

## MATT 7.12: THE GOLDEN RULE

[Chelmsford 8 July 2012]

At the beginning of this year (14/1/2012), the upmarket American business magazine *Forbes* ran an article entitled: *The Ten Golden Rules on Living the Good Life* (by Panos Moudaktos)

1. *Examine life... always search for new pleasures and new destinies*
2. *Worry only about the things that are in your control, that can be influenced and changed by your actions*
3. *Treasure Friendship*
4. *Experience true pleasure – avoid shallow and transient pleasures*
5. *Master yourself... complete liberty necessitates a struggle within, a battle to subdue negative psychological and spiritual forces..*
6. *Avoid excess... Even good things, pursued or attained without moderation, can become a source of misery and suffering*
7. *Be a responsible human being... Stop the blame-shifting for your errors and shortcomings*
8. *Don't be a prosperous fool. Prosperity by itself is not a cure-all against an ill-led life, and may be a source of dangerous foolishness.. Money is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for the good life....*
9. *Don't do evil to others... Harming others claims two victims – the receiver of the harm, and the victimizer, the one who does harm*
10. *Kindness towards others tends to be rewarded... Helping others bestows a sense of satisfaction that has two beneficiaries – the beneficiary, the receiver of the help, and the benefactor, the one who provides the help*

By contrast in the Sermon on the Mount we find Jesus giving just one basic rule for living the good life – **Do for others what you want them to do for you: this is the meaning of the Law of Moses and of the teachings of the prophets**” (Matt 7.12).

Eugene Peterson: “*Here is a simple, rule-of-thumb guide for behaviour: Ask yourself what you want people to do for you, then grab the initiative and do it for **them**. Add up God's Law and Prophets and this is what you get*”.

Or in the more traditional phrase: “*Do as you would be done by*”.

Those of you with a penchant for Victorian novels may have read Charles Kingsley's *The Water Babies*. There the good fairy was known as ‘*Mrs Do-as-you-would-be-done-by*’ – in contrast to another fairy, ‘*Mrs Be-done-by-as-you-did*’!

**Do for others what you want them to do for you** - Since the time of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century Roman Emperor Alexander Severus (AD 222-235), this has been known as ***the Golden Rule***.

Although Alexander Severus was not actually a Christian, he had it inscribed in gold on the wall of his bedroom.

The Golden Rule is so simple, but also so profound.

It is the ultimate guide for living the good life.

Yet in spite of this, I find to my amazement that in over 40 years of ministry I have never preached on these words of Jesus. I wonder, why not? Perhaps because they do not enshrine the Gospel – there is no good news. But is that a reason not for preaching? I believe not.

Interestingly, we find versions of the Golden Rule in all the main religions of the world.

- The famous Jewish Rabbi Hillel, when challenged by a non-Jew to “*teach me the whole Torah [Law] while I am standing on one leg*”, replied: “*Do not do to your neighbour what is hateful to you. This is the whole Torah; the rest is commentary*”
- Effectively Hillel was only repeating what is to be found in the Book of Tobit (4.15), one of the books which belong to the Old Testament Apocrypha: “*Do not do to anyone what you yourself would hate*”
- The Buddha said: “*Hurt not others in ways that you yourself hurtful*”
- Confucius said: “*What you do not wish for yourself, do not do to others*”
- The Hindu Scriptures state: “*One should never do that to another which one regards as injurious to one’s own self*”
- The Stoics said; “*Do not do to others what you would not wish done to yourself*”

Some people get worried when they discover parallels to the teaching of Jesus.

It seems to rob Jesus of his originality.

It seems as if Jesus is simply restating ancient wisdom.

Indeed, according to one Biblical scholar, Jesus wanted “*to say nothing new but something extremely old, nothing original but something generally valid, nothing surprising but something intelligible, incontestable and inescapable. Jesus is only the messenger of an eternal truth which in principle is acknowledged always and everywhere and by all*” (Stauffer).

And yet, for all the parallels, there are differences.

## 1. THE GOLDEN RULE IS A CALL TO POSITIVE ACTION

It is highly significant that, almost without exception, all the parallels to Jesus’ Golden Rule are expressed negatively: ***Don’t*** do to others what you would not want them to do for you.

- If you don’t like being robbed, then don’t rob others
- If you don’t like being cursed, then don’t curse others
- If you don’t like being hit over the head, don’t hit others over the head.

By contrast, Jesus’ Golden Rule is positive in expression – and this gives it a completely different feel.

- If you enjoy being loved, love others
- If you like to receive things, give to others
- If you like being appreciated, appreciate others.

As a result some have described the negative form of the Golden Rule as *the Silver Rule*: it simply serves as a prohibition of the wrong action; whereas the Golden Rule serves as a motivation toward proactive action.

Yes, the Golden Rule is a call to action.

In its negative form the Golden Rule could be satisfied by doing nothing; but in its positive form you have to do something for others. In the words of one commentator: “*The Golden Rule is of no use to you whatsoever unless you realize that it is your move*” (Dr Frank Crane)

Some smart Alecs have been critical of the Golden Rule

- George Bernard Shaw declared that ‘*the golden rule is that there are no golden rules*’. Instead, in his *Maxims for Revolutionists* he suggested an alternative rule: ‘*Do not do unto others as you would that they should do unto you. Their tastes may not be the same*’! In that respect it has been said that that a sadist is just a masochist who follows the Golden Rule!
- The German philosopher Immanuel Kant criticised the golden rule for not being sensitive to differences of situation: he argued that following the Golden Rule would mean that a prisoner convicted of a crime could appeal to the golden rule and ask that he be released; furthermore the judge would not want anyone else to do the sentencing, so he should not do so to others!

