

THE GOLDEN RULE

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SCRIPTURE: Luke 6:27-36

I say unto you which hear, Love your enemies, do good to them which hate you, Bless them that curse you, and pray for them which despitefully use you. And unto him that smiteth thee on one cheek offer also the other; and him that taketh away thy cloke forbid not to take thy coat also. Give to every man that asketh of thee; and of him that taketh away thy goods ask them not again. And as ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise. For if ye love them which love you, what thank have ye? for sinners also love those that love them. And if ye do good to them which do good to you, what thank have ye? For sinners also do even the same. And if ye lend to them of whom ye hope to receive, what thank have ye? for sinners also lend to sinners, to receive as much again. But love ye your enemies, and do good, and lend, hoping for nothing again; and your reward shall be great, and ye shall be the children of the Highest; for he is kind unto the unthankful and to the evil. Be ye therefore merciful, as your Father also is merciful.

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Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength. This is the first commandment. And the second is like this, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.

The Golden Rule receives lip service from many people who regard it as a good copy-book maxim or wall motto, but who fail to appreciate or understand its deeper implications and meanings. By too frequent reiteration, on the part of those who do not understand it, the Golden Rule has sometimes become trite and meaningless, a stilted, commercialized slogan which makes men think they are following Jesus when they are still far from understanding or loving or obeying him. The Golden Rule is usually quoted in the language of the Gospel according to Matthew: "Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them...", but we have chosen to read it from Luke's gospel in this service, because in Luke's account it follows and sums up Jesus' teaching regarding the old law and the new Christian ethic of love and mercy, kindness and forgiveness for all men, even for enemies and for those who persecute and despitefully use you. Then: "As ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise." In Matthew, there is a suggestion of this same idea, inasmuch as this Golden Rule follows Jesus' teaching about asking, seeking, and knocking, and God's willingness to give good gifts to the erring and wicked ones among his wandering children. The implication of both writers is that if God is willing to give good gifts even to the wicked, and to sinners like ourselves, that we should be just as willing to return good for evil, to turn the other cheek, to love our enemies, to do unto them as we would wish them to do to us.

Some form of the Golden Rule -- usually stated in the negative -- had been formulated by many philosophers, most of them pre-dating Jesus Christ by centuries. Aristotle, who lived in the third century before Christ, when asked how we should act towards friends, replied: "As we would that they should act towards us." This is positive in form, but its application is limited to our friends. Confucius, who lived five centuries before Christ, and Lao Tse, who lived about the same period, used this phraseology: "Do not to others what you would not wish done to yourself." Plato taught a similar precept. Ancient Jewish rabbis taught the same philosophy. A story is told concerning a Gentile proselyte who went to Rabbi Hillel and demanded to be taught the whole Jewish law while he stood on one leg. The good rabbi told him, "What is hateful to thyself, that do not thou to another." The saying appears thus in the book of Tobit, one of the apochryphal books of the Old Testament: "See thou never do to another what thou wouldst hate to have done to thee by another." (Tobit 4:26)

Although the Golden Rule had thus been stated many times anciently, it will be seen at once that Jesus brought to it a new application, a new emphasis, a new meaning. Instead of limiting its application to friends, as Aristotle had done, he expanded it to apply to all men -- friend and enemy alike. Jesus taught that men should be actively and positively engaged in doing good, not primarily concerned with a negative avoiding of evil. If avoidance of sin is the highest good, then a rock sitting on a hillside is the most moral thing in the world. It certainly does no evil; but it does no evil because it does nothing at all. We could perfectly observe the negative statement of the Golden Rule, and never do to our neighbor what we would not want him to do to us, by simply doing nothing at all. But Jesus counselled us not only to avoid doing any injury to our neighbor, but to seek and strive to do him all the good we can, whether he appreciates and loves us for it or not.

Some skeptics have said that the Golden Rule is an unreliable code of human conduct. Suppose that you meet on the street a man so drunk he can hardly stand, who lurches up to you and asks you for money to buy another drink. If you were in his place, you would want a drink too. Therefore, say the cynics, if you follow the Golden Rule you will supply him with another drink so that he can pass out completely, since that is what he desires. By the same logic, following the Golden Rule would cause us to supply drugs to the drug addict, loot for the highwayman or embezzler, another victim for the criminally insane murderer.

The superficiality of this reasoning is evident if we extend it a little. What will supplying another drink to the drunkard, do to the drunkard's wife and children, or to the people who must walk or drive on the same street where he is trying to walk or drive his automobile? What will supplying another dose of drugs to the drug addict do to the society about him? What will happen to the people who lose their money to the highwayman or the embezzler, or those who lose their lives to satisfy an insane killer's lust? The Golden Rule cannot be narrowly applied. Narrowly applied, it breaks down. Universally applied, as Jesus intended it to be, it works.

A careful examination of the context of this teaching of Jesus, the people to whom it was addressed, and the background of its expression, will disclose just how lofty is its ethic, just how universal its scope, and just how new and unique was Jesus' phraseology of an old maxim. In Matthew's account and in Luke's the Golden Rule is a part of the Sermon on the Mount. Both writers make it plain that this sermon was not addressed to the multitude, but to Jesus' disciples. The Golden Rule was not meant to be interpreted or practiced cynically by men of the world, but to be joyfully, fully, freely practiced by enlightened, re-born men -- men with a higher vision, with spiritual perception -- men with love and sympathy for all other men -- men who loved peace and righteousness. As this kind of man looks at another man in distress, or in need, or in sin, and discerns the needs of that man -- physically, economically, socially, spiritually -- and as he analyzes the situation with full understanding, sympathy, and patience, he decided what he, with his enlightenment, would like to have done to him if he were in the place of the needy brother -- and then he does it. The Golden Rule calls for complete understanding, love, sympathy, patience, and wisdom -- as well as spiritual enlightenment and re-birth, in him who tries to live by it.

In Luke's account particularly, the Golden Rule is made a part of Jesus' teachings about reconciliation between enemies. The worldly cynic builds his life on a distortion of the Golden Rule: "Do unto others as they would like to do unto you, but do it first." He expects the worst from every man, and gives the worst in advance; or having received a real or imagined slight or insult or injury, he returns it with interest. Jesus' Golden Rule calls for tolerance, patience, forbearance, forgiveness, reconciliation, love -- even to those who abuse, injure, persecute, and spitefully use you. The Christian ethic requires us to do even unto our enemies as we, in our enlightenment, would like to have them do to us if we were in their place, and they in ours. The Christian application of the Golden Rule requires an utterly unselfish, self-sacrificial love and understanding and sympathy for all men, and particularly to our enemies.

As ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise.