

## Sermon 43, The Golden Rule, Matthew 7:12

If ye will be heard, besides those things which I have now said to you, do this also. And He said not, Whatsoever you would have done for you by God, do that for your neighbour; lest you should say, But how can I? but He says, Whatsoever you would have done to you by your fellow-servant, do that also to your neighbour. - Chrysostom

Scripture does not mention the love of God, where it says, "All things whatsoever ye would;" because he who loves his neighbour must consequently love Love itself above all things; but God is Love; therefore he loves God above all things. — Augustine

"The measure of our growth in grace is our attitude toward other people." — Oswald Chambers  
"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." — Martyn Lloyd-Jones

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**Proposition:** Jesus' teaching, our conscience, and the Father's bounty all drive us to obey the Golden Rule.

One of the things I remember from my childhood is being a snotty wise guy. I was not more than 8 years old when one of my friends invited me to attend an Awana program at his church. I duly went, and to this day I remember arguing with the leader about the Golden Rule. He must have been teaching on the saying of Jesus that we encounter this morning, and he doubtless told us that it was the Golden Rule. I remember insisting that the "golden rule" was "He who has the gold makes the rules," and I'm pretty sure I shared my view with my friend and his dad all the way back to my parents' house.

Well, this is a sermon, so you're not allowed to argue with me. And rather than telling you what I would have told you twenty years ago, I will insist this morning that the real Golden Rule is "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." This is it. This is what Jesus Himself says is a summary of His teaching. He's also famous for saying "Love your enemies." But He didn't personally stamp that as a summary of His teaching. This, however, He did. In other words, if you're looking for something typically "Christian," something that boils down to its essence what the founder of Christianity taught, this is it.

So you should listen. If you are a Christian, you should listen because you claim to follow Jesus, and surely you want to follow what He says is a basic summary of everything He taught. If you're not a Christian, listen because Jesus is not the only great teacher who's taught this — and yet He puts a unique spin on it that no one else has.

What was that unique spin? Well, other teachers appealed to conscience when they promulgated this rule. Confucius and Immanuel Kant both told us that we should keep this rule because we know it's right. Jesus agrees. But He added something else — namely, that we should also keep this rule because God's generosity sets us the example and Jesus' own teaching reinforces it. Confucius never said, "Do unto others because I, Confucius, tell you to." But Jesus says, "Do unto others because I tell you to. Do unto others because I am a faithful expounder of the law and the prophets." In short, the basic message of this sermon today is that Jesus' teaching, our conscience, and the Father's bounty all drive us to obey the Golden Rule.

### **I. The Golden Rule Itself**

First, let's look at this rule itself. It is well known to us, in the paraphrase "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." It's widely known, to the point that it has parodies like "He who has the gold makes the rules" or "Do unto others before they do unto you." The most popular parody is "Do unto others as they do unto you" — that is, if they treat you badly, treat them badly. If they cuss at you, cuss at them. If they rip you off, rip them off. If they leave you a bad review online, leave them a bad review online.

Brothers and sisters, as fair as that sounds, it is emphatically not the Golden Rule. Jesus did not tell us that as long as someone sinned against us first, it's all right for us to rip that person to shreds, literally or metaphorically. Not at all. Rather, Jesus insisted that we needed to treat others the way we would want to be treated.

#### **A. It Is Based on Our Innate Sense of Justice**

How could He say that? Because He knew that we are hardwired to seek justice. We are born with knowledge of the law and the difference between right and wrong built into us. I know that it's wrong for someone to take my toys! I know that it's wrong for someone to steal my wallet! I know that it's wrong for someone to cheat on me in a romantic relationship!

So this rule already indicates that according to Jesus, we humans have a conscience and that conscience tells us the precepts of the moral law. We know what we want other people to do to us. We want them to be kind and generous. We want them to refrain from hurting us in any way. We want them to help us as they can. At the same time, we recognize that they need to live too. Mentally stable people recognize that others shouldn't have to sell everything and support them; we know that it's not fair to say "You work for money, and I'll take it all. You make food, and I'll eat it all and not leave anything for you."

Now, does this Golden Rule mean that we can agree with someone else to do something that the Bible calls evil? Can a boyfriend agree that he really wants his girlfriend to sleep with him, and she agree that she really wants him to sleep with her, and thus make fornication lawful? No.

