

## THE GOLDEN RULE

(The Bible's Greatest Hits II, 1)

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Matthew 7:12. "So whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them; for this is the law and the prophets."

Luke 6:31. "And as you wish that men would do to you, do so to them."

When I was in college I came across a typical quip by George Bernard Shaw, which I never forgot. "Do not do unto others as you would have them do unto you," he said. "Their tastes may be different."

Let me make two observations about this witticism. The first is that it points to the limitation of this and all other rules relating to human behavior. The second is that Shaw makes a clever point by missing the point.

To return to the first observation: the golden rule obviously will not work if we always try to do for other people what our own taste dictates. Most of us have had the experience of having somebody do for us something which that person thinks should be done for us, but which we do not want done at all. Parents have a weakness that way. They may buy us clothes that we don't want to wear, or send us tickets to shows we don't want to see, or pick out wallpaper for us that we cannot stand to look at. Sometimes the people who do these things for us know better than we what is good for us. Yet their taste makes us uncomfortable. Moreover, sometimes they are trying to control us or to enjoy something vicariously through us. In such cases their good offices go very much against the spirit of the golden rule.

Shaw might have gone further and noted that not only do people's tastes differ, but their needs as well. If you have arthritis and your neighbor is a landscape gardener, you might appreciate his offering to look after your yard. But if you offered to do the same thing for him he would have a right to feel insulted.

It is very easy to reduce the golden rule to absurdity by interpreting it to mean that we should always do precisely to other people what we want done to us. I do not believe that Jesus intended his saying to mean that. Yet as far as it goes it can be misinterpreted in such terms. Like all very abstract summaries about human behavior it fails to deal specifically with concrete cases. It does not deal with the matter of differing tastes and needs nor with the less than worthy motives out of which people may do what seem to be kindly things for other people.

The golden rule may be perverted in another way. It appeals to people's desire to have some simple, little moral maxim to which they can give lip service but which is so general that it never troubles their consciences. About fifty years before the time that Jesus taught, Hillel was a leading rabbi. Once a smart-aleck Gentile came to him and said that he would become a proselyte if the rabbi would teach him the whole law while standing on one leg. One of his colleagues grew angry, but Hillel accepted the challenge and replied, "Do not do to others what you would not like done to yourself; all the rest is commentary." Such a summary insight is very valuable. Yet the genius of Judaism lies in the commentary.



Perhaps Jesus framed the golden rule in response to one of those stand-on-one-leg requests. The truth is that this saying is uncharacteristic of Jesus. It is not uncharacteristic in its message; but it is uncharacteristic in its form. Jesus did not usually teach in terms of wise sayings such as those in the Book of Proverbs or the Analects of Confucius. He usually taught in terms of parables, stories and metaphors that made righteousness concrete and which showed love in action.

It is easy to think of the golden rule as a bit of prudential wisdom that works well in business and social relationships - something like "Honesty is the best policy." Fortunately the context that Luke provides explodes such a prudential understanding. Luke ties the golden rule into that very venturesome and heroic love that reaches out to enemies and which makes difficult sacrifices.

The phrase added in Matthew's version also is helpful.

"So whatever you wish that people would do to you, do so to them; for this is the law and the prophets."

That last phrase reminds us of another saying of Jesus which he declared summed up the law and the prophets. In that instance he referred to the great commandments of love to God and neighbor.

I would suggest then that the golden rule is a summons to put into action that line in the law that reads "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Seen in that light the saying becomes much less abstract.

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I said that Bernard Shaw's witticism makes a clever point by missing the point. For the point of the golden rule is not that we should treat the other person exactly as we want to be treated. The point is that we treat the other person as we would want to be treated were we that person in that situation.

This means that the golden rule asks us to step out of our self-centeredness in two ways. First, we are asked to take the other person's welfare into consideration. Secondly, we are asked to see beyond our own needs and tastes to the other person's condition. The quintessence of the law is not projecting our own wants on other people. On the contrary, Jesus is saying that in the end all good human relationships come down to acts of empathy.

Despite what I said earlier it is not always a bad thing when other people act for our sake according to their own tastes. A little boy may give his grandmother a baseball glove or his teenage brother a rubber duck. These gifts are great compliments. It would be much less of a compliment if the little boy gave his grandmother his cod liver oil. There is no truer indication of high regard than that a person share with us the things that he likes best.

But suppose that boy grows up to be a man and still gives his grandmother baseball gloves and his older brother rubber ducks. I should think we might conclude then that there was something wrong with him.

As we grow in experience we should grow in empathy. (Of course, our concern for empathy should not lead us to make too narrow assumptions about other people. How I miss all those rubber ducks and plastic sailboats the kids used to leave around! It's no fun taking a bath anymore.)

One final observation about the golden rule. When I was nine I came across a similar saying by Confucius. My mother pointed out that whereas Confucius and other ancient sages stated the thought in negative terms, Jesus made it positive. For Jesus the rule means much more than refraining from doing bad things to people. It calls for a life of active good will.

This is an important difference. Yet the positive version logically includes the negative, and sometimes it is useful to bear that negative side of the rule in mind. I have observed that some of the same people who make a point of doing pleasant little things for other people are often the ones who do some very bothersome things.

When I was about five years old some of us kids found it great fun to shout at women going down the street, "Your slip is showing." Sometimes it was, of course. But I doubt if many of these passersby appreciated being informed of the fact in that fashion.

Some people do not seem to outgrow that sort of behavior. They grow up to be busybodies. These are worse than children, because while children know they are acting mischievously, this kind of adult masks his mischief under a cloak of solemn righteousness. He goes around informing people that their slips are showing without ever asking whether he would like to receive such information in the way he is supplying it.

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"As you wish that people would do to you, do so to them." The saying is great for making into a sampler and hanging on the wall. You can say it while standing on one leg. Putting it into practice, however, means a lifetime of bruised shins.