

The Golden Rule

In today's sermon and last week's, we have the exception and the rule.

Last week we looked at the exception to evangelism: those who were dog-like and pig-headed against the things of God. We are told by Jesus that because of their stubborn refusal to hear the gospel, to let them be and keep silent. When people are so against the things of God, it's better to be at peace and be silent about spiritual things. The only message we can give certain individual is the Law that convicts of sin and judgment. The Law cannot save; it only exposes sin.

Then there is the rule on how we treat everyone. Jesus said, "In everything, therefore, treat people the same way you want them to treat you, for this is the Law and the Prophets" (Matt. 7:12).

I. The Impossible Standard

In this section Jesus reaches what many call the summit and its peak.

This saying of Jesus has been called

"the capstone of the whole discourse,"
the "topmost peak of social ethical teaching"
and the "Everest of all ethical teaching."

Barclay continues on this theme

"This is something that had never been said before. It is new teaching, and a new view of life and of life's obligations."¹

Historically, there were others who had made similar statements.

Confucius is credited with having said,

"Do not to others what you would not wish done to yourself.

The **Stoics** said something identical.

The Old Testament Apocrypha we find:

"Do not do to anyone what you yourself would hate."²

Rabbi Hillel quoted in 20 BC when asked by a would-be proselyte to teach him the whole law while standing on one leg. His rival Rabbi Shammai had been unable or unwilling to answer, and had driven the enquirer away, but Rabbi Hillel said:

"What is hateful to you, do not do to anyone else. This is the whole law; all the rest is only commentary."³

¹ William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible, The Gospel of Matthew, Vol. 1*, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1958), pp. 276-277.

² Tobit 4:15.

³ Recorded in the Talmud: Shabbath 31a.

In a Jewish work called *The Letter to Aristeas*, which purports to be an account of Jewish scholars who went to Alexandria to translate the Hebrew scriptures into Greek and who produced the Septuagint. The Egyptian king gave them a banquet at which he asked them certain difficult questions.

“What is the teaching of wisdom?” he asked.

A Jewish scholar answered,

“As you wish that no evil should befall you, but to be a partaker of all good things, so you should act on the same principle towards your subjects and offenders, and you should mildly admonish the noble and the good. For God draws all men to Himself by his benignity” (*The Letter to Aristeas* 207)⁴

The thing that is noticeable is this: Every similar statement throughout history is in the negative, while Jesus’ statement is in the positive.

This change greatly affects it’s meaning and application.

I read about a change that affected classical music:

During the first quarter of the 19th century, toward the end of Beethoven’s life, an unknown musician made a small alteration in the construction of the harpsichord that subsequently altered the whole development of western music. Before his time most of what we call piano music was composed for that instrument, but because of its design the music itself was quite limited. The strings of the harpsichord are plucked by a small hook, producing a sound even in intensity and similar to that of a harp. In this change the hook was replaced by a hammer, so that the string was struck rather than plucked. This minute alteration made all the difference musically, for the dynamic range of the instrument was greatly increased. The harpsichord became the piano. And the way was paved for the dramatic and thrilling compositions of Rochmaninoff, Schuman, Brahms, Liszt and Chopin. The development of music then revolved to a large degree around the piano, just as it had previously revolved around the organ during the Baroque era.⁵

When Jesus gave His Golden Rule it also radically changed things.

Changing the rule from the negative to the positive now made it impossible to keep. Men had always been able to keep the negative, simply by inaction.

⁴ Barclay, p. 278.

⁵James Montgomery Boice, *The Sermon on the Mount, An Exposition*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1972), 279.

The negative form is a legal principle, and the law always has self as center. Someone could be disciplined enough to not hurt others, primarily because he doesn't want them to hurt him. Self becomes the starting point and the end.

"I don't do this so that I'll be left alone to accomplish what I want."

II. The Standard Condemns

One the other hand to *'do to others as you wish they would do for you,'* the positive, requires that we not be the starting point, rather others.

Boice writes,

"The law tells us what we must not do. The saying of the Lord Jesus Christ tells us what we ought to do. But a man can do what Jesus says only if his mind is entirely off himself and fixed at all moments on the needs, cares, loves, joys, hopes, and dreams of other people. In this expression, Jesus is therefore actually outlining the true nature of morality..."⁶

Living out the Golden Rule would make us perfect. That's why Jesus could say that treating people as we would like to be treated would fulfill the Law and the Prophets. In essence, it condemns us. It shows that all human morality and goodness comes short of God's standards.

The British had a word for ruler – ***straightedge***. Here a ruler is a 12 inch measuring stick. In England a ruler is called a straightedge. Our text would be called a "Golden Straightedge." We could accurately say that Matt. 7:12 is God's straightedge by which a man may know how morally crooked he really is.

