

Implementing the Golden Rule (Mat 7.12)

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Introduction

The moral standards of the Sermon on the Mount are truly “high and lifted up.” An example of the challenging comprehensiveness of the Sermon is before us today in Matthew 7.12. The golden rule is the name assigned to this passage. The name fits well. This verse gives us a rule of conduct that shines with the value of pure gold. I hesitate to preach this text for fear of not doing justice to it. However, it is our duty to reflect on, pursue, grapple with, grasp, expound and live by this rule under Christ as our prophet, priest, and king.

Furthermore, there is no room for despair before the lofty standard of the golden rule. This principle does not retard or hinder your life, knocking you down in your sinfulness. Rather, it lifts you up by pointing you to *life on a richer and higher plane*. The wealthy of this world may lack this gold; the poor of this world may be rich with its treasure. The entire Sermon calls us upward, no matter what our outward standing may be, to a fuller, richer, and better life that comes by confessing Christ as our risen Lord.

What then is the golden rule? It is a pattern, a standard, a measure, a guide for our conduct, spelled out for us here in principle. In simplest terms, the pattern we are to follow in our conduct is *what we want*. What we want others to do for us is the standard by which we are to guide our conduct toward them. In other words, the pattern of our conduct with regard to others comes from what we want from others:

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

Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets (KJV).

"Therefore, however you want people to treat you, so treat them, for this is the Law and the Prophets (NAS, 1977).

So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets (NIV).

Notably, what you wish and want from other people is your standard for your conduct toward them. This precious rule of life could be abused if read out of context and out of balance.

An important question that should be in the back of our minds in this study is, “How do we get past the all too common sins of ‘inactive’ love?”

Thus, the title for this message is “Implementing the Golden Rule.” The way I want to approach the golden rule today is to discuss its implementation in four steps.

1A. First, you must recognize your need of others

There is a premise here of a very deep personal need of other people. This is an aspect of self-love. We want other people to do things for us, to notice us, to care about us, to take an interest in us, to cooperate with us, and to help us. We all truly need these things. Even if we deny our need of people, even if we try to live as if it were not true, we all want and need many things from other people that directly and personally affect our lives. Such denial contradicts our status as *the people of God*.

It is personally true. Jesus speaks of “What *you* want people to do for *you*.” We all have need, acutely personal need. We are social creatures. No man is an island. We have a self-love that we long to have fulfilled. We desire that other people do things for us.

This dimension of self-love is not wrong. It is a basic assumption. It is a fact, an underlying truth. We can compare the golden rule therefore with the love command, “**love your neighbor as yourself.**” There is an underlying reality of self-love in the great commandment. Nevertheless, the two commands (the golden rule and the love command) are distinct. Here is how they are distinct. “Love your neighbor” means do for them what you do for yourself. For example, if you owned a business and you had employees, and if you showed love to them, you would give them the best health insurance you could because that is what you do for yourself. The standard of neighbor love is your *doing* for yourself but the golden rule means you do things for others according to the standard of what you *want* others to do for you. The golden rule promotes love; it extends love in way that accents its depth. It reaches deeper than what we do; it reaches deep into our desires and wants.

Thus, we start with a particular aspect of self-love and recognize our basic social need. Jesus says, you need others and you want others to do things for you. This is not wrong. It is a fact to keep in balance.

2A. The second step in formulating this pattern is to reflect upon and identify your personal wants and needs. This is comprehensive for the Lord refers to “*whatsoever* you want.” You must ask yourself, “What do I want?”

We each have our own circumstances, concerns, interests, and needs. Even though we are all different in many respects, still we must start with what we ourselves truly want from others in order to determine our standard of how to live by the golden rule.

What do you want from others? What do I want from others? We need to think about this question and come up with some specifics.

Be honest with yourself. What do you want others to do for you? What do you want from your family? What do you want from your parents or from your children? What do you want from your friends (a loaded term when we remember Job)? What do you want from your employer and fellow workers? Make a list that covers all the things you want. Now here is the rub: that list is your pattern, your rule to guide you in your actions toward others.

There is no waiting on others to do for you. It is not do for others what they first do for you. You do not go around with this list in order to give it to this person and to that person. Just consider what you want from this person and that person, then go and do that for them as best you are able.

3A. A third step serves to balance the first two. Acknowledging your need of other people and considering all the things you want them to do for you must conform to the law of God: for such is the law and the prophets (7.12b). It must conform to the whole of Scripture, the tone and tenor of Biblical teaching as a unity. Hence, we need to grow in our understanding of the OT along with the NT. This is important; we tend to forget it, but lack of knowledge is damaging.

In this light, we can see how the move from self-interest or self-love to a pattern for conduct is not autonomous. The golden rule has flexibility, latitude, and rich variety but it is not lawless (*law-less*). It seeks to fulfill the law and the prophets. Thus, it operates within the framework of God’s commandments in their true spirit and intent.

