

THE GOLDEN RULE (Christian Character for Challenging Times)
Matthew 7:1-8 - October 11, 2020 - Immanuel - Senior Pastor: Dr. Kelly McClendon

If you were with us last week, in person, or online, you know that we started a new sermon series entitled “*Christian Character for Challenging Times.*” I made a case for why I felt led to talk about this in my previous sermon, so I don’t want to belabor those points. However, if you missed it, please go back and listen or watch it online.

What I will repeat it this - if you spend any time on social media, or very much time watching the news, or keeping up with popular culture, then you must have noticed that many people are treating other people with great unkindness and a lack of graciousness and respect. Maybe everyone has just reached a boiling point after all the challenges of this pandemic, and the complex issues of racial and social injustice, and political conflicts. Maybe it’s because there are forces in the media and political circles that want to stir up division and outrage for some unknown purposes. Maybe it’s time to reap what we have sown after years of disregarding the will of God. Like the wildfires out west, maybe the dry underbrush of unresolved differences has just accumulated for so long it was too highly flammable, so it was bound to catch fire.

I don’t know why it has gotten so bad, or whether we’re just more aware of it all in this information age. What I do know is this, in too many cases, we’ve forgotten how to talk to each other with civility, and how listen to each other with patience, and how to be kind and gracious to each other. We need to learn to how to treat other people better - especially in challenging times, especially if we're disciples of Christ - **we need to exhibit Christian character.**

That’s all very heavy - right? So, just for fun I thought I’d start with some Biblical Bloopers today. These are slightly skewed scriptural insights from children at church. These are like corny Dad jokes, but if get the joke at all you probably went to Sunday school.

- In the 1st book of the Bible, Guinessis, God got tired so he took the Sabbath off to have a beer.
- Adam and Eve were created from an apple tree.
- Noah’s wife was called Joan of Ark.
- Lot’s wife was a pillar of salt by day, but a ball of fire by night.
- Moses led the Hebrews to the Red Sea, where they made unleavened bread, which is bread made without any ingredients.
- The Egyptians were all drowned in the desert. Afterwards, Moses went up on Mount Cyanide to get the Ten Amendments.
- The First Commandment was when Eve told Adam to eat the apple.
- The Fifth Commandment is "Humor thy father and mother."
- The Seventh Commandment is "Thou shalt not admit adultery."
- Solomon, one of David’s sons, had 300 wives and 700 porcupines.
- When Mary heard that she was the mother of Jesus, she sang the Magna Carta.

- Jesus was born because Mary had an immaculate contraption, afterwards St. John the Blacksmith, dumped water on his head.
- **Jesus made up the Golden Rule, which is "Do One to others before they do One to you."**

Jesus actually said, "So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you."

Toward the end of his long sermon on the mount - Jesus offered a kind of summary, or cliff-notes, for much of the message he'd been preaching. Jesus said, "*So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.*"

I want to share four ways we need to embrace this rule that is rightly called golden.

1. View the Rule Positively - *DO to others what you would have them do to you...*

You can find versions of this idea in many other places in history and even in other religions but in almost all other places it is stated negatively, as in, "***Don't do this, and don't do that.***"

I read a story about an event that took place in 20 B.C. That is, around 50 years prior to Jesus giving the Sermon on the Mount. The tale was told of a Gentile (a non-Jewish person) who approached the most famous Rabbi Hillel. The Gentile promised that he would convert to Judaism if the Rabbi could teach him the entire Law while standing on one foot. So Rabbi Hillel stood on one foot and said, "*Do not do to your fellow what you hate to have done to you. This is the whole law; the rest is explanation.*" Then he dropped the mic and took a bow.

That incident would have been legendary by the time of Jesus. Every Jew would have heard about it and probably even repeated it a few times. But Jesus took that very familiar statement and turned it around - so that it is no longer stated negatively, but positively.

I tried to think of something said in our culture about 50-60 years ago that has become legendary, and I thought of what John F. Kennedy said in his inaugural address of 1961. He said, "*Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country.*"

What if someone today reversed that and said, "*Ask not what you can do for your country. Ask what your country can do for you.*" Actually some version of that is actually being said by many people these days. The orientation of a inward versus outward focus makes a difference.

Jesus knew full well, that there is a big difference between "do not do" to others what you don't want done to you and "**do to others**" what you would have them do to you. And his hearers could not have possibly missed it. Let me give you an example of the difference.

Let's say someone has been in a coma their entire life. Born comatose and lived their whole life in that condition. (I don't know if that's even possible, but let's pretend it is). At that person's funeral we could say, *"What a great man. He never stole, he never lied, he never lusted, he never once lashed out in anger."* All of that would be very true.