But isn't that literally what Jesus said? Doesn't this statement plainly mean that if you would want someone to do it to you, it's right to do it to some other person? Doesn't this justify homosexuals, provided they find someone who's interested in a homosexual relationship?

The answer is no, and the reason ultimately goes back to Jesus' confidence that the law is written on the human heart. There are people in this world who believe they are totally sincere in saying, "But I genuinely want others to have homosexual relationships with me, and therefore I'm literally obeying the Golden Rule and thus obeying Jesus by practicing homosexuality." But because the law is written on their hearts, they don't want that wholeheartedly. That's not all they want. We are each wired with an innate knowledge of right and wrong and an innate desire to do what is right. Even the most hardened homosexual, in his heart of hearts, knows that homosexuality is wrong and wishes he could stop. Even the most hardened murderer knows murder is wrong, and wishes he could stop. Even the most hardened human sinner *is still a human being*, and thus one who at some level knows what is good and desires it. Our curse, our tragedy as a race, is that we are capable of suppressing the truth, of lying to ourselves and believing those lies.

But think about this way: if our desires were amoral, were just the random results of chemical interactions, then would it make sense for Jesus to say that "Do unto others" is the summary of the law? Let's say I had a bottle of seltzer water up here. If I shook the bottle and opened it, what would happen? It would all spray out. Would it be right for the water to do that? Or would it be evil for the water to do that?

You all know that such a question is a category mistake. Seltzer water is not good or evil. It just is. It is not evil for the carbon dioxide to dissolve in or to dissolve back out.

Well, if human beings were just extra-fizzy moist robots, as cartoonist Scott Adams calls us, then how could it be morally right to follow the Golden Rule? You might say that it was a possible way for humans to behave, but you wouldn't be able to say much more than that. You certainly couldn't say "You are morally obligated to follow the Golden Rule."

But Jesus says we are morally obligated to follow this rule. Jesus says that following this rule will lead us to follow the law and the prophets — that is, to do what the Old Testament tells us to do. And the Old Testament tells us that premarital sexual relations are wrong, wicked, and sinful. The Old Testament tells us that any and all homosexual relations are perverse, evil, and abominable. And so, if Jesus is seriously presenting this rule to us as a summary of the Old Testament, then it must cover those things.

I'm saying that the reason it covers those things is because when Jesus says "Want" or "would," He's talking about our deepest desires. Right down at the bottom of your heart, He says, you have a desire for the good. It may be buried and all but obliterated by the power and habits of sin — but as long you're human, it's there. It's like a beach ball, kept under the surface of your consciousness but only with great difficulty and relentless attention. If the power of sin wanes for even a second, that desire for good is popping up, drawing attention to itself. This, incidentally, is why so many thoroughly wicked people depend on drugs, alcohol, or distractions.

They can't bear to think; they can't bear to let their knowledge of the good and desire for the good crop up inside them, because that knowledge and desire only adds to their pain. If they liked being wicked and were happy being wicked, they wouldn't need drugs and alcohol and constant distractions.

So Jesus is saying that based on what we really are, what we were originally created to be, we know how we ought to want to be treated, and we know how we ought to treat others. We can hide that knowledge, lie about it, try to ignore it, and even succeed most of the time. It's entirely possible that a homosexual man could sincerely (at least, believing himself to be sincere) advocate homosexual relations as the fulfillment of the Golden Rule. But Jesus says otherwise. Jesus says that our knowledge of how we want to be treated is irremediably moral. We want to be treated *right*, in the full sense of that term. We can delude ourselves to think otherwise for a time, but at heart, we all have an ineradicable desire for the good, for the morally pure and right. And if we treat others the way we want to be treated, we will be treating them in a morally upright way.

But furthermore, Jesus' way of phrasing this rule moves us. It enlists our conscience on the side of treating others rightly. The very way of phrasing it makes us want to obey it. Rather than a "thou shalt," it invites us to empathy.

### **B. It Presupposes Our Ability to See Things Another Person's Way**

Put another way, Jesus is presupposing that we can get into someone else's shoes and think, "If I were where this guy is, how would *I* want to be treated? If I were on the bottom of this power relationship, how would I want the guy on top to act?"