Paul wrote

"By the deeds of the Law no flesh shall be justified in his sight; for by the Law comes the knowledge of sin." (Rom. 3:20)

J. B. Phillips (an Englishman) translates this verse using the term, "straightedge":

"No man can justify himself before God by a perfect performance of the Law's demands – indeed it is the straightedge of the Law that shows how crooked we are."

Suppose I were to pass out a piece of paper and pencils and have everyone here draw a straight line down the middle of the page. We would have every kind of line represented. Imagine if we gave prizes for the straightest line. Then how would we check out who would be the straightest and win the prize?

I'd bring out my straightedge and draw a red line next to everyone's lines.

It would reveal that no one had achieved a straight line.

⁶ Boice, p. 281.

People may argue “Who is the most moral among us?”
 When we bring out God’s straightedge we find that no one’s character is moral.
 Compared to what? That’s why ***by the Law no flesh will be made righteous.***

If a man could keep the Golden Rule he would be as holy as God.
 According to God “there is none righteous, not even one...

all have sinned and come short of the glory of God”⁷

When a man sees that he cannot keep God’s standard, he must take his place
 alongside all the rest of humanity and admit that he has come short of God’s glory
 and is a sinner and deserves God’s judgment. Boice writes,

“To such men God comes with the offer of salvation, revealing that He has
 set forth His own Son to be their righteousness and to provide them with a
 heavenly life that alone of all lives is capable of pleasing Him.”

At the heart of this Scripture is the message of salvation.

The text wasn’t written to merely bring man to Christ,
 but to also provide us with a consistent Christian morality.

In order to obey the commandment we must be new men and have new life.

We were saved to become like Christ and experience His life within.

Dr. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones in his *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount* observes this
 very point,

“After all, the Law was not meant to be praised, it was meant to be practiced.
 Our Lord 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.”⁸

The Golden Rule is the standard that is Impossible, Condemns, & is Practiced

III. The Standard Practiced

God’s laws were meant to be put into action. Think about the ramifications of
 having a rule that is beyond our ability to do in our own flesh. But in our new
 nature it can be implemented with great benefits, especially in regards to our
 relationships. Treating others as we would want to be treated if we were in their
 place simplifies our lives.

⁷ See Rom. 3:10-23.

⁸ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1967), Vol. II, p. 211.

On one occasion Jesus gave the Royal Law,

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength; and then He gave the second part to “love your neighbor as yourself.”

Edersheim referred to the Golden Rule as *the neighbor-love ...*

‘the nearest approach to absolute love of which human nature is capable’.⁹

Stott reasons,

Also it is a remarkably flexible ethical principle. Self-advantage often guides us in our own affairs; now we must also let it guide us in our behavior to others. All we have to do is use our imagination, put ourselves in the other person’s shoes and ask, ‘How would I like to be treated in that situation?’

As Bishop Ryle wrote,

‘ It settles a hundred difficult points...It prevents the necessity of laying down endless little rules for our conduct in specific cases.’¹⁰

How do we treat others in any setting? The way we would want to be treated.

When correcting someone we do it in the right spirit:

“...restore such a one in the spirit of gentleness...” (Gal. 6:1).

We share the gospel with courtesy.

“...but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence...” (1 Pet. 3:15).

In the Christian family we are careful with our words.

“...but speaking the truth in love...” (Eph. 4:15).

Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, so that it will give grace to those who hear.” (Eph. 4:29)

⁹ Alfred Edersheim, *The life and times of Jesus the Messiah, I* (Longmans, 1883), pp. 525 f.

¹⁰ John R. W. Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*, (Downers Grove, Ill: Inter-Varsity Press, 1978), p. 191.

In a church setting we are thoughtful of others.

Preaching a Sermon: “How will the people best hear this message?”

Message with content – solid meat, illustrated for maximum grasp of concepts.

Timely: “the mind cannot absorb beyond what the seat can endure.”

Hearing a Sermon: How can we support his preaching? – pray, no distractions

Thoughtful behavior of others in a church setting:

--not just in negative but in positive actions and example

Bluegrass song: “If everyone in my church was just like me,
what kind of church would my church be?”

Isn't it time to abandon ourselves to obedience in dependence on Him?

Conclusion:

The Christian community is held together by love – unselfish actions towards others. The world looks on and knows that we are His disciples if we love one another. The Golden Rule simplifies our choices concerning how we treat each other in the family of God. The two greatest relationships for all Christians is first, God as a heavenly Father, and second, fellow Christians as brothers and sisters through Christ. At the same time believers have a responsibility to those who are not Christians – to provide a positive Christian witness in word and deed.

We must give God the honor and love that is due Him as our God and Father.

We must give our fellow Christians the love and respect due as family members.

To all men we must practice the Golden Rule by treating them as we would want to be treated if we were in their place.

Stott writes,

“If we put ourselves sensitively into the place of the other person, and wish for him what we would wish for ourselves, we would be never mean, always generous; never harsh, always understanding; never cruel, always kind.”¹¹

¹¹ Stott, p. 192.