

The Golden Rule

Scripture: Matthew 7:12

Sermon Series: Matthew

Topic: The Golden Rule



Matthew 7:12 (ESV) "So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets."

Introduction

As we continue listening to the words of Jesus, which he spoke in the Sermon on the Mount, this morning we come to verse 12. Verse 12 is what has popularly become known as the Golden Rule. It became known as such because of the Roman emperor **Alexander Severus** who reigned from A.D. 222-235.

Apparently he loved this teaching of Jesus so much that it became a kind of motto for his reign. He had it inscribed in stone on public buildings¹ and in gold² on his palace wall. Thus, it became known as the Golden Rule.



¹ Jewish Encyclopedia, <https://jewishencyclopedia.herokuapp.com/articles/1153-alexander-severus> accessed 1 July 2023.

² R. T. France, *Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 1, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 149

Jesus Begins With a Conclusion

The first word in this verse is “so,” which could also be translated as ‘therefore’ (eg. KJV, NASB, YLT) or ‘then.’ Whenever you see this word, it is always wise to ask what is ‘therefore’ there for?

The word indicates the beginning of a purpose clause and serves as a “marker of result, implying the conclusion of a process of reasoning.”³ Thus, Jesus is not starting a new topic. Neither is this a random section that is detached from what has gone before. Rather Jesus is concluding a ‘process of reason,’ we might say, an argument, that he’s already begun.

The question is what exactly is he concluding? There are two possibilities. Either he’s concluding the previous section (which he began with chapter 7) or he’s beginning the conclusion of the whole sermon (which he began with chapter 5).

Is He Concluding Judgment (7:1-11)?

Is he concluding the topic of judgment and discernment that he began in chapter seven (as Lloyd-Jones understood⁴)? If so, then he’s offering a once sentence summary of the standard which ought to govern all the kinds of judgments that Christians must make.

Chapter seven began with prohibition of a standard of judgment that one would be willing to impose on another, but would be unwilling to impose upon one’s self. Particularly the kind of judgment that would carry a sense of final condemnation. But, that paragraph concluded with a call to exercise some kind of judgment, which we concluded last week might be better thought of as discernment (v.6).

Within that paragraph is also a call the live a holy life so that you can helpfully support fellow disciples of Jesus to also live holy lives (v.5). This help cannot be provided by ourselves alone, but can only be accomplished through earnest prayer, which is the topic Jesus discussed in vs. 7-11. His aim in that paragraph was to motivate his followers to persistent prayer that is grounded in unshakable confidence in the overflowing goodness of God the Father.

Jesus is teaching his followers to avoid condemning kinds of judgments that exclude the gracious work and kind mercy of God the Father. When God adopts children into his family, by giving them his Holy Spirit, he begins a transforming work that will last until the day that persons dies (Phil. 1:6). We ought not ever think that a particular person is beyond the transforming power of God’s Holy Spirit or the reach of God’s grace and mercy. We must actively seek to rid ourselves of our own sin if we are to be

³ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 782.

⁴ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, Second edition. (England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1976), 522.

helpful in the process of someone else's sanctification. Both can only be achieved through persistent prayer.

So we concluded that the point of the previous section was to motivate us to pray to God for strength to turn away from sin and for the wisdom to help others do the same. God is good and always gives good gifts to his children. It is good to turn away from sin. Therefore, if you seek him for growth in holiness, he will give you all that you need.⁵ He gives the greatest gift each of his children need in order to please him in all things; his own Holy Spirit.⁶ Therefore, in summary, whatever you find yourself in a situation when you need to make a judgment or you need discernment, or you need help from the Holy Spirit to grow in holiness, then keep this principle in mind,

"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**

Summary. If Jesus is concluding this section on judging, then he is providing a one sentence principle that ought to govern the followers of Jesus in every kind of judgment and the exercise of discernment that they are called to make.

Is He Concluding the Whole Sermon?

Or is Jesus beginning the conclusion of the whole sermon? Some scholars think that Jesus is starting to conclude the whole sermon since he once again uses the phrase, "the Law and the Prophets." Jesus first used this phrase in 5:17 when he said,

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

You will recall that after saying this, Jesus then went on to expound six specific instances in which the teaching of the scribes and Pharisees had "relaxed"⁷ the righteous requirements of God's law. One could argue that in 5:21-48 Jesus is explaining the correct *interpretation* of the law and then in 6:1-7:11 he is explaining correct *application* of the law. If this is what Jesus is concluding in 7:12, then he is giving a one sentence summary of the true heart and spirit of the whole "Law and Prophets," i.e. the whole Old Testament (OT).

So which is it? It could be either or even both. Clearly it is a wise and appropriate principle to apply when one is required to make any kind of judgement concerning another person. But it is also true that this is an accurate summary of the whole law. The apostle Paul affirmed as much when he wrote in his letter to the Romans, that all the commandments,

⁵ His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness... 2 Peter 1:3.

⁶ Luke 11:13.

⁷ Matthew 5:19.

Romans 13:9-10 (ESV) ...are summed up in this word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.

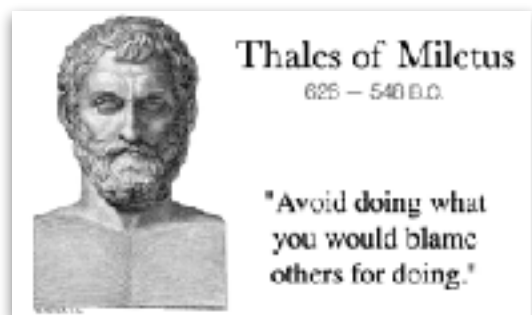
The structure of the text and the language used by Matthew could allow for Jesus to mean both. *This Golden Rule seems to fittingly apply as a conclusion to both the section calling for judgment and discernment as well as the entire exposition of the law itself.*

Pause to Ponder

If this is correct and this one verse is both Jesus' summary of the whole OT law and a guiding principle when we must exercise judgment and discernment, then we must not fly by this without pondering and applying its significance. We know these words. We are familiar with these words, but have we allowed them to be to us a guiding principle?

- Is this verse in your mind guiding your marital relationship?
- Or your guiding your interactions with your neighbors?
- Or your coworkers?
- Or your parents?
- Or your children?
- Or the server in the restaurant?

In 1913 this sign hung above the door to the employees entrance in the Amce Rod factory in Toledo, OH. Imagine for a moment that this was THE governing principle at your place of employment.



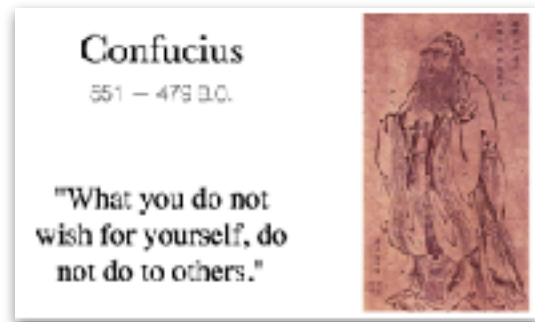
Positive Affirmation in Jesus Alone

The essence of this command is not unique to Jesus.

In Ancient Rome it dates as far back as 626 B.C. to **Thales of Miletus**, who said, "Avoid doing what you would blame others for doing."

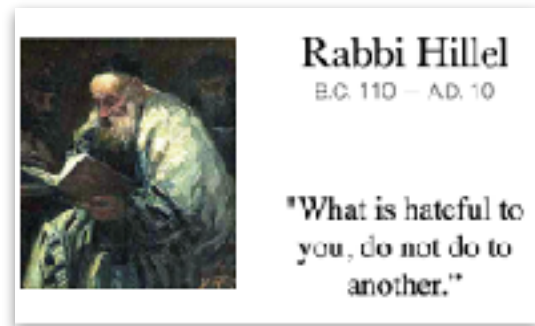
In East Asia it dates to the time of Confucius (551 - 479 B.C.) who said,

"What you do not wish for yourself, do not do to others."



In rabbinic Judaism, it dates back to rabbi Hillel (110 B.C. - A.D. 10) who said,

"What is hateful to you, do not do to another."



What is unique about Jesus is that he is the first to formulate the command positively. All others before him stated the command negatively, as in what not to do, but only Jesus states the command positively, as in what one ought to do. His is a call to loving action, "Whatever you want others to do to you, do that also to them..." While others call to refrain from harmful or hurtful deeds, Jesus alone calls his followers to thoughtful, loving deeds.

How Do You Wish to Treated

This standard is understandable to everyone. You can teach a child to do this. To the three year old who just smacked his baby sister, you can ask, Would you prefer I hugged you or smacked? He will certainly answer that he prefers a hug. Then you can say to him, then if you want more to be hugged than smacked, then hug your sister and do not smack her.

This standard is applicable to everyone. You simply start with yourself then move out to others. How do you want to be treated? What do you like done to you? Answer that question and you will rightly discern how to respond to others—most beautifully, even in 10,000 situations that the Bible does not specifically address. Use yourself as the standard of deciding your actions toward others.

- Do you like to be spoken to with kind words? Then you also must speak kindly to others people.
- Do you like to be treated with respect and patience? Then you also must treat others with respect and patience?
- Do you like be listened to when you have something to say? Then you also must listen when others are speaking.
- Do you like to have your birthday remembered? Then you also ought to remember the birthdays of those around you.