Animals cannot imagine what it's like to be someone else. They don't have empathy. But we do. We can think in these terms; we can ask ourselves what we want others to do to us. This is a divine gift, and it is to be used for moral purposes.

So this Golden Rule tells us that humans were created to be bent toward the good, and it tells us that we can find the moral law written on our own hearts by merely thinking about how we would want to be treated in a particular situation.

### **C. It Sums Up the Old Testament**

But this rule does another thing: it sums up the Old Testament. Jesus directly calls attention to this feature of the Golden Rule. This summary "is" the Law and the Prophets. Now, this is obviously not the kind of "is" that means "one and the same thing; completely equal to, and thus interchangeable." Jesus doesn't intend to suggest that the Law and the Prophets, aka Genesis through Malachi (or Genesis through Second Chronicles, for a first-century Jewish person) can all be boiled down to this sentence, and thus that we don't learn anything from (say) Deuteronomy that isn't already in this single sentence. Not at all. (By the way, this "is" of total equivalence is the big hang-up for Catholics and Lutherans on the Lord's Supper. They say that "is means is." Unfortunately, if that were true, then Genesis through Malachi would say exactly the same, no less and no more, than "Therefore, whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them." It would also mean that bread is God, because according to those churches God is bread,

and is means is. But of course both of these ideas are ludicrous, and both stem from the same error of thinking that “is” only has one meaning. It simply doesn’t.)

Rather, what Jesus is trying to say is simply that the behavioral codes of the law and the prophets can be summarized by “Do as you would be done by,” or “Love your neighbor as yourself.” If you want a handy reference tool that tells you whether something is right or wrong, then you don’t have to go look it up in a book. You don’t have to ask Siri. You can simply look inside and ask yourself, “How would I want to be treated?”

#### **D. It Demands That We Treat Others as We Would Want to Be Treated**

After all, this is the bottom-line demand of the Golden Rule. You must treat others as you personally want to be treated. You must do unto others as you would have them do unto you. You must take the time to *think* about the other person, to put yourself in his shoes, to switch roles in the scenario, and then to apply those findings to yourself. It doesn’t take long, but it does take effort. It does require you to sympathize with the person you’re relating to, and you may not want to do that. Let’s say this person is your abusive spouse. If you’ve already decided that he is scum, that he needs to be put out at the curb for the trash truck to haul away, then you can’t treat him according to the Golden Rule. You refuse to think about how you would want to be treated if you were him, because you have this mental block in place that will not let you imagine what it would be like to be him. You are so sure that you would never do what he does that you cannot even imagine how he might want to be treated.

Now, don’t get me wrong. I’m not denying that spousal abuse happens, and that some Christian husbands really do attempt to imitate scum. What I’m trying to say is that Jesus is really repeating, and extending, His rule that we “judge not.” The second you write someone off, the second you judge and condemn that person, is the second you become unable to fulfill the Golden Rule. *You cannot do unto others if you decide that they are not like you, not really human, not really people with a heart and a conscience and hopes and dreams and fears.*

We’re most familiar with this idea from the 19th-century American slavery. It was said at the time by slave traders, etc., that black people weren’t really people, that they didn’t have the same feelings as white people, that they didn’t care if their families were split apart or their children sold down river. Well, that simply isn’t true, and they knew it wasn’t true. But the point is that if you judge others, if you decide that you simply can’t put yourself into their shoes because you would *never* behave like they do, or be like they are, then you are saying that the Golden Rule actually doesn’t apply to you. You are saying that you don’t have to treat *that person* like you would want to be treated because you would never be like that person. But Jesus will not let us off the hook so easily. He insists that we must treat any and every human being as we would want to be treated, deep in our heart of hearts where we know what’s good and love what’s good.

This is a tall order. All of us want to be treated really well. We want people to genuinely care, to genuinely love and forgive us, to overlook our mistakes and yet encourage us to excel. So far so good, says Jesus. Now do the same thing for the people around you.

## II. The Golden Rule in Context

Well, I haven't treated all of you perfectly — or if I have, by some miracle, just wait. I'll do something, or fail to do something, that you would really have preferred that I do. You haven't treated each other perfectly. We all know someone whom we haven't treated in accordance with this Golden Rule.

So here's the question: how do we begin to do unto others? How do we become faithful obeyers of this rule?