Another person might say, *"Sure, but on the other hand, he never loved, or gave sacrificially, he never once complimented anyone, he never offered a shoulder to cry on and never ever said thank you."* All of that would be true as well.

Of course a person in a coma has a very good excuse for inactivity. However, we don't have such an excuse. Jesus expects us to DO something! *"Do not do to others what you don't want done to you,"* can be observed more easily because no real initiative is needed. That kind of rule can be obeyed by simply minding your own business - but at the same time - this kind of rule lacks the power to make anyone or anything else better, it represents missed opportunities.

The poet Margaret E. Sangster captured the difference between the doing something positive and avoiding something negative in her poem called, *"The Sin of Omission."*

It isn't the thing you do, dear,	-	It's the thing you leave undone
That gives you a bit of heartache	-	At the setting of the sun.
The tender word forgotten,	-	The letter you did not write,
The flowers you did not send, dear,	-	Are your haunting ghosts at night.
The stone you might have lifted	-	Out of a brother's way;
The bit of heart some counsel	-	You were hurried too much to say;
The loving touch of the hand, dear,	-	The gentle, winning tone
Which you had no time nor thought for	-	With troubles enough of your own.

(In The Book of Virtues, ed. By William J. Bennett, p. 138-139)

Jesus said, "DO to others what you would have them do to you" - this requires conscious and concentrated effort. This can get us up out of bed and fill our day with direction. This is counter cultural and revolutionary and potentially life changing.

So Jesus is saying, "Look beyond the negative form of the rule. Be positive and proactive in your approach to others. DO to others the good thing you'd want done for you."

2. Secondly, we need to embrace the golden rule in the context of God's grace to us.

The key to the interpretation of this passage is the word "therefore" in verse 12. Not all English translations have the "therefore" but it is there in Greek. Whenever we see a "therefore" we should examine what it's "there for." In this case, it sums up or concludes a previous point. So verses 7-11 have to be read into the "therefore" of which the "Golden Rule" in verse 12 is the conclusion. I personally think it goes further back than this, but at the very least, we must see the *"ask, seek, and knock"* of verses 7-11 as being instrumental to verse 12.

Starting in verse seven, Jesus defines the true disciples of Jesus as those who hear the words of God and out them into practice. The present imperatives in the Greek indicate the habitual practice of a believer as one who practices prayer and thereby sustains a strong connection with God. The three imperatives, “ask, seek, knock” are of increasing intensity. The believer’s life consists of fervent prayer and an ever closer walk with Christ.

True prayer is based on a relationship with God that trusts the Lord to be looking out for the good of His beloved children. Here Jesus argues from the lesser to the greater, saying if wicked people know how to treat their children right, how much more will God do right by His children? Even imperfect parents often show kindness and grace to their children. How much more will a perfect heavenly Father show kindness and grace to his children? As I said last week, when we reflect on how much God has loved us - as undeserving as we are - **we can afford to be generous toward others.** We can afford to share with them the grace and kindness that God has shared with us in Christ.

3. The third way we need to embrace the Golden Rule is that we need to understand that there is - *More to the Story than This*. Having good relationship with God and others, requires more than this - but never less than this - it is an essential starting point but that’s all.

I am saying that the Golden Rule is vitally important to the Christian life but it doesn’t tell us all we need to know. In fact, if you don’t know, and respond rightly to the rest of the story, the Golden Rule might actually set you up for failure, because you can’t keep it alone.

I read about a professor at an Ivy League school who overheard a conversation between the head of the astronomy department and the dean of the seminary, or divinity school. The astronomy professor, was agnostic, and he said, *"Now, let's face it. In religion, what it all boils down to is that you should just love your neighbor as you love yourself. It's just the Golden Rule, right?"* *"Yes, I suppose that's true,"* replied the dean of the divinity school. *"Just as in astronomy it all boils down to one thing - 'Twinkle, twinkle, little star.' "*

The Golden Rule is like cliff notes for the sermon on the mount - cliff notes cover most of the story - but not all of it. For example the Golden Rule says nothing about how to establish a right relationship with God. That’s critically important. I believe that if we don’t have a right relationship with God we have very little chance of having healthy relationships with other people, and we have very little power to live consistently according to the Golden Rule.

Jesus said the Golden Rule sums up the law and prophets, but the New Testament teaches that the law and the prophets cannot provide us with all people need to be right with God. In many places the Bible says we are saved by grace through faith Christ and not by keeping the law. So, it is not enough to simply follow the Golden Rule - apart from faith in Christ your good deeds will never get you into heaven or heal the sin in your soul or deeply change your life.

So just remember - people need to accept the gift of Gods' grace by faith in Christ - and that leads us into a healthy relationship with God - which creates in us a new capacity for more healthy relationships with other people. In other words we cannot live the Christian ethic apart from the indwelling presence and power of Christ (and then we need to rely on Christ always).