- Do you like it when people volunteer to babysit for you? Then you also ought to volunteer to babysit for others who are in need.
- Do you like it when a coworker occasionally buys you lunch? Then you also ought to occasionally buy the lunch of a coworker.
- Do you like it when someone takes seriously and actually prays for you when you are in need and have asked for prayer? Then you also must take serious and pray for others who are in need when they ask for prayer.
- Do you like to be fed when you are hungry? Then we also must do the same for others.
 - Doug Slaughter car broke down; PB & chocolate icing?
- Do you like to be welcomed when you visit a new church? Then look around when you see new people among us and be sure you go and greet them. Do not worry about your friends. They will understand when they see you welcoming strangers.
- Do you like to have dinner on the table when you come home from work? Then plan ahead, come home early one day, and do the same for your spouse who normally cooks for you.
- Do you like to have only the truth spoken or written about you? Then stop and think and pray and remember these words of Jesus before you whip off your next post or comment.
- Do you like to be forgiven when you have messed up and made a stupid mistake? Then be quick to forgive others when they mess up and make a stupid mistake.

This is the Law and the Prophets

Jesus teaches that this one sentence suffices as single sentence summary of the whole “Law and the Prophets.”

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The phrase “Law and the Prophets” is Jewish shorthand for the entire OT. The “Law” refers to the first five books, while “the Prophets” refers to rest of the OT.⁸

What Jesus is saying here is that *this single standard summarizes the spirit of the entire OT*. “It is their whole object and purpose.”⁹ If we would only put this one principle into practice, then we would rightly have in our mind the goal and aim of all of the OT. On another occasion Jesus made a similar statement later in Matthew when asked about the greatest commandment.

⁸ See Matthew 5:17; 11:13; 22:40; Romans 3:21.

⁹ Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, 524.

Matthew 22:37-40 (ESV) "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.¹⁰ ³⁸ This is the great and first commandment. ³⁹ And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.¹¹ ⁴⁰ On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets."

What Jesus is saying here in Matthew 22 is the same principle that he taught in the Sermon on the Mount. These are simply two different ways of saying the same thing. God's expectation of us is not complicated. We are simply to love Him above all else and then love others second. All the remaining 611¹² commandments are then simply exposition and application of these two foundational commands.

Knowing Is Not Doing

You'd think that having only two commands to keep would be sufficient for us all—every human being—to be pleasing in God's eyes. Or, even simpler, having only one, as Jesus states here in 7:12, would be abundantly easy to obey. If all we have to do is obey one command, then surely everyone could be saved. You'd think we could certainly keep one command. Right? But we don't. We can't. *Knowing the truth is not equivalent with obeying the truth.* We know more today than ever before, and yet we are still broken and corrupt.

Is it not amazing that nearly every civilization down through the centuries has embraced some form of this teaching—called the Golden Rule—and yet theft and abuse and murder and wars continue almost unabated? Every day there is a headline of some mistreatment or mutiny or murder. Every day! We have abundant power of mind, but no power of heart to obey this single command of Jesus.

This simplicity of Christ summary statement reveals the sinfulness of man. Even when God's demands are limited to only one command, not a single one of us can obey it. This fact reveals the depth of our fallenness. We humans are completely unable of keeping God's holy law, even if it were just one command. The apostle Paul is certainly correct when he wrote,

Romans 8:5-8 (ESV) ⁵ For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh... ⁶ For to set the mind on the flesh is death... ⁷ 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. ⁸ Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

This is why Jesus had to come to earth. This is why the Son of God had to leave the glories of heaven and enter into the horror of earth. He and he alone has perfectly lived a human life in fullness of and complete dependance upon the Holy Spirit. Freedom from sin to do righteousness only comes through faith in Jesus and receiving his Holy Spirit.

¹⁰ Jesus is quoting Deut. 6:5.

¹¹ Jesus is quoting Leviticus 19:18, 34.

¹² Mimonides numbered the total OT commands, both positive and negative, to be 613.

Romans 8:2-4 (ESV) ² For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. ³ For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, ⁴ in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

The only way a person becomes a Christian is by faith in the person and work of Jesus, through receiving the Holy Spirit of Jesus. Then, after receiving His Holy Spirit within us, we are freed from the dominion of darkness in our lives and set free to obey the righteous law of God. But to do that we must live by the Spirit.

Romans 8:5-6, 9 (ESV) ⁵ ...those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. ⁶ ...but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. ⁹ You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you.

No one can obey the Golden Rule without the Holy Spirit. No one can receive the Holy Spirit without repentance of sin and faith in Jesus. Those who do put faith in Jesus are freely given the gift of the His Holy Spirit. Jesus is the only human to have ever fully obey and never disobeyed any of God's commands, including this one we've been thinking about this morning. Thus, if we have the Spirit of Jesus in us, then we have access to the power and strength to obediently live according to his commands. Those who have the Spirit of Christ living within them are able to obey the commands of Jesus. The more we surrender our will to His will, the more we will be able to do to others as we would have others do to us. Jesus and Jesus alone can make and does makes this happen. Therefore, he and he alone is worthy of our praise.