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ANSWERING THOSE WHO TRY TO LIVE BY THE GOLDEN RULE

by Brian Peterson

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In 1894, there was a series of lectures given in both Oxford and London called “Via, Veritas, Vita” (The Way, the Truth, the Life). The theme of the lectures centered on the idea of “Christianity in its most simple and intelligible form.”¹ The author, James Drummond, made the point that Matthew 7:12, stating the Golden Rule, is just that — Christianity in its most simple and intelligible form: “Whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the law and the prophets.”²

On its surface it’s a very basic thing, and frankly, not a concept unique to committed Christians: do unto others what you would have them do unto you. Every parent in Western culture has corrected their children, “Do you want people to be kind to you? Then be kind to them.” Indeed, most people, regardless of their religious background, would agree with the ethic of the Golden Rule. That raises the question *Can a person simply live by the Golden Rule and claim to be living as a Christian?* Put differently, what do you say to a friend who tells you he tries to live by the Golden Rule, but does so without reference to Jesus Christ?

It’s worth noting that, in the annals of religious history, there are many doctrines that seem to defer to other people. Confucius and other religious leaders or founders taught such things, but always from a negative and passive position, the so-called Silver Rule: “Whatever you don’t want other people to do to you, don’t do those things to them.” But in His infinite wisdom, Jesus framed it positively, and in doing so, dramatically altered the impact of this simple and intelligible expression of the Christian faith, “Do unto others what you would have done to you.” In other words, our Lord will not be satisfied with a passive social ethic. After all, one could do

absolutely nothing, and care nothing for one's neighbor, and still be in full obedience to the Silver Rule.

Rather, He calls for active, intentional pursuit of the good of your neighbor. Thoughtfully considered, then, the Golden Rule is a uniquely Christian ethic that has the power to transform a culture that feels very much like it's in a state of decay. But the Golden Rule never can be fully appreciated apart from a robust connection to the person and work of Jesus Christ. That's true for at least three reasons.

The Golden Rule Compels Us to Love Others the Way God Loves Us. In his epic book *The Christian in Complete Armor*, William Gurnall lays out the kind of love for neighbor that flows from God's love for us.

I ask you, which friend loves you more — the one who, hearing you are in need, promptly writes out a check, puts it in the mail, and considers his obligation to you paid in full? Or the one who drops everything, comes to your house, and does not leave until he is satisfied that all your needs have been cared for? But he is not through yet; he keeps coming back until the crisis is completely past....God is the latter friend. He comes to our hearts, checks the cupboards, sees how bare they are and sends in provisions accordingly.³

The Golden Rule compels us to love others the way God loves us. We don't want God to love us impatiently, begrudgingly, or in words only. Rather, we want Him to fill our cupboards with His presence, His friendship, and His care. That's a unique kind of love that can flow only from divine grace, which, in turn, gives us the blueprint for doing unto others as we would have them do unto us. In this sense, the Golden Rule is intended to take our focus off of ourselves and our desires and center them in the person of Jesus Christ. The secularist or nominal Christian, then, can never live out the ethic of the Golden Rule truly, because his only reference point for "doing unto others" is his own imagination or experience.

The Christian gospel is unique in its call for sinners to live our lives to the glory of God alone. That's one of the patterns of the New Testament as a whole. God seems always to be going after our tendency toward idolatry. *Our problem is that we love ourselves far too much to treat others the way we want to be treated*, which is why the Golden Rule must be practiced in the context of God's holy love for us, which becomes the pattern for our love for others.

The Golden Rule Reveals How Demanding Selflessness Actually Is. Like it or not, our Lord in His grace calls you and me to hard things, and selflessness is demanding. When I am at my best, loving other people is the greatest joy in my life, aside from loving my family. But when I'm at my worst and living in the flesh, the Golden Rule remains a praiseworthy statement devoid of godly sacrifice. Martyn Lloyd-Jones was right: "This law was not given to be praised, it was meant to be practiced!"⁴ Matthew 7:12 is a measuring line to reveal how demanding a selfless life actually is. You can help guide your non-Christian friend into a deeper appreciation of the Golden Rule by asking him, "How do you ensure that you 'do unto others as you would have them do unto you' in a way that is less about your subjective definition of good and more about the objectivity of God's good?" Divorced from the person of Jesus Christ, it is impossible to live by the Golden Rule.

In my experience as a pastor, there are at least three things that can help a person reorient his adherence to the Golden Rule in a Godward direction, thus promoting a unique expression of the Christian faith. First, check your generosity. Much like the above quoted illustration of a man in need of a friend to fill his cupboards, Jesus means for people to exercise the kind of generosity that becomes a living expression of God's complete provision for them.

Second, check your intentionality. God has a rightful claim on your life. As a Christian, you belong to Him. That means your time, treasures, and talents are all under His sovereign sway. If that is true, then you must learn to be intentional about how you invest the gifts of God in a way that both benefits others and reflects His grace.

Third, check your expectations of how you want to be treated. Are you living your life for the well-being of your brothers and sisters? Do you respond to them (or initiate with them) in a selfless way that reflects what God is doing in your own life? In this way, the Golden Rule may be considered an expression of The Great Commandments: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 22:37-39).⁵

Framing these three self-reflective points as questions to a secularist or nominal Christian, you can help reorient his or her perspective on the true significance of Matthew 7:12.

The Golden Rule Reveals a Measuring Line of God's Holy Love. The final thing to notice is that the Golden Rule certainly promotes a spirit of charity and undoubtedly serves as a barometer for healthy human relationships. However, Matthew 7:12 demands something far more significant; it calls attention to something greater than the

self. In His infinite mercy, God loved the world the way He wants the world to love Him. He sent His Son into the world so that the world would receive Him. That's the measure of God's holy love. It is Christianity in its simplest and most intelligible form, but for the Rule to be Golden, it must be embraced according to Jesus Christ's work on the cross. Otherwise, Matthew 7:12 becomes a moralistic ethic that ultimately settles on the self.

The standard of God's perfect love is not attainable in this life. However, the Holy Spirit has come so that we might be renewed after the image of Christ, and thus pursue holiness. Be encouraged today, then, that He who began the good work of making you holy will complete that work on the day of His glorious return. For that reason, you may do unto others as you would have them do to you only because of the sanctifying power of sovereign grace and Godward sacrifice of love. That is how you live the difficult, yet triumphant, life that God has set before you.

Christianity in its most simple and intelligible form — the Golden Rule — is given to us that we may experience the joy of the Lord. If your friend is aiming to follow the Golden Rule without reference to Jesus Christ, then do unto him what God has done to you. Lay Christ before him that he may take hold of Him and thus learn to love not only the Rule but also, more importantly, its Giver. —*Brian Peterson*

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NOTES

- 1 James Drummond, *Via, Veritas, Vita: Lectures on "Christianity in Its Most Simple and Intelligible Form"* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1895). Delivered in Oxford and London in April and May 1894.
- 2 All Bible quotations are from the English Standard Version.
- 3 William Gurnall, *The Christian in Complete Armor*, vol. 1, rev. and abr. ed. (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2002), 39.
- 4 D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 211.
- 5 Keith D. Stanglin, "The Historical Connection between the Golden Rule and the Second Greatest Love Command," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 33 2 (June 2005): 357—71.