This shows that it is wrong to think that by looking into ourselves, we somehow find the conduct that fulfills the law of God spontaneously or autonomously. Rather, the law defines our basic wants *in their truest and best sense*. God’s law promotes our desires for personal well-being, safety happiness, comfort, and peace in the highest possible sense. It changes our desires and it guides them in the right channel. In other words, Scripture is our compass to guide us in the right direction. We might think of our desires like water flowing in a stream; our desires are good just as water is good but both serve a good end when channeled in the right direction; otherwise, destruction will result.

You can see how important it is to have a sort of “check and balance” system in place for our desires. Without the law and prophets (the teachings of the OT and thus the teaching of Scripture), the golden rule becomes something perverse. Consider the accounts of family theft where a mother and son, for example, steal from a retail store. A child can reason like this: “I would want my mother to steal for me, so I will steal for her.” This young person can reason in this way because that is how his mother taught him, “you want me to provide for you and do things for you, don’t you? Then do this for me.”

Actually, the golden rule puts the commandments into practical focus. It helps us avoid the abuse of subjectivity. Consider the person who claims to want nothing from other people. This is a hard person to deal with. Our relationship with such a person will be difficult to be sure, but I am interested in what is going on inside when someone makes such a claim. This is an assertion of autonomy and a perfect excuse for dodging the full impact of the golden rule. We may play down our desire for other people, for their respect and friendship, in order to avoid coming to terms with the true spirit of the golden rule.

4A. Now go and do

These four steps seem to be helpful in putting together a pattern of conduct from the golden rule that has balance: a) recognize your basic need of others; consider how true it is that you need other people and what they can do for you. b) Reflect upon and identify what you actually want from others (what you would like them to do for you), from different people, in diverse circumstances, and in various stages of your life. c) Honor the parameters of God holy word as a check on your wants so you can use them to guide your conduct in fulfilling the wants of others. Here you ask yourself, “What do I lawfully want from others that is within reason and general uprightness?” d) With these things on the table, you say, “That is the pattern for my conduct toward others. Now I must go and do.”

Interestingly, the golden rule is part of the strong biblical emphasis on work. It shows us another way that laziness is a sin and contrary to Christian discipleship. There are many forms of work and Christian faith takes in them all (cf. the work of wives in Proverbs 31 and in the home in the NT (1 Tim 5.14) and the sin of laziness in the book of Proverbs.

The golden rule is like a melody that has God’s commandments as the notes. The rule blends all the notes together to make music, to make uplifting, joyous, happy music for living as God image bearers on His earth with peace and dignity.

Applications

1) We can call the golden rule the great reversal principle of love. What do you want? Think it through and make a list. Now this list is the standard you are to use, not for yourself, but for others (not for what you can get but for what you can give in active “doings”)

That is, the list is not what you will now demand, expect, and insist on from others. Rather, it is the pattern you will demand, expect, and insist on *from yourself* toward others. This is love: looking away from oneself. It is self-love reversed and carried over to others.

This is unselfishness. You pinpoint your own needs not to hold out an offering plate, but to determine how to give. It is self-love in reverse or self-love turned outward (and inside out).

2) Concentration on the pattern of conduct of the golden rule does promote one’s own life as well as the life of others. It is a general fact that selfish people are the most miserable. One reason for this is that they dwell excessively on their own wants and needs.

By means of the golden rule, you do not dwell on yourself drowning in a personal sense of lack and longing. This principle protects you from excessive introversion by the fact that as soon as you focus a need however great it may be, you have an immediate release valve for this pressure cooker. You translate that need into a duty you have for others. For example, you say to

yourself, “Dog gone him, why didn’t he do this for me!” Then by the golden rule, it dawns on you and you say to yourself, “What I expect *from* him guides me in my responsibility *to* him.”

This pulls us away from self-pity and selfishness and this is wholesome and personally beneficial.

3) The law is relevant to the nitty-gritty concerns of everyday Christian living. The golden rule gives hands and feet to the law of God. When you do not know what to do or where to turn (or how to apply the law), this is the place to go-to the golden rule and to the kind of conduct Christ requires of us.

There is also a fulfillment of the gospel of the OT by the golden rule. The message of the OT promise of Christ and His sacrifice is one that we take to others out of a sense of want and need for ourselves. We want peace with God, life, security, and happiness. God supplies these things in the best possible way because He knows our wants better than we do. We want these things and we would want others to share them with us, so we seek to share them with others.

4) By the golden rule, we find wisdom. We formulate a pattern of conduct that is practical and loving. We go beyond learning and “bookwormism” to godly living. One way to view a bookworm is to note that he is person who devours books (that is the good part of the analogy). However, the bad sense is that the book becomes worthless when the bookworm eats it. True Christianity and discipleship is not learning, it is learning how to live for Christ. Our Lord tells us that we live for Him when we go and do. There is a major challenge here to unselfishness, to active unselfish love.

May this be our constant prayer: Lord Jesus, teach me how to be active in my love, doing for others not just receiving from them.