

# THE GOLDEN RULE: The Summary of Law

MATTHEW 7:12

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Sunday, July 20, 2003

**A** MAN NAMED RICHARD POWELL SAID, "ONE OF THE MOST ridiculous statements ever made is that one picture is worth a thousand words. As an example," he said, "I give you not a thousand words but eleven words, and I ask you to put across their message in a picture: *The words are, 'Do unto others as you would have others do unto you.'*"

It really is hard to paint one picture that would capture the meaning of those words, because when someone really does for others what he would have others do him, then that person is, in effect obeying all the moral commands found in the Bible. So, to paint a picture of someone doing to others what he would have others do to him would be to paint a picture of someone obeying all the **Ten Commandments**. The picture would somehow have to show children honoring their parents and people respecting the lives of other people and husbands and wives honoring their marriages. The picture would also have to show people who are honest and people who honor the property and integrity of other people and people who do not lust after that which does not belong to them. Above all, the picture would have to show people who have a strong love relationship with their Creator. But how can one picture show all these things?

And, besides the Ten Commandments, there are many other moral commands found in the Bible that are derived from the Ten Commandments. For instance, we have just been studying several commands given to us by Jesus such as "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth" and "Do not worry" and "Do not judge". So the picture we paint of someone doing to others what he would have others do to him would also have to include a representation of these and many other commands as well.

Maybe someone might argue that a picture of Jesus would show it all, since Jesus is the only human being who has ever perfectly obeyed the Law on every point. But, would it be a picture of Jesus smiling while holding children, or would it be a picture of Jesus driving the moneychangers from the temple with a look of anger upon His face? In both cases, I believe Jesus was doing to others what He would have them do to Him if He were in their shoes. I agree with Richard Powell. It is virtually impossible to use one picture to show what it means to do to others what you would have them do to you.

**I** HAVE ENTITLED THIS MESSAGE, "THE GOLDEN RULE: A Summary of the Law," because MATTHEW 7:12 tells us that the words, "Do to others what you would have them do to you" sums up the Law and the Prophets.

Consider for a moment how the Golden Rule serves as a summary of everything found in the Law given to us through the prophets. To do this we must understand the essence of the moral Law. Fortunately, this is not hard to do, because the Bible makes it very clear what the essence of the moral Law is. **The essence of the moral Law is love.** In MATTHEW 22:37-40, Jesus is quoted as saying, **"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest command. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."**

The overriding principle behind all the moral commands recorded in the Bible is love. If a certain person loves God with all his heart and loves his neighbor as himself, then that person will naturally obey every single moral command recorded in the Bible. In fact, even if a certain person who is filled with love for God and love for his neighbor never had the opportunity to read the moral commands written in the Bible, that person would still naturally do what the commands tell us to do, because love would drive him to do so. In JOHN 14:23, Jesus is quoted as saying, **"If anyone loves me, he will obey my commands."**

Now look again at the Golden Rule. It is a rule that commands us to love in a very practical way. It goes beyond saying, "I love you." It challenges us to put love into action. Do you say you love your neighbor? If you answer "yes" then the real test of your honesty is that you will desire the well-being of your neighbor as you desire your own well-being. Do you value your own life? Then you will remember that your neighbor also values his life, and you will not kill him. Do you value your own property? Then you will remember your neighbor also values his property, and you won't steal from him. You will love your neighbor as yourself, and the practical expression of that love is that you will do to him exactly what you believe should be done to yourself under the same circumstances.

**So the Golden rule explicitly tells us to put love into practice.** *And when we practice love, we are naturally doing everything the Law tells us to do.* In that sense,

the Golden Rule is a summary of all that the whole Law given to us by through the prophets.

But, some might wonder why the Golden Rule doesn't explicitly say anything about loving God. Doesn't part of the moral Law command us to love God? And yet, MATTHEW 7:12 seems to avoid that subject. When taken out of context, it is true that nothing explicitly is said about loving God in this verse of scripture. But, when we look at the context, we see that the command to love other people in a practical way depends on our ability to love God and totally depend upon His grace.

Verse 12 begins with the conjunction "so" which connects the Golden Rule to the words that immediately come before it. Remember what those words were? They were words that promised us that God would give us the strength to obey His commands when we sincerely ask Him for that strength. In other words, driven by love for the God who created us and saved us from our sins, we seek Him with all of our hearts. We ask Him for the strength we need to obey His commands, because we love Him.

I hope you can see from the context that the Golden Rule has not ignored the command to love God. **We must still love God first. We must still ask and seek and knock and trust in Him for the strength we need to obey. That is still the first and greatest commandment of all. When we do that, then we will receive the strength to obey.** 'So, in light of this strength that is promised to us as we seek the God we love, let us put love into practice by doing to our neighbor what we would have him do to us.' That is what MATTHEW 7:12 is saying.

