

The Golden Rule

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[0 : 00] Our text this evening is verse 12 of the chapter. So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them.

For this is the law and the prophets. The golden rule. And this is a text that everybody likes.

Everybody likes the golden rule. Those inside the church, those outside the church. You are never going to get into a heated debate about the golden rule.

You're never going to come across somebody outside the church who says to you, well, you know, I go along with a lot of what Jesus says, but you know that golden rule, that bit, do to others what you would like them to do to you, that really sticks in my throat.

I can't stand that bit. Nobody is ever going to say that to you. You can rest assured that will never be a problem. Everybody is happy with the golden rule. They think they understand it and they go along with it.

[1 : 08] And the reason is that for many people outside the church, this statement of Jesus, prized out of context, of course, is the ultimate example for them of doctrine free morality.

And the argument goes something like this. All the problems that we have in the world are down to religion. Everybody says that, don't they? And we don't need institutional religion to tell us how to behave.

All we need to do is to do to others what we would like them to do to you. And if we all lived by that rule, then everything would be fine. We don't need those Christians and especially those nasty fundamentalists to interfere.

We don't need a minister or a priest to tell us what to believe or what to do. All we need to do is to keep the golden rule. And that's why amongst many people outside the church, it's very, very popular.

Of course, it's also, sadly, within mainline churches, liberal mainline churches, a central plank of what's repeatedly preached.

[2 : 27] In fact, you could almost stereotype some liberal preaching as, do your recycling and do to others what you would like them to do to you.

And of course, that's a very anemic, truncated message. It's so shorn of any doctrinal content. It has no appeal to the very ones that liberal theologians and teachers are wanting to interest.

The saying, at least in some forms, is not original to the Lord Jesus. You find it in some other contexts expressed negatively.

Confucius said, do nothing to your neighbor, which afterward you would not have your neighbor do to you. And then, again in AD 20, Rabbi Hillel, one of the leading rabbis of his day, was once challenged by a non-Jew, by a Gentile, if he could summarize the law whilst this non-Jew, this Gentile, was standing on one leg.

So he didn't have a very long time to try to do that. And Hillel responded, this is the whole law. No, we know.

[3 : 54] He said, this is the whole law. Do not do what is hateful to anyone else. This is the whole law. All else is commentary.

Go and learn it. What is hateful to you, do not do to anyone else. Now, Jesus, in using this, turns it around and expresses it in a positive fashion.

Whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them. For this is the law of the prophets. But in fairness, precepts, laws which are framed negatively, also imply the positive.

Because that, of course, is the way that the Ten Commandments work. They are framed negatively, but they imply also our positive duty to God and to others.

[4 : 53] So, much saying similar things. Now, when we look at a text like this, when we make a text our particular meditation, it's very important for us to have a look at the context to see what is around it and why it has been placed where it is placed.

And we ask the question, why has the golden rule been placed here in the Sermon on the Mount, which runs from chapter 5 to the end of chapter 7? Why here and not somewhere else?

What's the connection with what has gone before? Is it referring to verses 7 to 11, which would be the immediate background? Jesus has been speaking about God giving good gifts to his children. And then, if that was the case, if the connection was there, you would say, well, Jesus is teaching us that we must respond to God's goodness to us, his fatherly kindness, by also doing good to others.

And this is the way we are to do good to others. But probably, the context is actually bigger. And probably the verse relates to the whole of the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount.

[6 : 10] I say this because the other mention that we have of the Law and the Prophets occurs at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount. You have the Beatitudes, like a doorway into the Sermon on the Mount.

The Beatitudes which are declaring the character of the one who belongs to the Kingdom. And then you have Jesus' exposition of the Law.

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law and the Prophets. Chapter 5, 17 to 20. And then you have the Law given its full and searching exposition.

The Law which searches us because its demands are internal. Because God looks in the heart for obedience to his Law. So it's harking back to that reference to the Law and the Prophets at the very beginning of the Sermon on the Mount.

And in effect, the Lord is saying, all that I have been teaching you up until now has been to show that the Law is of enduring relevance.

[7 : 18] Indeed, it is far more demanding than you have ever understood it to be. And if you would have a ready summary of your obligations under the second half of the Law, then this would be it.

Whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets. So let's look now, having established the connections with what's gone before, let's look at the verse in more detail.

and try, first of all, to see how this rule is very readily abused if it is isolated from other aspects of the Bible.

Secondly, how it shows us that Christians always have a duty to care for those around them.

Thirdly, that this rule is an excellent way of informing our duty to care.

And then fourthly and finally, how the Golden Rule serves as an evangelistic challenge. This rule, the Golden Rule, is not to be seen or used in isolation.

[8 : 37] It's not detached from the Bible. Now, it's important, as we've seen already, to be clear on that. It's not a way into a doctrine-free morality.

And there's two respects in which the rule can't be isolated. Can't be isolated from the calling, first of all, to love God.

So it's not detached from acknowledging the one true God and our commitment to loving and serving Him. Jesus, in Matthew chapter 22, embarks on a similar exercise of summarizing.