Clearly tastes and situations vary – what appeals in one cultural setting, might not appeal in another cultural situation. But frankly, such criticisms are ‘picky’ and fail to do justice. The truth is that the Golden Rule is a superb rule of thumb.

Remember the context in which Jesus gave this rule.

The religious leaders of his day had created a veritable maze of rules and regulations.

For example, one of the Ten Commandments laid down that the Sabbath Day should be kept holy and that no work should be done on that day – but what was work? In the first instance, the scribes said that meant not carrying a burden: but what was a burden? The scribes answered: “food equal in weight to a dried fig, enough wine for mixing in a goblet, milk enough for one swallow, honey enough to put upon a wound, oil enough to anoint a small member, water enough to moisten an eye-salve, paper enough to write a notice upon, ink enough to write two letters of the alphabet”.... and so on and so forth. There were literally 1000s of such rules.

- The Jewish *Mishnah*, which represents the codification of the oral law runs to some 800 pages in the English edition.
- Later on the *Talmud* was produced as a commentary on the *Mishnah*: the Jerusalem Talmud ran to 12 volumes, and the Babylonian Talmud to 60 volumes.

But Jesus liberated his followers from the religious experts.

Instead of listing a host of new rules for his new community, he laid down a general principle.

He said: “*Do as you would be done by*” “**Do for others what you want them to do for you**” (GNB). I.e. “*How would you like to be treated? Well, then, act accordingly*”

## 2. THE GOLDEN RULE IS A CALL TO LOVE

There was an occasion when a teacher of the law asked Jesus: “**Which is the greatest commandment in the Law**”. Jesus answered, “**Love the Lord your God with all heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind**’. **This is the greatest and the most important commandment. The second most important commandment is like it: ‘Love your neighbour as you love yourself**’. **The whole Law of Moses and the teachings of the prophets depend on these two commandments**” (Matt 22.35-40).

The Golden Rule essentially draws out the principle of the second commandment. Indeed, a way that is reminiscent of that later occasion Jesus says “**for this is the law and the prophets**” [GNB: “this is the meaning of the law and the prophets”]

This becomes clear in the context in which the Golden Rule is placed in Luke’s Gospel. In *Luke*’s version of the Sermon on the Mount the Golden Rule comes within a passage where Jesus is calling his disciples to love their enemies.

Jesus said: “**love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, and pray for those who ill-treat you. If anyone hits you one cheek, let him hit the other one too; if someone takes you coat, let him have your shirt as well. Give to everyone who asks for something, and when someone takes what is yours, do not ask for it back**”.

Then come the words: “**Do for others just what you want them to do for you**” (Lk 6.31).

The Golden Rule is then followed by a further section on the need to love our enemies and do good to them.

In the light of this context, it is clear that to do as you would be done by is to love others.

*Matthew* has a different context. The Golden Rule follows a passage on prayer which ends with the words: “**How much more, then, will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him**” (7.11). “**So then**”, says Jesus, “**do for others what you want them to do for you**”.

Strangely, however, neither the GNB nor the NRSV have translated the little Greek word “*so then*”, or “*accordingly*” (*oun*). The impression is then given that there is no link between the teaching on prayer and the Golden Rule. But there is an underlying link – the link of generosity. Just as God can be amazingly generous in the way in which he answers our prayers, so too we should be generous in the way in which we treat others.

In the words of one commentator: “*The ground of obligation is... the boundless grace of God whose magnanimity we are to imitate*” (Hare). So we are to love generously.

Indeed, we are to love as we love ourselves.

This is what doing as you would be done by is all about: loving others as one self.

Some people don’t like this idea of self-love – but the reality is that such love “*is the nearest approach to absolute love of which human nature is capable*” (Edersheim).

Where self-love goes wrong is when it is limited to self!

### 3. THE GOLDEN RULE IS A CALL FOR IMAGINATION

Jesus said: “**Do for others what you want them to do for you**”.

I.e. when it comes to others, use your imagination - think of how you would like to be treated.  
Lack of imagination is lack of love

In 1963 the American President John F. Kennedy appealed to the Golden Rule in an anti-segregation speech at the time of the first black enrolment at the University of Alabama. He asked whites to consider what it would be like to be treated as second-class citizens because of their colour. Whites were to imagine themselves being black – and being told that they couldn’t vote, or go to the best public schools, or eat at most public restaurants, or sit in the front of the bus. He went on to say, ‘*The heart of the question is... whether we are going to treat our fellow Americans as we want to be treated*’.

To apply the Golden Rule requires imagination.

And imagination involves creativity

Far from being a wooden rule to look back and ‘do what others have done to you’, it is a counsel to look forward and to anticipate what others would like to be done.

So this morning, let me encourage you to use your imagination: What can I do for others? Of course, that depends on who the other people are: who are those whom God would have us bless? Clearly other people should include our neighbours – our colleagues at work – but also, our brothers and sisters here at church

A little later in the service we will be welcoming into membership four/five people: Berenice Ducker, Nelly Feyide, Dorcas Gyabah, and Tom & Jessica Spurgeon.

We will be promising to love them, care for them, pray for them – what about applying the Golden Rule to them? How could we bless them? What could we do for them? How would we like to be treated were we them? Wow – that is a challenge.

But as we shall remember as we gather around the Table, the God who calls us to be imaginative in our loving of others, is the God who has loved us beyond our wildest imaginings – he is the God who has sent his Son to die for each one of us, that we might be forgiven, that we might have a hope that goes beyond the grave.

God has loved us far more than each of us has ever deserved

For the truth is that through our sinful, selfish, stupid behaviour, we have repeatedly gone against God’s pattern of living. And yet he has loved us beyond measure.

It is this amazing God who calls us to “**do for others what you want them to do for you**”