



SUNDAY MORNING SERMON

August 7th, 2022

The Golden Rule

We all know the Golden Rule. It is one of the most cited articles of the Christian faith by believers and non-believers alike. But what does it mean? The Golden Rule is the summation of Jesus discourse from the Sermon on the Mount. In this sermon, Jesus is preaching to a saved people – his disciples- about how they should organize and orientate their lifestyle, ministry, and mission. This isn't a message about how to get saved, but rather, how a saved people should live. In Matthew 7:12, Jesus articulates a principle from antiquity in a new and revolutionary way: the old standard of not treating people poorly is replaced by a new one; namely, Christians are to do to others what they would like done to them. This leaves no room for error on interpretation as it sets a new -high- bar on Christian living. One that requires the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and living in a community of believers.

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The Sermon On The Mount

The Beautiful Tune We Love So Well And Play So Poorly

“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 ESV)

“You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.” (Leviticus 19:18 ESV)

“The entire Law is fulfilled in a single decree: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” (Galatians 5:14 ESV)

The Golden Rule

Matthew 7:12

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Introduction:

Good morning Cornerstone! This morning we have come to a pinnacle moment in the Sermon on Mount. You could summarize the whole sermon in this one verse. That’s why this verse is called the Golden Rule. I like to think of the Sermon on the Mount as an instruction manual for Christian living. It’s basically a “how-to live-in light of your calling”, and just like in any instruction manual if you miss or skip a step, the thing you are building might not work. Today’s topic is the equivalent of building a bookcase and forgetting to add the shelves. Missing this piece affects everything that came before and ultimately will affect the finished product. This morning we come to that piece of the Sermon on the Mount. The Golden Rule is something we are all familiar with as a rule about doing to others what we want done to us. But for the Christian, it’s more than a motto, it’s central to living the Christian lifestyle. That’s why we are dedicating a whole sermon to this one verse. It’s a challenging one because we know it so well and yet struggle to live it out. This rule routinely seeks to redirect and refine us; that’s why it is good for us to return to this critical piece to refocus and evaluate how we are doing in living out the Golden rule. William Barclay writes this of the Golden Rule:

“With this commandment, the Sermon of the Mount reaches its summit. This saying of Jesus has been called the capstone of the whole discourse. It is the topmost peak of social ethics, and the Everest of all ethical teaching.”¹

Ethics is the study of how one’s moral principles guide their behaviour. This is a “how-to-live” verse. We have these types of ethical statements in almost every area of life. Take for example driving, did you know that one of the DMV’s test questions according to the 2022 handbook was: What is the Golden Rule of Driving? The answer: “The golden rule of driving is to treat other drivers the way you want to be treated” So, this concept isn’t foreign to any of us in the room- believer and non-believer alike. But what does it mean? Or better yet, what does it mean for the Christian? So let’s address our call as Christians living in this world by re-learning what the Golden Rule is all about as we continue in our series on the Sermon on the Mount. Here it is:

“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 ESV)

Or you may be more familiar with a version of the Golden Rule found in Luke 6:31:

“Do to others as you would have them do to you.” (Luke 6:31 NIV)

Regardless, the Golden Rule functions as a summary of Jesus’ teaching on Christian living and ethics. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus is preaching to a saved people – his disciples- about how they should organize and orientate their lifestyle, ministry, and mission. This isn’t a message about how to get saved, but rather, how a saved people should live. Christians are to do to others what they would like done to them. This leaves no room for error on interpretation as it sets a new -high- bar on Christian living. One that requires the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and living in a community of believers.

¹ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, (London: Westminster John Knox Press), p. 315.

As we discuss the verse, we'll ask the following questions: why was the Golden Rule so revolutionary when Jesus gave it, how does the Golden Rule relate to the Old Testament, and why is the Golden Rule so hard to live out in practice?

Why Was the Golden Rule so Revolutionary?

First, as we consider why the Golden Rule was so revolutionary when Jesus gave it, we have to understand a bit of the historical context in which he lived. Now, people have argued that the Golden Rule isn't unique to Jesus.:

The earliest expression of this rule in the Greek comes from Homer's *Odyssey* (ca. 700 BC). Calypso alleviates Odysseus' distrust by saying, "I will be as careful for you as I should be for myself in the same need. I know what is fair and right, my heart is not made of iron, and I am truly sorry for you".² In Ancient Greece, it was a virtue to do good to one's friends and harm to one's enemies. Confucius, the Chinese Philosopher from the 6th century BC, said, "Do not to others what you would not wish done to yourself". In the Old Testament Apocrypha (these are non-canonical works with unknown authorship, dates and even authenticity) the rule is expressed as, "Do not do to anyone what you yourself would hate." Then, a Jewish Rabbi named Hillel in 20 BC said, "What is hateful to you, do not do to anyone else. This is the whole law; all the rest is only commentary."³