Remember the context. Jesus is in an encounter with an expert in the law who asks Him what the greatest commandment is. Jesus replied, Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.

This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it. Love your neighbor as yourself. All the law and the prophets hang on these two commandments.

[9 : 51] So Jesus is essentially summarizing the Ten Commandments. The first four, our duty to love and honor God. The next, our duty towards our neighbor.

And Jesus says that the priority, the first place, the starting point, is our love to God with all our being.

Until we are rightly related to God, until we have learned to respond to His grace towards us, we have not begun.

It's in the light of God's love towards us that we go on to love our neighbor. And therefore, people are entitled to say what they want to say, and they can say that this is doctrine-free morality, but they are not entitled to say that Jesus used it in such a way.

Jesus taught us that God's, that our love of God came first and was inseparable from the golden rule. Nor, secondly, is it to be separated from the law in the sense of the commandments.

[11 : 04] If you think about it, it doesn't really serve as a ready reckoner for non-Christian people. You know, if you don't believe in God and you don't believe in absolute revealed truth, then this is so easily abused, is it not?

To do to others what you would like them to do to you. So, somebody who thinks that, well, it would be quite nice to get drunk every so often, every second weekend, is therefore under an obligation to give drink to someone who would like to go and get drunk this coming weekend, and so on. You could multiply illustrations of abuse. Unless it is informed by God's revealed law, it doesn't serve as a means of telling us what to do.

Jesus specifically connects it with the rest of the law. This is the law and the prophets. The rest of the New Testament does similar connecting the golden rule, as we call it, with the rest of the law. Paul, speaking about the issue of loving one's neighbor, says in Galatians 5, 14, for the whole law is fulfilled in one word. You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

[12 : 41] The whole law is fulfilled in one word. Romans 13, 8-10, for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law.

Again, verse 9, if there is any other commandment, it is summed up in the saying, you shall love your neighbor as yourself. Love does no wrong to a neighbor, love, therefore, is the fulfillment of the law.

So, what Jesus is saying here is a summary, it's a summary form of the whole of the law, God's revealed law, that which we would know no other way but by God's revelation.

So, that's the first thing. By way of clearing the ground, we cannot isolate this statement from the prior command to love God and also from its explanation through the law, the commandments.

Secondly, the golden rule makes it clear to us that every Christian has an obligation to care for their neighbor.

[13 : 50] We are to do good to those around us. We are not simply to avoid doing bad things. We are to do good to those around us.

We are to act positively towards those with whom we come in contact. And so, Jesus' golden rule destroys the idea of private religion.

Some people speak of not getting involved. You know, I don't like to get involved. It's just so hassle getting involved in people. Everything becomes so troublesome.

And so, you know, I just try to avoid hurting people. But, that is not an option with Jesus' rule, with his summarizing of the commandments, for the perfectly obvious reason is that that is not what we would want others to do for us.

We would not wish that others, under some circumstances, would keep their distance, would refuse to engage with us. If you were lonely, if you were on your own, would you prefer that people took this notion of not getting engaged, or would you prefer that occasionally someone came to visit?

[15 : 21] Or, think of a more specific example, if you're living on your own, and the power goes off in the middle of the winter, would you be glad that everybody around you was not interfering with anybody else's business, or would you be glad of somebody coming with assistance in such a situation?

Of course you would. And Christians are not to leave care to others, or to the state, or to show active love, reaching out to others, as we would want them to reach out to ourselves.

Of course the reason that we speak about not wanting to get involved is that when we do that, then there is always the possibility of being hurt.

And in his book *The Four Loves*, C.S. Lewis speaks of the nature of love as being vulnerable. And in a well-known passage, he writes, to love at all is to be vulnerable.

Love anything and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give it to no one, not even an animal.

[16 : 36] Wrap it carefully around with hobbies and little luxuries. Avoid all entanglements. Lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness, but in that casket, safe, dark, motionless, airless, will change.

It will not be broken. It will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. To love is to be vulnerable.

Jesus' rule implies our duty to care for those around us. It does not leave us with the option of protecting ourselves against being vulnerable.

Thirdly, the golden rule enables us to think through quickly what our duty to our neighbor is by using the measure of love to ourselves.

Jesus knows that self-love and the instinct for looking after number one is a powerful force in our lives. so powerful, in fact, it keeps us often from loving others.

[17 : 59] We always think that our problems are bigger and more intractable than anybody else's problems. We always feel that our needs are the most pressing needs of the hour.

Calvin writes, where our own advantage is concerned, there is not one of us who cannot go into detail chapter and verse on the extent of our rights. Everyone shows himself to be an exact scholar of justice when it suits themselves.

But when it suits others, that is another matter. And Jesus is here saying that those instincts for self-love and self-preservation and self-advantage, they must be turned around and harnessed as a guide for our treatment of others.

William Hendrickson, the commentator, says that the golden rule works in the way that a pocket knife or a carpenter's rule works, ready to be used in a sudden emergency when there is no time to consult books or speak with others.

