

"The Golden Rule"

This morning we come to another one of Jesus' more famous statements, the one commonly called, *The Golden Rule*. It is well known and with good reason, but I did hear a sort of humorous story about it. A mother was sharing how one evening she spent; what she thought was significant time going over the golden rule with her preschool daughter Katie. She explained what it means and why it was important. The following morning she quizzed her daughter. "What's the golden rule?" She asked. With a look of frustration, Katie said, "*I know, I know, You're the mommy!*" Well, children and other folks, that is not the golden rule! The golden rule is what Jesus gave us in **Matthew 7:12**, "*So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.*"

There are some things we may think we know, we do not know. And even if we can say the words, I wonder if we truly know the golden rule, what it means, why it matters, and how to practice it. It will do us well to take a fresh look today. There's no question in my mind that the golden rule is critically important in our present cultural, and political climate. It is also important for the emotional and spiritual wellbeing of so many.

I read one article that quoted a psychologist who talked about our surge capacity.¹ Surge capacity is a collection of emotional and mental resources we call on for short-term survival in acutely stressful situations. But she commented that the pandemic has turned into this drawn-out situation in which the new normal is a state of indefinite uncertainty and stress. The result is that we get exhausted and feel awful. Taking care of yourself is important. Finding healthy ways to refresh and renew your strength spiritually but also physically all matter. But you know what else matters? Others. So many are struggling. Jesus speaks to that here. I hope you believe with me that the words of Jesus are very relevant to our present situation. They always are, and they speak to us with a pointed clarity. They help us remember what is most real and most important in our lives.

Jesus, who cares for us deeply, gives us the "golden rule" And in it

I. JESUS GIVES US A CLEAR COMMAND TO LOVE OTHERS.

Verse 12; "*So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also*

to them.” It has been claimed that this teaching is common in many cultures. There *are* similar statements. One that is often quoted is the one by Confucius. But it is a little different. Confucius said, *“What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others.”*

A. The golden rule given by Jesus is positive, not negative.

That changes it immeasurably. William Barclay, studied this saying of Jesus and compared it to all the similar statements in the world's religious literature, said, *“It is a new teaching and a new view of life...”*² In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus calls us not just to ask, what does God's law require of me, but how can I, from the heart, ask what God desires from and for me? If you drive a car the law can require you to observe the rules of the road designed to protect people in traffic, but it can't compel you to pull over and help a stranded motorist or give someone in need a ride. That is the thing that Jesus is after.

B. The golden rule calls us to be proactive about love.

1. You can satisfy the negative form of the golden rule by simply not doing anything. The negative form teaches behavior like this: “If you don't enjoy being robbed, don't rob others. If you don't like being hated, don't hate others. That isn't all Jesus is saying.

2. Jesus calls us to be proactive about loving others. *The golden rule taught by Jesus teaches behavior like this:* If you like being understood and forgiven and respected and appreciated, then work to understand and offer forgiveness and to give respect and appreciation to others. How do you want the people in your life to deal with you?
Verse 12; *“So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them.”* Do you give others the respect, attention, or understanding you want them to give to you?

C. The golden rule isn't to be interpreted superficially.

It does not mean that if *sushi* is your favorite food, you should serve it to all your guests in the name of doing for others what you wish they would do for you. There's a TED talk speaker who spoke on “the problem with the golden rule” and presented himself as wiser than Jesus because he suggested the golden rule would lead people to do for others what they wanted instead of learning from others how to best please them. That's a superficial foolish view of the golden rule. For centuries Christians have understood the meaning is not that you

impose your preference on others, but you have empathy for others and, understanding them, show respect and love to them just as you would want them to have empathy and show respect and love to you.

Some marriage counselors use an interesting exercise in helping troubled marriages. They ask husbands and wives to practice reverse role-playing. The husband is asked to picture his wife in an empty chair. He asks his wife a question. For instance, "What would it take to improve our relationship?" Then he gets up, goes over and gets in the chair where he's imagining she's sitting and tries to "get into her mind" and talk to himself, answering the question the way he thinks she would answer it. Then he moves back to his seat and imagines himself listening and responding to what she said. Now, if this doesn't drive you completely crazy, it's supposed to help you! I don't know if all that musical chairs is necessary, but do you see what's at the heart of that exercise? It's a way of trying to get into the other person's mind so that you can truly begin doing what you would wish them to do for you! *The golden rule shouldn't be interpreted superficially.*

D. The golden rule is also not to be interpreted narrowly.

It doesn't just apply to our personal relationships. In a sermon on the Golden Rule, John MacArthur quoted J.C. Ryle. He said, Bishop Ryle, said, "*This truth settles a hundred different points. It prevents the necessity of laying down endless little rules for our conduct in specific cases.*"³ We need the golden rule and the Holy Spirit to help us apply it in every area of life.

