



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

It's a Little More Than Kindness

Matthew 7:12

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The Famous Rule of Gold

“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” If that is not the most quoted maxim from the Bible, it is near the top of the list. As a way to treat others, it makes sense to nearly everyone, which may explain why others said essentially the same thing, even before Jesus did.

- Tobit 4:15a - “And what you hate, do not do to anyone” (ESV).
- Sirach 31:15 - “Judge your neighbor’s feelings by your own and in every matter be thoughtful” (ESV).
- Confucius - “Do not to others what you would not wish done to yourself.”¹
- The rabbi Hillel, a contemporary of (or a little before) Jesus, when told by a heathen that he would become a proselyte if Hillel could teach him the whole Torah while he stood on one foot, said, “What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. That is the whole Torah. The rest is commentary. Go and learn.”²

The Rule is so popular that some have distorted it by over simplification. A friend told me about seeing a bumper sticker that said, “Kindness Is My Religion,” derived from a statement by the Dalai Lama. For many, that is the essence of the Golden Rule. Just be kind, or nice. Certainly, both will occur when the Rule is practiced. However, if we have looked at all of Jesus’ teachings, we sense that there is likely more to it than just being nice.

Matthew 7:12 confirms as much: “So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.” Both the introductory “so” (οὕτως, *oun*) and the affirmation that the Rule “is (ἐστίν, *estin*) the Law and the Prophets” call us to look for something more than a general kindness in Jesus’ intent. Consider three calls specifically.

A Call to Think Again about the Law — and God

What to do with the idea of law has proved troubling. Some have tried a “multiplication approach,” with the good motive of clarifying by adding explanations. Sadly, these often

¹ Cited by John R. W. Stott, *Christian Counter-Culture: The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1978), 190. Stott notes that “the Stoics had an almost identical maxim.”

² b. Šabbat 31a, as cited in Scot McKnight, *Sermon on the Mount*, The Story of God Bible Commentary, eds. Tremper Longman, III & Scot McKnight (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013), 251. This saying is in the Babylonian Talmud, recorded three to four hundred years after Jesus and Hillel.

become binding laws and therefore burdens (cf. Mt. 23:13ff.). Others pursue a “reduction model” that decreases the number of laws. That leads to antinomian freedom believed to allow one to receive more grace (cf. Rom. 6:1). Or gives in to self-justification of whatever we want instead of what God wants (McKnight, 250). Jesus endorsed neither view. “[M]any are uncomfortable with the legal texts of the Bible, but Jesus wasn’t” (McKnight, 249).

Matthew 22:36-40 expands the statement of 7:12 and shows Jesus’ view of law.

1. He did not abolish the many laws; he challenged us to comprehend them and see them for what they are intended to be and do.
2. The Torah (law) is all about love, either for God or others. Though many allege that these verses *separate* law from love, Jesus keeps them together. Where God’s laws are concerned, where there is love, there is law; where there is law, there is love.
3. He grounded this understanding in self-care, as stated in different ways in both Matthew 7:12 and 22:39 (see McKnight, 249, 251).

Paul followed Jesus in this (Rom. 13:8, 10; Gal. 5:14). So did John (Jn. 14:15; 15:14; 1 Jn. 5:2-3). From all of them, we see the most important thing to know about law: it exists to help and make concrete the practice of love which is itself at the heart of the nature of God (1 Jn. 4:8).

This understanding should lead to a different view of both God and law than many have.

1. In giving laws, God is not being a cosmic spoilsport. He is exercising his wisdom (cf. Isa. 46:10; Psa. 147:5; Jer. 10:23) for our good (see Dt. 10:12-13).
2. That means the laws he gives are not arbitrary, but have our best interests in mind. The Golden Rule puts this in terms of imitating God’s desire and so wanting the same best things for others that we want for ourselves.

A Call to Think Again About the Sermon on the Mount

The Sermon on the Mount provides concrete examples of the principle.

1. Recall that it gives details for Jesus’ fundamental call to “reform your lives” (Mt. 4:17, NAB, 1970 edition).
2. Remember that the body of the Sermon began with an affirmation about “the Law or the Prophets” (5:17) in the interest of calling disciples to “righteousness [that] exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees” (5:20).

Given the repetition of “the Law and Prophets” in the summary statement of 7:12, it is legitimate to look at the teachings in 5:21-7:5 for a specific working out of the idea of extending the principle of self-care to others.³

1. Consider again the principles taught in 5:21-48. How do we want to be treated relative to hatred / murder, lust / adultery, marital faithfulness, honesty in communication, revenge, or as someone’s enemy?
2. How do we want religious people to treat us? Do we want their motives to be to please God or people (6:1-18)?

³ Following Frank Matera, I see the body of the Sermon as the text from 5:17-7:12. Somewhat different from Matera, I have come to see 7:6-12 as a summary statement at the end of the main Sermon body, comparable to 5:17-20 at the beginning. For his outline, see Frank J. Matera, *The Sermon on the Mount: The Perfect Measure of the Christian Life* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2013), 12-13; he elaborates his outline with the Sermon text on pp. 14-25.

3. Do we want to people to mainly value their treasures and use people? Or to value people and keep treasures in perspective (6:19-34)?
4. How do we like it when people pick at our specks while ignoring their logs (7:1-5)?

Do *we* live so that our lives reveal the deepest meaning of the representative practices treated in 5:21-48? Do *we* practice public acts of righteousness with the single-minded devotion that avoids all pretense or duplicity of motive (6:1-18)? Do *we* live in wholehearted service to God with regard to what we treasure, what we aim at, and what we worry about (6:19-34) (see Matera, 105, for the above)? Do *we* take care of our faults first so we can see clearly to help others with the faults we see in their lives (7:1-5)?

A Call to a Radically Different Manner of Life

The irony is that, despite the fondness of so many for the Golden Rule, few take it seriously enough to really try to live it. In truth, most of us find it just too radical to be realistic.

I think the reason for our resistance is suggested in the summary statements at either end of the Sermon body. We too often are slack in seeking “exceeding righteousness” (5:20). Our standard is often far lower than the holy nature of the “Father . . . in heaven [who] give[s] good things to those who ask him” (7:11).

In his discussion of 7:1-12, Randy Harris calls particular attention to the generosity of God described in vv. 7-11 and then considers the Golden Rule in light of that. His questions serve as the point of exhortation we must consider as we take the lesson of the Rule with us.

I wonder what would happen if generosity had to do, not with just how much money we gave, but with the respect we gave to other people. If we came to believe that every person was worthy of respect just as we want to be respected. . . .

What would happen if God’s generosity became our generosity? If, when we looked at other people, we looked, not for what was worse in them, but we looked for the image of God that’s in every human being? What if we showed the same generosity to other people that we want them to show when they look at us? . . .

When Jesus says that we can trust God to give us good gifts, he presents his Father as the model of the one who knows how to take care of us, who will be generous with all that he has. What if we were generous, not just with our money, but with all that we have? What if we were generous with our love, our sympathy, our compassion, our spirit? . . .⁴

Will you dare to be so different?

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⁴ Randy Harris, *Living Jesus: Doing What Jesus Says in the Sermon on the Mount* (Abilene, TX: Leafwood Publishers, 2012), 117, 121-122.