We have Jesus, a simple summary of the law. How would I want to be treated in this case? It's remarkable how applying it can result in interesting conclusions.

[19 : 32] Ligon Duncan, the American preacher, once told of a husband who came home one day from work after a long and demanding time. Just three months earlier his wife had had a baby and the baby was not keeping well, the baby had colic, hadn't slept a full night in these three months, screaming continually.

That night the noble husband came home to his wife and said, dear, I can tell that you're having trouble with the baby. I'll tell you what I'll do.

I'll go out and I'll get supper for myself. And understandably she responded, yes, and what am I supposed to do?

And of course she was quite right, because he had not put himself into her shoes. He had not thought to himself, I was in her position at my wits end with a baby that's not sleeping.

What would I want to be done for me? In a whole host of different situations we can apply this carpenter's rule to life decisions.

[20 : 52] Think about hospitality. You're a single person going to church on your own. Would you appreciate someone asking you back for lunch?

Yes, of course, Jesus says. What do to others what you would have them do to you? Appreciation. We all like to be appreciated for the things that we have done well. Well, the golden rule would imply that we should show appreciation to others.

We should not hold back for fear that speaking well of somebody will go to their head and throw them off the rails, give some legitimate praise.

Accountability. Whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the law and the prophets. If you were not at church for a number of weeks, would you want someone to inquire why it was you hadn't been around?

[22 : 05] Something wrong? Could they be of any help? Of course you would. Therefore, whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them.

Witnessing, telling other people about Jesus. Think of yourself in a non-Christian condition, think of yourself in a workplace where there was a Christian. You would want that person to pluck up courage at some point and share their faith with you.

Of course you would. Whatever you wish others would do to you, do also to them. So the golden rule, this ready reckoner of how to live, tells us the extent of our duty to our neighbour.

neighbour. And also it can be used to show us the manner of discharging our duty to our neighbour. Again, we simply apply how we would like to be treated.

So in a particular situation, if I would like to be helped here, is it the case that I would like to be helped with a minimum of fuss? If that is so, then whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them and do in the way that you would like them to do to you.

[23 : 29] Let the manner in which you would want help also be the rule for the manner in which you give help. Then lastly, as we close, the golden rule turns out ultimately to be an evangelistic

message.

It functions as indeed the whole law functions. The law is our schoolmaster to lead us to Christ, so also is the golden rule. The great mistake of the secular man or woman is to think that they can somehow keep the golden rule, that they can fulfil this rule in their own strength and that's a huge mistake.

None of us are able to keep God's law. The Pharisees could not even keep the letter of the law and Jesus comes and presses home the inner heart requirements of the law.

Now Jesus makes this same law radical in this formulation, telling us that whatever we wish that others would do to you, that is the thing that we must do to others and immediately our natural inability is exposed.

It destroys our self-confidence. Somebody who says, well, I like to live my life by the golden rule, is simply out of touch with reality because they have never even begun to do that.

[25 : 12] He's not taking the implications seriously. When we begin to do that, or when the implications are teased out for someone, the golden rule functions as the law always functions.

It leads first to despair before it brings hope. In fact, we are back at the beginning of the Sermon of the Mount with the Beatitudes, with the poor in spirit who realize that they have nothing in the bank of moral merit.

We're back with those who mourn over their sin, with the meek who are willing to be criticized by others because they have an accurate idea of their own sinfulness.

And that is where the golden rule functions evangelistically. I don't know most of you, maybe there's somebody in church tonight, young or old, is not yet a Christian, not yet a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ.

If that's the case, then let me tell you straight away that you have never kept the golden rule. You have never, in all your living, done for others the things that you would wish them do to you.

[26 : 36] You've never lived up to that rule. never think that the golden rule is the gospel, that this is the way to heaven, simply trying to live a life that is respectful of others.

It's not the gospel. What it does is it clears the way for the gospel. It shows you your great need. So don't think that you can get to heaven by the golden rule, but let it instead bring you to the only one who has ever kept the golden rule, the teacher, the saviour, Jesus himself.

It constrains us, doesn't it, to cast ourselves on Jesus with complete trust, to rely utterly on his goodness, his perfection.

We come and we ask the Lord to grant us forgiveness and to give us his Holy Spirit that we might be renewed to live a new life.

And when we begin on that road, and if you are not a Christian, may God grant you to begin on that road tonight as you trust in Jesus.

[28 : 01] us, we move on from that point, depending on God, more and more, to enable us in whatever we wish others would do to us, to do also to them, for this is the law and the prophets.

Amen. May God bless his word to us. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Our concluding psalm is Psalm 25, and we are singing down to verse 9 of the psalm, Psalm 25, To you, O Lord, I lift my soul.

I trust in you continually. Do not let me be put to shame, nor let my foes gloat over me. No one who sets his hope in you will ever suffer such disgrace, but those who act with treachery, humiliating shame, O face.

Psalm 25, 1 to 9, To you, O Lord, I lift my soul. \$