another,  
Love suffers long with the fault of a brother.*

### **THE GOLDEN RULE ISN'T THE GOSPEL**

Unfortunately, this is one of the most misunderstood statements in the Bible. While this statement does summarize Jesus' immediate teaching, it is not the sum total of Christian truth. Neither is it God's plan of redemption. How many times have you heard a person, when asked how they know if they are a Christian, reply, "I just try to do good and treat others the way I want to be treated." For

some, Matthew 7:12 is their “religion”. They foolishly presume that they can live up to the standard that Jesus sets forth in this relatively simple, yet profound, statement. The reality is that if any of us were to be judged on the basis of how well we met the standard of Matthew 7:12, we would all be condemned. Jesus isn’t teaching how a person is saved in this verse. Warren Wiersbe says, “We should no more build our theology [of redemption] on the Golden Rule than we should build our astronomy on ‘Twinkle, Twinkle little Star’.”<sup>4</sup>

Matthew Henry makes a tongue in cheek comment, he says, “Either this rule is not the gospel, or we are not Christians.” In other words, if the Golden Rule is the standard by which I am going to be judged as to whether I am a Christian or not, then I just failed, because it can’t be kept perfectly this side of glory. Should we desire to keep it? Yes. Should we strive and grow in the keeping of it? Yes. Will we ever perfectly keep it? No, never! By this rule the law of Christ is commended. But if it were the rule of our justification, we would be condemned.<sup>5</sup> The purpose of this standard is to reveal that we cannot measure up to its demands and therefore are in desperate need of the grace of God.

## **THE GOLDEN RULE CANNOT BE LIVED OUT APART FROM THE GOSPEL**

Only a person with a new heart and the indwelling Holy Spirit has the capacity to live out Jesus’ teaching.

## **LIVING OUT THE GOLDEN RULE WILL COST YOU**

And notice that Jesus didn’t say, “Treat people the way they treat you.” No. People may treat you badly - but that is not the way He tells you to treat others. Instead He says, “Treat them the way you want to be treated.” There is a huge difference here. Treating other people the way they treat you is just the old “an eye for an eye.” Do back to them what they did to you. But that isn’t what Jesus tells us to do. In other words, don’t give that person the kind of present you know they are going to give you; give them the kind of present you’d want them to give you! That’s a whole different thing, isn’t it? You see, practicing the Golden Rule releases the love of God in our lives and enables us to help others, even those who have ill will toward us.

## **THE GOLDEN RULE SUMMARIZES THE LAW AND PROPHETS**

It basically summarizes so much of what is spelled out elsewhere in the Bible. After He had spoken the Golden Rule, Jesus added: “For this is the Law and the Prophets.” In other words, this one simple rule or truth summarizes the spiritual intent of the Old Testament Scriptures. It’s the teaching of the

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<sup>4</sup> Warren Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary vol. 1*, (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2001), 30.

<sup>5</sup> Ligon Duncan, *The Justice of the Kingdom, Part 4: The Golden Rule*, September 21, 1997.

second half of the 10 commandments: Honor your father and your mother, you shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not bear false witness against your neighbor, you shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor's. You don't want these things done to you, treat your neighbor in the same way (cf. Exodus 20:12-17).

It's the teaching of Exodus 22 concerning the way you were to treat strangers (the way you wanted to be treated) when you were in Egypt. It's the teaching of Exodus 23:4, "If you meet your enemy's ox or his donkey going astray, you shall bring it back to him. If you see the donkey of one who hates you lying down under its burden, you shall refrain from leaving him with it; you shall rescue it with him." Do for him what you'd want someone to do with your animal. It was a restatement of Leviticus 19:18, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." If you were to distill the Law and the Prophets, to boil them down to their very essence, this is what they teach: whatever you wish others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets. How are you doing at this, friend?

### **COMMUNION:**

This morning we celebrate the fact that God's grace is greater than all our sin. Specifically, our sin of not treating others the way we, ourselves, would want to be treated. As we prepare for communion, consider for a moment what God has done for you. Paul tells us that we were dead in our trespasses and sins (cf. Ephesians 2:1). We failed to meet the exacting standard of God's Law and were without hope. Each one of us lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind (Ephesians 2:3). But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (Ephesians 2:4-5). God did this by crushing His own Son in our place, the innocent for the guilty, to pay the penalty for our sin. His body – like the bread – was broken. His blood – like the juice – was poured out. But Jesus rose on the third day, victorious over sin and death. Now, by simple faith and repentance, those who had no hope of measuring up to God's perfect standard are justified - made righteous – in His sight. Having been given a new heart, we long to please, honor, and live for Christ. Paul said, "The life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" Galatians 2:20. This is the hope we celebrate this morning.

### **CLOSING BENEDICTION:**

Hear this benediction as we bring our corporate worship to a close this morning. Paul, writing in Colossians 3:12-14 says, "Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony." And all God's people said, "Amen!" Go in peace!