



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

August 13, 2017

The Golden Rule

A Christian Worldview: Sixth of Seven in a Series

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Printed in the United States of America

First Printing: August 18, 2017

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

What could be more obvious than the Golden Rule? The notion that we should treat other people the way we ourselves want to be treated seems so self-evident that you might wonder what else needs to be said about it.

Lots of people have pointed out that Jesus was not the only one, or even the first, to offer the Golden Rule as a basic principle of ethics, and sometimes they say that as if it was some sort of challenge to the significance of Christianity. But Christianity is about a lot more than ethics, of course, and in any case, is it really a surprise that some version of the Golden Rule should turn up in just about every culture and religion? It seems that any moderately sensible group of people, if they stopped to think about it, would come up with something like the Golden Rule in about fifteen minutes.

Frans de Waal and others who study primate behavior have shown that even chimpanzees have a rudimentary sense of reciprocity: You scratch my back, literally, and I'll scratch yours. I'll share with you if you'll share with me. I won't steal your banana if you don't steal mine.

Imagine a group of early humans sitting around a campfire trying to figure out the basic rules for their tribe. "What do you think?" someone asks. "Should we each try to do as much as we can for ourselves and stick it to everybody else? That sounds good, looking out for Number One." Then somebody else says, "Yes, but if I do that to you, you'll do it me, and the whole tribe will be in a constant state of conflict.

Hmmm. Maybe we should just agree that we'd all be better off if we treated others the way we want to be treated." "All right then," the leader says. "Let's make that a rule." It seems as though that would be a fairly short conversation.

Now having a rule and following it are two different things. And since humans are even better than chimpanzees at detecting cheaters, they'll always be on the lookout for anyone who tries to get away with breaking the rule. In fact, there's a good case to be made that this is where hypocrisy comes from. Hypocrisy is the attempt to get credit for being good without actually having to *be* good. So the Golden Rule is also a kind of hypocrisy detector. It's a pretty good indicator of who is an honest member of the community and who is not.

When you think about it, the fact that the Golden Rule is so widespread and feels like common sense should come as no surprise. What might surprise us, though, is how far the rule really reaches, at least according to Jesus.

The Golden Rule is one way of talking about justice as fairness—the kind of justice the prophet Micah means when he says, "He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

Justice as fairness is what the late Harvard philosopher John Rawls described when he said that a situation is fair if any reasonable person would agree that it was fair before that person knew what part he or she played in the situation. This is the principle any mom or dad can watch unfold when it comes to dividing the last piece of cake between two children. The wise mom gives one child the knife and tells him that the other gets to choose her piece,

and then the one who does the cutting will go to great lengths to make sure the slices come out evenly.

The trick is that fairness has to be judged *before* you know what part you play in the situation. The trouble, of course, is that in real life people already know what part they play in any given situation, and so they tend to define fairness according to whatever suits their own interests.

Take slavery as an obvious example. If you didn't know whether you would be a master or a slave, who would ever say that slavery is fair? But in fact, if you were an American slaveholder in the 1850s, you would have had all sorts of motivations to convince yourself and everyone else that slavery was right and just after all. You'd have to engage in lots of moral gymnastics to find your way around the Golden Rule, but most slaveholders did exactly that, because they wanted to think of themselves as decent people, even as they wanted to keep their slaves. If they couldn't rationalize their situation, the Golden Rule would have settled the matter in a minute, simply by asking, "How can you treat anyone else as a slave if you would not want to be a slave yourself?"

Slavery is just one obvious example in retrospect, but 600,000 Americans died in the Civil War because economic and cultural interests outweighed the Golden Rule. History shows again and again that where immediate self-interest is at stake people can be enormously creative in finding ways around the most basic moral principles.

What sounds like the sort of thing we should have learned in kindergarten turns out to be, like the word of God itself, sharper than a two-edged sword, cutting to the heart of every aspect of our lives. So let's think for a moment about

some other areas where the Golden Rule might apply, and consider the implications for our life together as a people under God.

