

The Golden Rule. Matthew 7:12

Today, we come to a very familiar "rule" that Jesus gave at the end of His Sermon on the Mount. In fact, it was His summary statement of the whole sermon, after which He moved on to what we would identify as His altar call. We will come back to this idea of the Golden Rule as the summary of the Sermon on the Mount, but for now keep this in mind, because it makes for a rather surprising conclusion.

No doubt each of us has heard of the Golden Rule for as long as we can remember. According to legend it was called "golden," because the Roman Emperor Alexander Severus (222-235 AD) adopted a version of this rule as his motto and had it written in gold on the walls of his palace and on public buildings!

Nearly every adherent of every religion throughout history, as well as those who claim to have no religion at all, also have held to some form of the "Golden Rule." But as we will see this morning, the way Jesus reformed this rule made it actually much more revolutionary and far-reaching than it appears on the surface.

The Bible skeptic would argue there is nothing special about Jesus teaching His followers this rule, because it had been a principle taught by many other great religious thinkers before Him. But if you listen closely to the other versions, you will notice that once again – as He did with many other traditional laws of morality – Jesus turned this rule on its head; transforming a negative into a positive and a passive attitude into an active lifestyle, which He then declared as His summary of the entire "*law and the prophets*," ... this would make it truly golden.

Here are some of the other versions of this rule, see if you can spot their difference from Jesus' version.

- Around 500 BC, the Chinese sage Confucius said, "*What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others.*"
- In 400 BC, the Greek philosopher Socrates said, "*What stirs your anger when done to you by others, that do not do to others.*"
- History also records that the Jewish Rabbi Hillel, a near contemporary of Jesus, was once challenged by a Gentile to summarize the entirety of Hebrew law while standing on one foot. Hillel gave this answer:
 - *Do not do to your fellow what you hate to have done to you. This is the whole law; the rest is explanation.*

So Jesus' followers would already have been familiar with this rule when Jesus shared it in His sermon. But, did you notice how He changed it? All these previous versions, phrased the Golden Rule in a similar, negative and passive, manner. **But Jesus**

flipped the common understanding of this saying on its head turning it into a positive and very active rule for the way Christians are expected to live.

Just in case you have forgotten it, let's say Jesus' version of the Golden Rule together:

In everything do to others
as you would have them do to you;
for this is the law and the prophets.
Matthew 7:12 (NRSV)

And for those who remember their grade school days ...

Do unto others
as you would have
them do unto you

I know that many of you are hoping that the length of this morning's message is in direct proportion to the amount of Scripture we're covering. Unfortunately, that won't be the case since there is more than enough in this one verse to occupy our time as we begin to mine the riches of what Jesus said, so that we can apply this principle in our day-to-day lives in the way that Jesus intended for us to do.

Before we get into some of the details, let's take a moment to put this rule into context. Back near the beginning of His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, "*do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.*"
Matthew 5:17. Then for the rest of chapter 5, all of chapter 6 and the first 11 verses of chapter 7, Jesus goes on to explain how He is the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets and how all this should impact the way that we live our lives as His followers.

With the Golden Rule, this is now Jesus' second reference to the fulfillment of "*the Law and the Prophets,*" making the rule a one sentence summary of everything that Jesus has been teaching up to this point. And if you think this phrase, "*the Law and the Prophets,*" sounds familiar, it is because Jesus also said that these were summarized by the Greatest Commandment

*"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." **On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.*** Matthew 22:35-40

So here is your first "AHA" moment for the morning. **If both the Golden Rule and the Greatest Commandment serve as summaries for "all the law and the prophets," then they are essentially the flip-side of the same idea.** If you love God with all your heart and your neighbor as yourself, then you would do unto them as

you would have them do unto you. There is another revelation about this rule yet to come so keep on chewing on this. But first let's get to rule itself, because even though the "Golden Rule" is well known, even by those who know very little else of the Scriptures, I'm convinced that much of that knowledge is so superficial that many people miss the significance of what Jesus is teaching. So, the best approach to this passage would be to take a careful look at what the "Golden Rule" is NOT SAYING as well as what it IS SAYING.

First, THE "GOLDEN RULE"... IS NOT – A prerequisite for salvation

Although Jesus certainly intended for the crowds to hear His teaching, we need to keep in mind that this entire sermon is primarily directed toward His followers – to those who were already citizens of the kingdom of heaven. So He is not saying here that in order to get into that kingdom one has to behave in this manner.

In fact, Jesus' entire sermon has focused on the idea that we can never be made right with God through our external behavior, because God is more concerned with our heart. Unfortunately our world is full of people who have been deceived into thinking that all they have to do in order to be right with God is to live by the Golden Rule.

The Apostle Paul makes it very clear that the kind of righteousness which makes us right with God is not our own righteousness that comes from our behavior, but rather the righteousness from God that comes through faith in Jesus alone.

[God] saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done,

Titus 3:5

But according to His mercy through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, which He poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior ...

So if the "Golden Rule" is not a prerequisite for salvation, what is it?

IT IS – A standard for those who are already citizens of the kingdom of heaven

Up to this point, "kingdom living" has been the entire focus of the Sermon on the Mount. From the opening beatitudes that describe the desired character of the citizens of the kingdom of heaven, to the admonition to not be judgmental of others, Jesus has been establishing a standard for His followers – those who are already citizens of His kingdom.

So the Golden Rule has tremendous implications for those of us who have committed our lives to following Jesus. It means that this is a standard by which we will one day be measured ... by Jesus.

As I hope you have learned from your previous studies, that Jesus' eventual judgment of believers is not for the purpose of determining our salvation, since our sin has been covered once for all by His own shed blood. But, one day, our lives as followers of Jesus Christ will be judged by Him for the purpose of determining our reward or loss of heavenly reward. As the Bible says ...

For all of us [Christians] must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil. 2 Corinthians 5:10

So, along with the Greatest Commandment, the Golden Rule will certainly be one of the standards that Jesus will use in making His judgments. **But, the Golden Rule IS NOT – Conduct we can accomplish on our own**

Even if we have committed our lives to Jesus, our sin nature still lives within us. That means that even if we have the desire to live by the "Golden Rule", we do not have the ability to carry it out through our own efforts. Even Paul had to deal with that reality in his life:

For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. Romans 7:18

By his own power, Paul could not carry out that which he desired to do, including trying to live by the "Golden Rule." That is because we are by nature selfish people who are only interested in looking out for ourselves. Which brings up two parodies of the Golden Rule, the first of which we also learned in grade school: ***Do unto other's then split!*** Then there is the cynical capitalist version of the rule: ***Those who have the gold make the rules.*** Neither of these rules are golden, but they do describe the natural way we would behave without some outside influence – either a teacher with a yard stick, or the I.R.S., or the Holy Spirit – teaching us otherwise.

So, if as a result of our sinful, selfish nature, even as believers, we are incapable of adhering this standard, yet Jesus commands us to live in that manner, how can we possibly be obedient in this area of our lives? **Because the Golden Rule IS – illustrating conduct enabled by our relationship with Jesus**

A moment ago, we read where Paul confessed his inability to carry out what he desires to do in obedience to Jesus. But fortunately for us, he doesn't just leave it there. As he

continues to write fellow believers, Paul says that it is possible to be obedient to Jesus when we depend on our relationship with Him and not our own efforts:

For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. ... If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you. Romans 8:5-11

Although it is our human nature to be selfish, Jesus can change that by changing our hearts. That's why the standard imposed by the "Golden Rule," can only be fulfilled by those who possess the gift of God's Spirit, which they receive by trusting in Jesus.

Which is why, in spite of the sincere desire of many to live in this way, it just can't be done apart from a relationship with Jesus. And it is only as we "live according to the Spirit," moment by moment, that we can treat others in the way that Jesus commands us to do here in the Sermon on the Mount and by His Golden Rule.

Third, the Golden Rule IS NOT – A negative ethic compelled by fear

Hopefully you noticed that almost every other religious variation of the Golden Rule was always stated in the negative; they did not say "do" they said, "do not do." When religion is taught in such a negative manner - with a whole list of "Thou shall not's" – it attempts to compel people to behave in a certain way out of fear of the negative consequences that would occur if one fails to refrain from those activities.

Here is how the Apostle John contrasted a negative religious ethic compelled by fear with the positive ethic compelled by the love of Christ

There is no fear in love,
but perfect love casts out fear;
for fear has to do with punishment,
whoever fears has not reached perfection in love.

1 John 4:18

So, Jesus took a negative teaching that was already familiar to His audience and turned it completely upside down by commanding us to follow a rule that... IS – a positive ethic compelled by love

Jesus went well beyond the accepted teaching of the day which urged people not to do something to someone else that they wouldn't want someone else to do to them. That is why His teaching sounded so radical to His audience.