These parallels found in Jewish and pagan literature SEEM to claim exactly what Jesus is saying before he did here. But notice that there is a key difference: their claims are in the negative: "Do NOT do what you DON'T want done to you." This statement a means of limiting or prohibiting certain actions. For example, "don't hurt others because you don't want them to hurt you." But Jesus' statement is in the positive. "DO to other what you want DONE to you." **That's a massive difference.** Jesus is giving a new rule which guides and directs ALL our actions toward others. He doesn't simply LIMIT what we should do or what is PERMISSIBLE.

² Homer, *Odyssey* (ca. 700 BC), V.184–91.

³ b. Shabbat 31a

“Love your neighbour as yourself” is not a negative limitation but a positive rule- a higher standard indeed. It’s one thing to refrain from hurting others, its entirely another to respect and love them as a neighbour. I would argue that it is entirely possible for anyone -saved or unsaved- to live out this rule in its negative form. But Christians alone are held to Christ’s new and higher bar. In essence, the world is saying, “Do not do to others what you would not want them to do to you.” But Jesus’ formulation is quite the opposite, “Do unto others as you would have them do to you.”

Like I said, everyone can understand this rule. Even Alexander Severus, a Heathen/Roman emperor in the third century, so greatly admired this rule, that he ordered it to be written on the walls of his closet. But there is a difference between UNDERSTANDING and LIVING out this rule. As I said off the top, though it may be universal in our awareness of it, it is singularly the practice of Christ-followers.

Did you know that non-believers have reinterpreted the Golden Rule? It’s informally known as the “Platinum rule”. This rule has reinvented the Golden rule with a post-modernistic flare. And in it we see that it’s not about HOW you treat them, it’s about how THEY want to be treated.

George Bernard Shaw advocated for this rule when he stated that one should not do to others as you would have them do to you because “their tastes may not be the same”.⁴ Karl Popper, one of the 20th century's most influential philosophers of science, wrote “The golden rule is a good standard which is *further improved* by doing unto others, wherever reasonable, as *they want* to be done by”.⁵ Immanuel Kant critiqued the Golden Rule by arguing that it inadequately provided the space for the receiving party to *dictate the means* by which they wished to receive such love. That’s why the Platinum rule is no Golden Rule. It missed the mark because it inevitable ends up approving sin at the cost of Christian morals and ethics.⁶ In our day and age, one might critique

⁴ Shaw, *Maxims for Revolutionists*.

⁵ Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*.

⁶ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub., 1960), p. 467

the Golden Rule and say that because everyone's idea of love is different, to love someone the way you want is bigoted.

Brothers and sisters, this new high bar that Christ gives us in the Golden Rule is getting harder and harder to live by because the world is moving farther and farther away from it. We are in an age where, unless we define our terms, communicating this rule is near impossible. Truth has become subjective to the point that objective truth is either irrelevant or harmful. But this morning I don't want us to get caught up in the semantics of it all. I want us to focus on the heart of Jesus' revolutionary teaching here. Matthew Henry is always helpful by way of getting to the heart of the matter, and here he writes:

“Christ came to teach us, not only what we are to know and believe, but what we are to do; not only toward God, but toward men; not only toward those of our party and persuasion, but toward men in general, all with whom we have to do. We must do that to our neighbour which we ourselves acknowledge to be fit and reasonable. We must, in our dealings with men, suppose ourselves in the same case and circumstances with those we have to do with, and act accordingly. There are but two ways right and wrong, good and evil; the way to heaven and the way to hell; in the one or other of these all are walking: there is no middle place hereafter, no middle way now.”⁷

Despite all the challenges and the obstacles, let's commit today to this revolutionary-Jesus-given-standard that is meant for you and me as Christians. Secondly, this verse can be challenging, and it does require some digging, to see how Jesus meant this Rule to be a summary of and fulfilling of the Old Testament teaching. So, we want to next ask:

How Does the Golden Rule Relate to the Old Testament?

How is it REVOLUTIONARY, and now, how does it RELATE to the Old Testament?

⁷ Matthew Henry and Thomas Scott, *Matthew Henry's Concise Commentary* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 1997), Mt 7:12.