If, for example, we want others to listen to what we have to say, and take our thoughts and feelings seriously, then maybe we ought to listen carefully to them as well, and not dismiss them out of hand. If we want people to respect us as individuals and not treat us as just an element of some category they despise, then perhaps we shouldn't stereotype and label and caricature other people either. If we all respected each other the way we want to be respected, our society would not be nearly as divisive and uncivil as it is today.

If we want to enjoy the fruits of our labor, and retire one day with some level of security, that should motivate us to work hard and do our best, and provide for ourselves and our families. We'll want a society where we're free and able to do that, and according to the Golden Rule, we should want other people to have that opportunity as well.

If we want a good education for our children, with capable, dedicated teachers in well-equipped, safe schools, and if we want to be able to pay for college without a crushing burden of debt for those who are capable of going, then maybe we should want those opportunities for other people's children too.

If we enjoy the benefits of health insurance for ourselves and our families, with decent coverage at an affordable cost, so that we can receive the care we need and a major illness won't drive us into bankruptcy, then why would a just and decent society not want to see that

everyone has at least some minimally adequate and affordable level of insurance?

If we don't want to inherit another generation's debt, why would we saddle our own children and grandchildren with trillions of dollars in national debt because we want things for ourselves that we're not willing to pay for?

All of these questions and more, about our personal lives and our life together as a society, arise from taking seriously the implications of the Golden Rule – a rule that each of us claims to believe in.

Now some people, when they hear us talk about social conditions in church, may be tempted to think that we're bringing up political matters in a way that's inappropriate. But at the level of moral principles we're describing here, that temptation needs to be resisted, for at least three reasons.

First, churches in America have always been a voice of social conscience, from the beginning of our country down to the present day. There's never been a time when the church was not a source of moral insight and prophetic questions about our community, based on principles like the Golden Rule and the Great Commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves.

And that's because of the second reason, which is that we can't be faithful Christians, from a biblical perspective, without addressing the way we live together, in our country and in the world. The Bible is full of God's guidance for public life, from the Ten Commandments to the Old Testament prophets to Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and his Parable of the Sheep and the Goats. There may be some

religion that has nothing to say about our obligations to one another in society, but that religion is not biblical Christianity.

And the third reason the church has to speak out about the wider implications of the Golden Rule is that, in the face of injustice or unnecessary suffering, there's no such thing as neutrality. Sometimes the most conspicuous sound that comes from a pulpit is the sound of silence.

Does anyone seriously think that in the midst of segregation, for example, the churches' unwillingness to speak out was a matter of neutrality? Read Martin Luther King Jr's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" and you'll see that silence is not always neutral. If people can go to church Sunday after Sunday and never hear a word about such flagrant violations of the Golden Rule, the effect is to support the way things are, and to imply that you can be a good Christian and still treat other human beings in ways that you yourself would never want to be treated. The most political sound that ever comes from some churches is the sound of silence, and that silence may be anything but neutral.

The Golden Rule is not just some platitude about being nice to whatever individuals we happen to meet. No, the Golden Rule is a foundation for Christian practice in every part of our lives, private and public. And God will hold us accountable for whether or not we live according to that rule. Jesus tells us that, come Judgment Day, some will say to him, "Lord, Lord," and he will answer them, "Go away, I never knew you." Why? Because they would not do for others what they would have wanted others to do for them if their situations had been reversed.

And notice one more thing about the Golden Rule. Like all of Jesus' other teachings, it's about what we *do*, not

just about what we *feel*. Having sympathetic feelings without taking any action may be just another cheap substitute for genuine morality. In his Parable of the Sheep and the Goats, Jesus doesn't ask, "When I was hungry, or sick, or a stranger, did you feel bad for me?" He asks, "Did you feed me? Did you take care of me? Did you welcome me?" And remember that the answer to those questions in the parable determines who is welcomed into heaven, and who is not.

So it turns out that the Golden Rule is not just some anodyne platitude we learned in kindergarten that we can all take for granted and get on with our lives. The Golden Rule is a fundamental pillar of Christian faith, a central part of our worldview, a moral compass to guide every aspect of the way we live.

We need to live by the Golden Rule because it reminds us how our life together is supposed to be, and what love is, and what it means to be brothers and sisters of Christ, made in the image of God.



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