This positive aspect of the "Golden Rule" is demonstrated most clearly by Jesus' words earlier in the Sermon on the Mount:

You have heard that it was said, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

*"You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I say to you, **Love your enemies** and pray for those who persecute you, **so that you may be children of your Father in heaven.**"*

Matthew 5:38-44

Jesus does begin with a negative statement – "*do not resist an evildoer*:" – but then almost everything else is stated in the positive: "*turn the other cheek*", "*give your cloak as well*", "*go also the second mile*", "*Give to everyone who begs*", "*pray for those who persecute you.*" And He makes it clear what should compel us to these responses: **we are to act in this manner out of love, even love for our enemies, because God has shown us the same kind of love.**

But God proves his love for us
in that while we still were sinners
Christ died for us.

Romans 5:8

The only kind of love that will compel us to live according to the "Golden Rule" is the kind of selfless love that serves in the way we would like to be served by others. And most importantly of all, it is a love that serves in that manner regardless of whether we ever actually receive that kind of service from others.

What if someone were to ask me if I loved Betty and I responded, "*Well I've never done anything bad to her.*" First of all that would be less than truthful, because I know that there have been times in my life when I did say or do things that hurt her. But just suppose for a moment that I hadn't done those things. Let's suppose that I had never done anything bad to her. Would that convince anyone that I really loved Betty? Probably not. After all there are probably a lot of people who have never done anything bad to her, but it certainly doesn't mean that they all love her (*though I cannot imagine anyone not loving her*).

So, the real test of whether I really love my wife is what I have done to demonstrate my love for her.

- How have I served her with a self-sacrificial love that looks out for her best interests?

- How have I treated her in a way that I would want to be treated if I were in her shoes?
- And have I done those things regardless of how she treats me – which, just for the record, is consistently far better than I deserve.

Which means that the “Golden Rule” **IS NOT** – Passive

The “Golden Rule” is much more than just not doing something. In fact, it is actually pretty easy to follow the negative versions of the “Golden Rule.” Anyone can keep that kind of rule by merely doing nothing. Even an inanimate object like my house or my car or my refrigerator can follow the rule if it merely consists of not doing anything I wouldn’t want done to me.

How many people have you heard say something like this: “*Hey, I’m not such a bad person. I’ve never murdered anyone. I’ve never cheated on my wife. I’ve never robbed a bank.*” But the “Golden Rule” is stated in such a way that clearly shows such a passive faith will never live up to God’s standard.

James, the brother of Jesus, probably had the “Golden Rule” in mind when he wrote, *What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill’, and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.* James 2:14-17

Clearly, in this case, it was not enough just to do nothing for the person in need. It was not adequate to merely – as Rabbi Hillel and others taught – “Do not do to your fellow what you hate to have done to you.”

James makes quite clear, the “Golden Rule” **IS Active**

In His rephrasing of the rule, *In everything do to others as you would have them do to you*, Jesus requires us to be actively involved in the lives of people in the same way that God has been involved in our lives.

So here is your second big ‘AHA’ for the day. The Golden Rule applies between us and God in the same way that it applies between us and others. From the start, God has treated us the way He wants us to treat others in His name. Thus another way to phrase the Golden Rule would be to say: *With the love of God living in our hearts, we are to do to others the same way that God would do to them.*

Since God’s Golden rule has actively changed our lives, now we must live by it to actively point other’s lives back to Him.

We see this last active aspect of the "Golden Rule" illustrated in the field of medicine. Perhaps you are familiar with one of the principal precepts of medical ethics which is, "**First, do no harm.**" Obviously, this is stated in the negative and is passive.

And it's okay if that is where my doctor begins. But frankly if he stops there, my health is going to suffer, because I not only need my doctor to refrain from doing something that will harm me, I also need him to be active and doing those positive things that will improve my health.

The same thing is true spiritually. It's not enough for us just to "do no harm." While that might be a good starting place, it will never achieve the kind of lifestyle that meets the standard that Jesus established for us in the "Golden Rule."

It's only one simple verse, but living according to the "Golden Rule" is not nearly as simple as we thought, is it? But, as we yield our lives to God's Holy Spirit and actively engage in serving others with love that God has both shown and given to us, it is indeed possible.

Let's ask for God's indwelling Holy Spirit to help us live up to His Golden rule every day.