As we first zoom out from the verse to its wider context, it is clear that Jesus is referring to some other teaching in this verse. In fact, verse 12 serves as the start of the epilogue, or conclusion, of the Sermon on the Mount. Verse 12 begins with the word “so”. Just like how the word ‘therefore’, means we need to determine what the word is there for, with so, we need to ask the question: so, what? (Actually, in some of your translations the first word may even be therefore.) ‘So’ generally connects a statement or series of statements to an application: x is true, SO choose y. Here, ‘so’ is hinting back not just to the previous verse or thought, but by way of making a summary of the whole sermon- the previous two chapters.⁸ We are entering into a section which contains in it the sum of what Jesus had delivered in the Sermon on the Mount. The Golden Rule ties back into what Jesus was saying at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount when he said:

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them.” (Matthew 5:17 ESV)

The overarching tone of the Sermon of the Mount can be summarized as follows: “You’ve heard it said -that’s the Law and Prophets-, but I tell you...”. And that’s what is happening here in verse 12 when it says, “for this is the Law and the Prophets”. This phrase had been implemented by Jesus a number of times as a way of describing the whole of the teaching of the Old Testament.⁹

What is the law that Jesus is referring to and what did the prophets say about it? Let’s turn together all the way back to Leviticus 19. Leviticus contains in it the elementary building blocks of the Christian faith. We did a series on that last year when we asked what Leviticus teaches us about Jesus, worship, giving and so on. So, it seems appropriate that we return there now as we try to better understand this rule of the Christian faith.

⁸ Charles L. Quarles, *Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament: Matthew*, (Nashville, Tennessee: B&H Academic, 2017), p. 73. Matthew 7:12 forms an inclusio with 5:17.

⁹ Alexander Souter, *A Pocket Lexicon to the Greek New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1917), 167.

“You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the Lord.”

(Leviticus 19:18 ESV)

Jesus actually calls this principle the second greatest commandment. He says that no commandments are greater than the command to love God (Deut. 6) and the command to love one’s neighbour.¹⁰ **Where does he say that?** It’s in Mark 12. If you’ll remember with me, in Mark 12 the scribes and Pharisees are trying to trick Jesus into saying something that they can use to condemn him, so they ask him a bunch of questions about paying taxes, the resurrection, and here, what the most important commandment is:

“Jesus answered, “The most important is, ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” (Mark 12:29-31 ESV)

According to Jesus, the **greatest commandment** -which is articulated in the Golden Rule- reveals the **greatest purpose** of the Christian life: to love God and love each other. Jesus ‘fulfils the Law and the Prophets’ by using the Golden Rule as a revolutionary statement to BOTH pagan and Jewish cultures. **He takes what the culture has been saying and flips it on its head by putting the Rule in its positive form AND he critiques the Jewish leaders who, in tragic manner, have misunderstood God’s law by seeking to limit the second greatest commandment.**¹¹

The Golden Rule WAS revolutionary, and yet, it STILL is a revolutionary and challenging rule for us today. I want to end our time together by asking the very practical question:

¹⁰ Douglas S. Huffman and Jamie N. Hausherr, “Shema, the,” ed. John D. Barry et al., *The Lexham Bible Dictionary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

¹¹ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub., 1960), p. 468

Why is the Golden Rule so Hard to Live Out in Practice?

Even for Christians, how do we maintain living at such a high bar in such a fallen world? Loving your neighbour as yourself seems so easy but it's not. Why? There's a great Martyn Lloyd-Jones quote about the Golden Rule which speaks to this. He writes:

“People hear this golden rule and they praise it as marvellous 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. And, 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.”¹²

So, yes, it is hard to make that next step from knowing the Golden Rule -which we all do- to living it out in practice. Why? Well, I have a couple of suggestions: First,

1. We are Inherently Selfish

I'd say we can all agree on that. Christians aren't called to limitations or minimums, but principles to abide by and strive towards. But our selfish nature fights us every step of the way. We need the Holy Spirit to direct our ambitions. Jesus called the disciples to a righteousness greater than the Pharisees' adherence to the letter of the Law.¹³ Jesus provides the INTENT rather than the LETTER of the law.

“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 ESV)

¹² D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub., 1960), p. 470

¹³ Timothy L. Jacobs, “Golden Rule,” ed. John D. Barry et al., *The Lexham Bible Dictionary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

“Do to them” is in the present active imperative in the Greek. It isn’t contingent on the first part -them doing to you- but rather it is an ongoing reality. The Golden Rule isn’t a **utilitarian maximum** like “honesty pays”. Though true and we should be honest, we don’t do to others because we expect the same in return, but because such conduct is the goal of the Law and Prophets.¹⁴ In our selfish desires we want to ‘return the favour’ rather than ‘do the good’. **The Golden Rule isn’t about reacting according to how we’ve been treated by others, but according to how we’ve been treated by God.** Our reactions to others certainly matter, but at the heart, it’s about God’s actions to us.

We fight our selfish desires by loving our neighbour, and that demands sacrifice.

“Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.” (John 15:13 ESV)

Loving your neighbour demands sacrifice. True love is sacrificial and requires all of who we are. You’ll know that if you’re married. I won’t ask you to raise your hands but how many of you know what it’s like to love your spouse with a sacrificial love? The Apostle Paul explained that a Christian marriage is designed to communicate a message to the world. Wives are called to honour and submit to their husbands just as the church honours and submits to Christ. Husbands are to love and serve their wife with a self-sacrificing love- the same kind of self-sacrificing love that Jesus demonstrated when he bore our sin on the cross. And when you honour and serve one another, God will use your marriage to preach a sermon to the watching world.

You get the idea of what I’m trying to say: love is unconditional and sacrificial. Those two things stand in direct opposition to selfishness. So, we need to keep our selfish wants in check.

Secondly, the Golden Rule so hard to live out in practice because:

2. We Have Desires that Do Not Align with Scripture

¹⁴ D. A. Carson, *The Expositors Bible Commentary, Matthew 1-12*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1995), p. 188

Now, that answer might sound just like the first, but it is meant to be more specific. Our first answer was just that we are a selfish people, but here we are getting to the heart of the matter, it's because we struggle to know what is good and what aligns with Holy Scripture. The natural inclination of our heart is deceitful and prone to wander. We have natural desires that aren't good.

“For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot.” (Romans 8:7 ESV)

I won't get into the theological conversation around total depravity and original sin, sufficed to say, we know this to be true just from looking at children. You don't have to teach a child to be bad, they get there all on their own. Kids come preprogrammed to make your life 'interesting'. The Golden rule is there to remind you that your kids need Jesus. Because Timmy looks sweet, but without a new heart he will be drawn to the world, and he'll get lost in it.

There was this one cute little girl during our VBS week last month who was so sweet. But, this one day she saw the streamers we had coming down over the doorway into the sanctuary to simulate a waterfall and she just had to have them. She started ripping them down and I went over to her and tried to reason with her. (Erin and I don't have kids yet so that's why I made that mistake.) She kept ripping until finally I had to pick her up and take her to her row.

We aren't inclined to do good, so the Golden rule is intended to keep us on track. I said off the top that this verse is the pinnacle of Christian ethics. In it, it says that “**whatever you wish** that other would do”. Your translation might say “whatever you desire for” or “however you want to be treated”. Regardless, what we wish for or desire in this life MATTERS. Because if we aren't wishing for the right -Godly- things, then this verse loses all its power. There is a reason that this verse is located in the Sermon on the Mount- a sermon for how to live BASED on Christian ethics and desires. Look with me at how Jesus revealed these Christian desires throughout this sermon:

We'll start with the Beatitudes:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 5:3-10 ESV)

The Christian's desire therefore should be to be all these things – not perfectly- but in part. When we are, we are blessed. My point is this: **living out the Golden Rule requires having Christian desires first and foremost.** Only then will you not wish harm on your fellow man. Only then will you strive to fight your selfish and ungodly desires. Only then will you love your **neighbour** as yourself. And not just your physical neighbour next door, right? It probably goes without saying, but I'll say it anyway: your neighbour according to the text isn't just the guy next door, or the family 2 doors down, or the people at the end of your street, or the folks across town. Discovering who your neighbour is should never start by putting limitations on the definition.

Who do you think Jesus thought his neighbour was? For God so loved the WORLD. I'm not saying that it doesn't START with your neighbour, but it MEANS going for the world no matter the cost. **Your neighbour is the lost.** We have to understand that in Christ, 'neighbour' has both a physical and spiritual reality. Your neighbour physically resides next to you in this life, but as a Christian, your primary concern is their spiritual residence in the next. If they aren't saved, then they won't be a neighbour in heaven. So, make this world your neighbourhood.

The bottom line is this: **the Golden Rule won't save you- and I'm glad it doesn't because I fail to live up to it each and every day. Neither will the Golden Rule make you a good person- Matt 17 "there is only one who is good"; but what it can do is make you look more like Christ.** And isn't that what this is all about? It's that the whole point of this thing we call life. It's the “exceeding

righteousness” of which we are called to.¹⁵ And know this: if the world was full of people who sought to obey this rule, it would feel like a much different- much better- world than the one we have now. It would be a new world indeed- a holy city whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High.¹⁶

We ARE the church on a hill.

Our CORNERSTONE is Christ.

And we have a MISSION to the lost.

A city on a hill cannot be hidden so go as the light of the world: do unto others as you would have them do to you.

¹⁵ David Platt, *Christ Centred Exposition: Exalting Christ in Matthew*, (Nashville, Tennessee: B&H Academic, 2012), p. 99.

¹⁶ Psalm 46