How do you apply the golden rule in this political climate, in this pandemic, in the racial divides, and in the social media posts? How are you doing? Do you stop to think, even to pray before you post or settle on your practice when it comes to masks? If I am going somewhere where the owners of the store or others are asking people to wear masks because they are vulnerable or fearful. I don't feel like anyone is taking my freedom from me. I freely choose to wear a mask. I don't have to wear one all the time to think about others for a little while. There's another side to that also. If I see someone who isn't wearing a mask because they are convinced they should not or that it is bad for them, I'm not going to try to shame them. I'm going to smile at them and welcome them. Why? Because, I do not know what is behind their decision, and if that were my conviction, I would not want people to judge me harshly for it. I'll trust God with the outcomes in both situations. My calling is to love well and do the golden rule.

You and I may have different perspectives but we both have the golden rule to guide us. Are we guided by it? When it comes to issues related to politics and racism, we don't have to agree on all the *details* of policies and personalities and movements, and rights and wrongs and the best way to make things better but if we are children of God and followers of Jesus let's take this seriously: the golden rule. It's seductive to get fired up over the witty put-downs of the political pundits, to listen mostly to the people you agree with, and enjoy the contempt they show to others. That is not Jesus' way.

Some people in some of the current social justice movements have moved dangerously far from Biblical priorities. However, historically the Christian church has often moved into the realm of an authentic biblical concern address injustices in the world *because* of the golden rule.

Dr. John Piper, the founder of [desiring god.org](http://desiringgod.org), chancellor of Bethlehem Baptist College and Seminary and pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church, preached a sermon on the golden rule. He titled it, *The Spring of Persistent Public Love*.⁴ In it, he talked about the historic role of the Golden Rule in the end of the slave trade. Here's what he said,

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, about three million African slaves had been transported to the Americas on British ships.¹ It was a profoundly racial issue—not *only*, but *profoundly*. The only people being stolen and stripped of all human dignity and ripped apart from their families and tortured on the way to work as sub-human beings were black. It was a profoundly racial issue, and the sinful attitudes connected with it are not gone from our day or our land or the church. William Wilberforce, with many others in his day, became deeply persuaded that this traffic was a great moral evil for many reasons, not the least of which was its utter inconsistency with Jesus' Golden Rule.

Abraham Booth was a well-known preacher and author in London, England, who worked with abolitionist organizations in America and England. When slavery was still legal in England, he preached a particularly moving message in London in which he asked his British listeners to imagine the slave ships landing on British shores and raiding London and Bristol and Liverpool kidnapping your loved ones and dragging them away never to be seen again. He was saying, think about this issue in light of the Golden Rule.

Piper preached his sermon relating racial issues to the golden rule in 2007. Why? Because, as he meditated on the golden rule and studied its application in church history, he saw that racism was one, not the only one, but one of its applications for us all. Please hear me. Please don't dismiss this because of defensiveness or an unwarranted assumption that we're saying things we're not saying. Are there movements in our culture that link anti-racism to dangerous anti-Christian ideologies? Yes! Does that give us a right to dismiss our concern for applying the golden rule to the issue of race? No! There is room in Christianity and at Christ Community for people who hold a variety of positions on past history and present policies, but no one who claims to follow Jesus and rejects the application of the golden rule to all of the issues of life that face us today.

In the golden rule, Jesus gives us an unequalled command for living a uniquely unselfish life. Now it is also true, and important to see, that when he gives us the golden rule...

II. JESUS GIVES US SPECIAL ENCOURAGEMENTS FOR UNSELFISH LIVING.

He give us us three. First, at the beginning of the verse...

A. The promises of God are an encouragement to practice the golden rule.

The very first word in **verse 12** is the word "So." That one word tells us the golden rule is logically connected to what Jesus has just taught. What had he just taught? Let's go back read **Matthew 7:11** *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!* To live by the golden rule is an act of faith. You don't have to live in a defensive "on guard" mindset or posture, ready to react defensively because you have a Father. God is more likely to give you good gifts than any human father on earth every would or could. Believe that, and let it free you to think for others.

The Lectio 365 Devotion for Saturday Morning ⁵ included this verse **Proverbs 3:5-8** *Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding.⁶ In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.⁷ Be not wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD, and turn away from evil.⁸ It will be healing to your flesh and refreshment to your bones.* We can risk caring for others because we can trust God's love and care for us.

