

## A Golden Rule for Living

*Matthew 7:12*

A marriage counselor told a troubled husband and wife that they needed to be more understanding and sensitive to each other's needs. He challenged to look at things through their spouse's eyes, and to treat them the way they would want to be treated. The husband really wanted to save their marriage, so one day the next week he came home a little early with a dozen roses in one hand and a box of chocolates in the other.

His wife opens the door, sees him and burst into tears. In between sobs, she says, "Little Johnny threw up, your parents called and said they were coming over for dinner, and to top it all off, you come home drunk!"

If you were to make a list of how you wanted people to treat you what would it include? If you could fantasize a world where everyone treated you the way you wanted, how would they treat you? With love, respect and kindness? Would people always be willing to give you the benefit of the doubt and be ready to forgive? Would they show you understanding and encouragement?

We look at a verse this morning where Jesus invites us to create this kind of world by treating others in the way we would want them to treat us.

**Matt 7:12**

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

**(The Golden Rule)** Many consider the Sermon on the Mount to be the greatest discourse ever given on ethics and morality. High point follows high point, but this one sentence has been called the Everest of Ethics. It is the pinnacle of the sermon. It is the most marvelous and purest statement of true morality, the perfect summary of all goodness and mercy. Even non-Christians admire its lofty intentions, and humble approach. In one brilliant summary, Jesus embodies all of the moral teaching of the law. Long known as the golden rule, Jesus' teaching here has been widely known, but barely seen; highly sought after, but rarely found; much desired, but seldom achieved. It truly is golden, precious and rare.

You see, here's the problem we have with the golden rule. It is something we admire from a distance, but we don't like to get personal with it. We want to be able to treat others the way we think they deserve to be treated. The golden rule is something we like to see practiced in the lives of others, especially in the way they treat us, but it's not something we want to do ourselves.

Fourteen years ago, a crazed gunman brutally murdered several young girls in a Pennsylvania Amish school before turning the gun on himself. Such stories have become all too heartbreakingly common, but what happened next was astoundingly rare.

The killer's parents had a private funeral for their son at the cemetery. As they approached the gravesite, dozens of Amish surrounded them, not in anger or bitterness, but in a bewildering gesture of grace to bestow love and forgiveness. Everyone was then amazed at how quickly and how thoroughly the Amish community seemed to forgive the man who killed their children. However, a newspaper columnist last week said that he didn't admire them, because if it happened to him he couldn't forgive, and he didn't think most of us could either.

Today, Terri Roberts, the shooter's mom has grown close to the Amish families whose lives her son so tragically altered that day. She volunteers weekly to help one of the young ladies most severely injured by the massacre. The Amish that day and after embodies the words of Jesus.

We can see the greatness of Jesus' words, but we must also admit how difficult they are to live by. And yet the things that pull us apart, the things that cause our marriages to breakdown and communication to fail, the things that cause strife between family and friends, the things that divide churches, the things that kill relationships, that make foes of friends, that turn lovers into fighters, neighbors into enemies, these things could be stopped in their tracks if only we put Jesus' words into practice.

So this morning, I want to invite you to take a little journey with me as we walk through this verse step by step and see how it might change our lives today.

### **"Whatever"**

The Golden Rule begins with such a powerful word, "Whatever." Other translations say, "In everything" or "In all things." There's no strings, limits, exceptions, or conditions. It is so open-ended, universal, and all encompassing. I think we would have preferred it if Jesus gave as a bullet-pointed list: Here are the 10 times you should do for others what you would want them to do for you. But He didn't. He simply said, "Whatever" What about when they... "Whatever." Even if they... "Whatever"

The troubling thing about the Golden Rule is you can't find the instance where it doesn't apply, the exception that proves the rule.

The universality of the Golden Rule makes it simple though. It always applies. Every time. Everywhere. It is always the right thing to do. It's always the best choice.

This verse is built on what comes before it. We are getting very near to the end of the Sermon and Jesus wants to sum up everything that he has said so far. Jesus turns his eye back over the sermon and offers this overarching, conclusive statement. Everything that Jesus has said about being angry with our brother, lusting and being faithful to our spouse, keeping our promises,

loving our enemies, giving, praying, money, and worry can be summed up in this one little statement.

To understand godly principles, to put them into practice in your life doesn't require exhaustive theological knowledge. It just means treat others the way you want to be treated. If you do that, you've covered 99% of it.

The Pharisees, whom Jesus has been staring down throughout this whole sermon, gave great effort to a perfect understanding of the Law, and they tried to teach it with a wearisome exactness. With all of their precise theology and intricate interpretation, the Pharisees often seemed to miss the point when it came to their attitude and treatment of others. Knowing and understanding the Law means nothing, Jesus says, if it doesn't change how we live and how we treat others.

Living a godly life doesn't require studying volumes of books, a Bible college degree or years worth experience, it simply takes a willingness to treat others the way you want to be treated. You might not know all the correct theology and doctrine behind it. You might not be able to find the book, chapter and verse, but there is one way we can know the right thing do. What would we want them to do if it was us?

**“whatever you wish that others would do to you.”**

Jesus follows up “whatever” with this, “whatever you wish that others would do to you.”

We normally operate on the rule of treating others based on how they treat us. If you forgive me, I'll forgive you. If you are understanding with me, then I'll be understanding with you. If you are kind to me, then I will be kind to you,” but if you get angry with me, then I'll get angry with you. If you do me wrong, then I'll show you.”

But Jesus flips the whole thing around. He didn't say treat others with the same respect they give you. He didn't say treat others kindly until they do you wrong. Jesus says the standard for how we treat others is how we WISH others treated us. How we treat others is not to be determined by how they do treat us, by how we expect them to treat us or even by how we think they should treat us, but by how we want them to treat us.