As I've said, this so called "Golden Rule" is known the world over. It begs the question - Why are most people so bad at obeying this command? Because it requires the power of God.

We cannot live this way unless we are submitted to Christ each and every day. The gospel starts with a painful realization: We are sinful people who cannot do right on our own. We will always default to exalting ourselves and using or even abusing others in our selfishness. We are not only sinful; we are arrogantly sinful, and prone to think of ourselves ahead of all else!

That is why Jesus said, we must be born again. In order to truly love others, we need to be transformed by the love of God. We need a new heart. This new heart comes only by trusting Jesus to pay for our sin and make us new by His Spirit. We need God to breathe life into us anew - and we need that help each and every day as we walk with God and rely on His grace.

So what did Jesus mean when it said, the golden rule sums up the Law and the Prophets?

Near the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount Jesus says, "*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.*"

(Matthew 5:17) In other words, Jesus is saying, "*I want you to go deeper.*" For example:

- The law says, "*Don't murder.*" Jesus says, "*Go farther. DO be reconciled to others.*"
- The law says, "*Don't commit adultery.*" Jesus says, "*Yes, but go farther. Don't even look at another person with lust in your heart. DO love other people as people created in God's sacred image instead of sex objects.*"
- The law says, "*Don't divorce without a certificate.*" Jesus said go farther, "*DO what you'd want done to you - be faithful to your spouse forever!*"
- The law says, "*Don't break your oath.*" Jesus says goes farther, "*DO be a person of your word. Just say what you mean and mean what you say in all honesty*"
- The law says, "*Don't leave retribution undone - take an eye for eye and tooth for tooth.*" Jesus says, "*DO be a person that is generous, kind, and forgiving to all people.*"
- The law says, "*Don't show love to your enemy,*" Jesus says, "*Do Love your enemies. Remember God loves those who don't love him. Treat them the way you want to be treated.*"

The last thing is this - to embrace the truth of the Golden Rule, we have to...

4. Follow the Rule Daily - Jesus says, *“In everything - do to others what you would have them to do for you.”* I think this means we take the initiative, every day, to care for others.

- **You want to be forgiven?** Then Forgive someone!
- You need affirmation? Then Affirm someone!
- You feel hurt, wounded, broken and could stand a gentle touch? Be gentle with others!
- You appreciate tact? Be tactful!
- You enjoy a nice compliment? Compliment someone else!

If you want healthy relationships, you need to constantly infuse health and goodness into those relationships by your actions. It won't change them overnight - but over time it will help.

It is hard to believe, but it was 20 ago now that a movie was released called *“Pay It Forward.”* How many of you have seen that movie or heard about it? It was based on a book by Catherine Ryan Hyde. In the movie, a boy has a social studies assignment to find a way to change the world. His idea - do something good for someone that they can't do for themselves, then, instead of letting that person pay you back, you ask that person to pay it forward.

As the idea catches on in the film you see more and more people engaging in acts of kindness to others, and then saying, *“Don't pay me back - I'm looking for nothing in return - instead pay it forward. Find three other people and do something good for them.”* It results in a great and exponential expansion of kindness and love.

Essentially, the heart of “Pay It Forward” is what we often call “The Golden Rule.” It's something Jesus taught about in the Sermon on the Mount more than 2000 years ago, and if taken seriously, it can still change the world today. Now, Jesus doesn't suggest we limit our actions to just to three people - but that we adopt this as a way of treating everyone we meet.

Assuming you've already placed your faith in Jesus - and assuming the Holy Spirit is already at work within you giving you the power to change - Jesus points us to the first step in that change - *“Do to others what you would have them do for you.”*

In the movie “Pay It Forward,” people first needed to wait until someone did something good for them before they could pass a good deed along to others.

We don't need to wait because, someone has already done something really good for us. Jesus Christ came to save us. He forgives us. He heals us. He loves us. He is the way and the truth and the life for us. One day Christ will usher us into our eternal home in heaven. He gives us grace, and kindness, and mercy, and after all that Jesus says, *“Pass it on. If you want to show gratitude to me - the best way is by loving and serving others in response to all that I've done for you.”*

1 John 4 says it like this,

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.... we love because God first loved us. (8-11; 14)

I read this quote this week, I don't know who wrote or said it, but it clicked with me.

"The Golden Rule is of no use to you whatsoever unless you realize that it's your move."

If you are follower of Christ - you are called by Him to go first. Love others, do good.

Jesus gave us the ultimate love, we can never pay it back, so I think Jesus asks us now to "pay it forward." Share the blessings. *Do for others what you would have them do for you.*