*The second encouragement Jesus gives is found at the end of **verse 12**, when He says, for this is the Law and the Prophets. This means...*

B. The whole of the Bible teaches us to practice the golden rule.

Jesus tells us that to love one another is one way, to sum up what the Bible says is most important. The golden rule is the expression of that love, which is at the heart of the teaching of the whole Bible. As challenging as the golden rule is, it is not some higher calling for a special class of Christian. It's given to every follower of Jesus.

Finally, because the whole Bible teaches us to live this way...

C. The golden rule is a powerful reminder of the beauty and power God's grace that calls us to show grace to others.

When this verse is called the golden rule, one image it brings to mind is that of a ruler; a measuring stick or straight-edge that measures our behavior. How do you measure up?

An English Scholar named J.B. Phillips created a powerful and translation of the Bible into Modern English. He used the same image of a rule in the book of Romans. **Romans 3:20** In our version, read like this: *For by works of the law, no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.* Here's how Phillips translated the same verse: *No man can justify himself before God by a perfect performance of the Law's demands—indeed, it is the straight-edge of the Law that shows us how crooked we are.*

Picture a cluster of little children with paper and pencils having a contest to see who can draw the straightest line. That is exactly what we have in human morality, except the children could probably draw straighter than we can live. Men draw the lines of human character then try to compare the lines to see whose line is the straightest. "I'm straighter than you are." "No, you're not, I am." But then God comes and lays down His straightedge, and we see that all human lines of character and goodness are hopelessly crooked. We all need to be forgiven. We all need the grace, the free and undeserved, love of God.

CONCLUSION

What God offers you in Jesus is grace. Imagine if God judged your whole life on the basis of the golden rule alone? How would you do? I hope that you can fully admit that you would fall short. We all need grace. And God gives that grace to us in Jesus. He doesn't judge us the way we judge each other or treat us the way we treat each other. In

Jesus, God came into our world and loved us and gave himself for us. Jesus died for you and me on the cross. He paid the penalty that satisfies the just demands of a holy God and his righteous judgment. That's no small thing. You need God's grace. You cannot earn it. But he offers to give it to you freely for you at great cost to himself. Jesus says, *Come to me, and I will give you rest. I will never turn you away or let you go. I will save your soul and give you eternal life.* But understand he also says I want to be your Lord, and if you receive me, I will go to work within you because I want to change you. It's part of his grace that he wants to make you and me more and more like him.

I read this story this week about a very wealthy man who owned a big business. His best friend died and left a young boy, and he helped this young boy financially. He put him through grad school, and gave him a very responsible job in his company. The young man was troubled though. He had a drug addiction. To get money for it, he embezzled money. As time went on, he realized he wasn't going to be able to cover it up any longer. He began to realize the auditors were about to close in on him and that he would be ruined. One night, he was opening and looking over the books, realizing he was about to get caught, and he decided to kill himself. He took out a gun and started drinking. He got drunk, so he could have the courage, but he got so drunk he passed out.

His father's friend, the owner of the company, the man who had done all those things for him, came in and found him. He realized what was going on, and left two notes: one note in the book saying to the auditors, "I will personally make up the difference out of my own funds," and one note to the young man saying, "If you're ready to get help, I'm ready to forgive and put everything behind." When the young man realized this man had seen him at his worst and yet shown him grace and kindness – that was the thing that in the end transformed him. He had been shown love from the beginning, but when he finally grasped how great the grace and love was, he changed.

Think about this, Jesus Christ has seen and knows the worst about you and yet keeps on loving, and forgiving you. Trust in him. Yes! And then, let his love for you move you, change you, transform you so that loving others becomes the goal, the desire, the rule of your life.

Amen.

Prayer of Response.

Today, O Lord, I yield myself to you. My only hope for redemption is Jesus. I trust in him who died and rose again for my salvation. May your will be my delight today. May your way have perfect sway in me. May your love be the pattern of my living. I release into your hands my need to control, my craving for status, my fear of loss. Enable me to live as a bold and joyful disciple of Jesus. Amen

¹ <https://elemental.medium.com/your-surge-capacity-is-depleted-it-s-why-you-feel-awful-de285d542f4c>

² Barclay, The Gospel of Matthew, St. Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1975, p. 273

³ <https://www.gty.org/library/sermons-library/2251/start-loving>

⁴ <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/the-spring-of-persistent-public-love>

⁵ <https://www.24-7prayer.com/dailydevotional>