We go through life measuring our love according to what we think others deserve. The problem is our measurements are always off. We overestimate ourselves while underestimating others.

Marriage offers a good example of this. I've talked before about this, and I always cover it in premarital counseling and that is the myth of a 50/50 marriage. Couples go into a marriage thinking they will share everything 50/50. The problem is that they measure each other's portions differently. He thinks he carrying 60% of the load and she's only got 40. Meanwhile, she thinks she's shouldering 60% of the burden and he's only doing 40%. But reality it's only 40/40.

Well, they each think they'll show the other one by withholding and withdrawing and that's how 50/50 becomes 40/40 then 30/30, 20/20, 10/10, then its divorce court. So I tell them marriage is 100/100. You give 100% no matter what the other one gives. Of course we all fall short many times, but when both are committed to giving 100%, there is always enough to make up the difference.

### **“do also for them”**

Jesus says, *“do also for them.”* *“Whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also for them.”* Harry Gensler is a professor of philosophy and ethics. He has written extensively on the Golden Rule. He says the golden rule is endorsed by nearly every religion and culture. He writes, *“The idea is global. It’s common to all major world religions; Confucious, Hillel, Jesus and many others used it to sum up how to live.”*

However, there is a major difference between what all the other religions and philosophies say, and what Jesus says. Let’s see if you can pick out what it is?

- Confucius – *“Do not to others what you would not wish done to yourself.”*
- Stoics – *“what you do not want to be done to you, do not do to anyone else.”*
- Jewish Tradition – *““Do not do to anyone what you yourself would hate.”* Quoted by Rabbi Hillel when asked by a would-be disciple to teach him the whole law by standing on one leg. Rabbi Shammai had been unable or unwilling to answer, Rabbi Hillel, however, said, *“What is hateful to you, do not do to anyone else. This is the whole law; all the rest is commentary.”*
- The Greek philosopher Epictetus said, *“What you avoid suffering yourself, do not afflict on others.”*
- *“Hurt no one so that no one may hurt you.”*- Muhammad
- Hinduism – *“do not do to others what would cause pain if done to you.”*
- Buddhism – *“Treat not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful”*
- Bahai – *“Lay not on any soul a load that you would not wish to be laid upon you.”*

Do you see the difference between all those and what Jesus says? What is it? Yeah, they are all in a negative sense. Don’t do to others what you don’t want them to do to you.

Though good in their own right, these negative expressions come nowhere near the golden rule of Jesus. Mark Moore calls them the silver rule, and they are not in the same league with Jesus. They are basically utilitarian, setting a minimum standard to allow for the practical functioning of society. Their primary motivation is fear- don’t do this to others if you don’t want them to do it to you. Jesus’ Golden rule is motivated by an affirmative desire- do to others what you would like them to do to you.

*“Do not to others what you would not wish done to yourself.”* You could fulfill that staying home and doing absolutely nothing. When I’m vegging out in the couch and watching a race, I’m hurting no one. I’m not inflicting anything on anyone. I’m fulfilling the silver rule, but I still fall short of the Golden Rule.

The Golden Rule is a call to action, a call to do something. Jesus wants us to take the initiative. We are to be the ones to take the first step. We don't wait for them to do first. We aren't merely responding or reacting. We are acting. We are to do for others.

Jesus' command to "do also for them" takes on a completely different nature and spirit. There is a large gap between keeping yourself from harming others, and taking the initiative in doing good for them. You can avoid doing bad to others, but still ignore and neglect them. Jesus calls for an active love and a positive presence in people's lives. We are to take assertive steps to make a difference in people's lives.

How often do we want the other person to make the first move? I'll do the right thing, when they do. I'll do something when they apologize? I'll work things out when they make things right? So you're waiting on them to do the right thing, and meanwhile they're waiting on you to do the right thing, and no one does the right thing. And things just degrade and break down from there.

Jesus says, "No, this stuff stops here. It's not about what they do or don't do. It's not about what they did or didn't do. It's not about what they say or don't say. It's not about what they said or didn't say." I believe Jesus would look you both in the eye and say, "It's about you and what you do for them. You make the move. You take the initiative. You start the healing process. You apologize. You swallow your pride, and do for them."

The golden rule calls for positive action on our part. This is what sets Jesus' statement apart from the other religions and philosophies of the world.

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 heartsome 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)

I would like to leave you with an old story. It's called the parable of the spoons. A man asked God, "Lord, I would like to know what Heaven and Hell are like. " The Lord led the man to two doors. He opened one of the doors and the holy man looked in. In the middle of the room was a large round table. In the middle of the table was a large pot of stew which smelled delicious and made the man's mouth water.

The people sitting around the table were thin and sickly. They appeared to be famished. They were holding spoons with very long handles that were strapped to their arms and each found it possible to reach into the pot of stew and take a spoonful, but because the handle was longer than their arms, they could not get the spoons back into their mouths. The holy man shuddered at the sight of their misery and suffering. The Lord said, "You have seen Hell."

They went to the next room and opened the door. It was exactly the same as the first one. There was the large round table with the large pot of stew which made the holy man's mouth water. The people were equipped with the same long-handled spoons, but here the people were well nourished and plump, laughing and talking. The holy man said, "I don't understand." "It is simple" said the Lord, "It requires but one skill. You see, they have learned to feed each other, while the greedy think only of themselves."

Write down the name of someone in your life. If you can, think of someone with whom you may have had some problems. This exercise has greater value when you act kindly toward someone who is not kind toward you. Next, think of a specific, positive thing you will do for them this week. Do this without thinking of how you will get credit or benefit from your act of kindness.