Well, Jesus doesn't just give the rule and move on. Rather, He gives the rule in two contexts. The first is the whole context of this Sermon on the Mount.

### A. Do Unto Others Because Christ Fulfills the Law and the Prophets, 5:17-7:12

Briefly, you can sum up this context by saying that you must, and can, do unto others because Christ fulfills the law and the prophets. Now, where'd I get that? I got it from the ancient literary technique known as *inclusio*, in which the repetition of a keyword or phrase marks off a literary unit. This technique was well known in antiquity, and is used throughout the Bible. One *inclusio* which we have seen fairly recently is in 1 Kings 2, where the narrator tells us that Solomon's kingdom was "established" at the beginning and end of the chapter. This indicates that the entire chapter deals with how Solomon's kingdom was established. Well, the key phrase in view here is "the law and the prophets." Jesus mentioned this back in 5:17, and He told us there that He was coming not to destroy but to fulfill the law and the prophets. Now He mentions the same phrase again — indicating that everything in between deals with His relationship to the law and the prophets. In short, Jesus fulfills the law by explaining it, and by discussing how it relates to hypocrisy, true religion, and discernment. That's what He does through His teaching in this sermon between 5:17 and 7:12. But in His life, He fulfilled the law by doing everything it required.

In short, by referring to the law and the prophets, Jesus is referring us back to 5:17, which in turn refers us to His mission of obeying the entire law. He's saying, "Do unto others because I did unto others. Obey the law, because I obeyed the law." This is the demand of the law, but it is built on the basis of Gospel freedom. The good news is that Jesus fulfilled the law. Jesus won salvation for you. Jesus earned forgiveness for you. If you haven't loved your neighbor as yourself, you can be forgiven because it was His mission to love His neighbor as Himself.

You know, if anyone could look down on others and say, "I would *never* do that," it would be Jesus! He would never sin. He would never yell with unrighteous anger, or sneak a lustful glance, or neglect to do His job. He would never fail to complete the tiniest bit of His responsibility.. And yet He still put Himself in our place, still thought about how we want to be treated, in our sin and misery and wretchedness and rebellion, and came and treated us like that. He fulfilled the law in our place! He obeyed God on our behalf, so that His righteousness could be credited to us. That's the first thing that frees us to obey this Golden Rule. You shouldn't hear it as condemnation, but as inspiration! Because Jesus Christ obeyed the Golden Rule, you can obey it too. And when you fail, you can pick yourself up and try again, because you are forgiven

and cleansed and have no condemnation in Christ Jesus. You are saved, and that means that the Holy Spirit is at work empowering you to keep God's law.

**B. Do Unto Others Because Your Father Is Generous, vv. 7-11**

But the second context is even closer, and perhaps even more relevant. This is the section from 7:7-11 that we looked at last week. What it says is that your Father is generous. Because He is generous, you should be generous. Because God treats you well, you should treat others well. That's why Jesus puts the "therefore" here — as if to say, "Not only did I fulfill the law and the prophets for you; my Father will give you whatever you ask, including the power to keep this Golden Rule!"

So this Golden Rule is a message that we need to imitate Jesus and imitate God. It's an assurance that Jesus treated us as He would want to be treated, that He didn't judge us and write us off as scum. It's an assurance that God is unimaginably generous, and that we can't out-give Him.

Brothers and sisters, the Christian life is the imitation of Christ powered by and built on the obedience of Christ. If you habitually break this Golden Rule, meaning that you don't even try to keep it, that you actively try *not* to think about what the other person might want, then I warn you — you are likely not a Christian. If you don't try to keep what Jesus called a key summary of His teaching, then you are probably not one of His followers.

How can we obey this Golden Rule? We have to have our minds full of Christ's sacrifice and God's generosity. Once you see what God is really like — and you can see that preeminently on a cross outside Jerusalem — then you will want to do unto others as God has done for you. You want to love them, forgive them, help them even when they don't deserve it.

Confucius said, "Do unto others." But only Jesus said, "Do unto others because I fulfilled the law for you and because your Father is so generous." Do you believe that Jesus fulfilled the law for you? Do you see how generous your Father is? Then do unto others. Treat them as you would want to be treated. This, after all, is the law and the prophets. Amen.