**The whole moral Law is summed up in two great commands. Love God and love your neighbor, and the Golden Rule tells us to put our love for God and our love for our neighbor into practice.**

**L**et me now share with you a few bits of advice when it comes to the practical application of this Golden Rule to the real life situations in which we find ourselves.

*The **first thing** I want you to understand as you apply the Golden Rule to your own situation is that you should not think that doing to other people what you would have them do to you will always make other people feel good.*

Our goal as Christians is not to make people happy. Our goal is to know God and do His will and to help others know God and do His will. When I am not doing God's will, I should not be pampered. I should be corrected. Maybe at the time I am doing wrong I don't feel like being corrected, and I might even get angry with the person who is trying to correct me. But, when I am thinking clearly, I know that I would rather have people correct me when I am doing wrong than I would have them pamper me.

So, when I apply the Golden Rule to someone who is behaving in a way that is not in harmony with God's will, what should be my response? Should I pamper that person to make him feel good? Absolutely not! I should do to him what I would have him do to me if I were in the same situation. And, if I am in a position of authority, I should reprimand him. That's what I would want someone in authority to do to me if I were out of line. He may not like it. He may sue me or do some other nasty thing to get even. But, I must put myself in his shoes and do to him what I would want others to do to me if I were in a state of rebellion against God.

Jesus did not say, "Do to others what they want you to do to them." He said, do to others what you would have them do to you (that is if you were facing the same set of circumstances). And, when we determine what we would have other people do to us under the same circumstances, we must think clearly. **We must put God's will first.**

I think you can see how applying the Golden Rule like this will not always make people happy. In fact, they might even accuse us of failing to live by the Golden Rule. A man once got angry with another man when that other man refused to give him a loan. The reason why the other man refused to give him a loan was because he had reason to believe the man asking for the loan would gamble the money away. When he was refused the loan, the man said, "If I had money and you asked me for a loan, I would have given it to you." In other words, "I live by the Golden Rule, and you do not." Sometimes when we are really doing our best to live by the Golden Rule we are made to look like hypocrites, because we are not pleasing other people. But, the purpose of the Golden Rule is not to please people. It is to put love into practice. And, sometimes that means being tough on another person.

You must put yourself in the other person's shoes and think what would need to be done to you under the same circumstances in order to help you grow closer to God. After you have gone through that mental process, then do to that person what you would have him do to you. And, do it even if it does not make him happy. That is one bit of advice I offer to those who are serious about applying the Golden Rule.

Now if that bit of advice sounds a too harsh, then let me give you another bit of advice to balance it out. It is this: **(Second,)** *when correcting a person, don't give the person what you think he deserves; rather, treat him the way you think God would treat you if you had committed the same wrong. And how would God treat you?*

One of my favorite verses of scripture is ISAIAH 103:10. That verse says that God "does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities." God does discipline us, but it is always less than what we deserve. If God always disciplined us the way we deserve to be disciplined, none of us would survive. So, when we do to others what we would have them do

to us, let's use God's standards of discipline to determine what our response should be. "The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love (ISAIAH 103:8). That is how God treats us and that is how we should desire other people to treat us when we have sinned. Therefore, it should be how we treat other people when they sin. When applying the Golden Rule, we must exercise compassion.

*The **third** bit advice I need to give you sounds something like this: "Drive as you wish your kids would."* I know that many of you are not yet parents and some of you have not yet begun to drive, but I can't think of a better way to bring home the point I want to make.

You see, application of the Golden Rule goes beyond what we say to other people in order to help them know God better. Even when we say nothing or do nothing intentionally to people, the very way we appear to other people—our habits and our attitude towards life—all these will have a tremendous impact on others. The impact on our children will be the greatest, but even people we don't know will be influenced.

I like to be around people who are good examples. They challenge me and inspire me to strive for moral excellence. When I was growing up, my father was very careful to obey the traffic rules when he was driving, and I am so grateful for the example he gave to me. Now I want to imitate that example so my own children and others will be able to experience the same kind of gratitude.

The Golden Rule is all about application. It is all about applying the commandments to love God and to love our fellow man. **Our own selfish pride is the main reason why so many of us so often fail to practice love.** We think of ourselves first. Our self gets in the way. We think of what we need before we think about what others need. We think about our own well-being before we think about the well-being of others.

There was a war in Germany long ago, and thousands of soldiers were scattered over the country. A captain of the cavalry, who had a great many men and horses to feed, was told by his colonel that he must get food

from the farms nearby. The captain walked for some time through the lonely valley, and at last knocked at the door of a small cottage. The man who opened it looked old and lame. He leaned on a stick.

"Good day, sir," said the captain. "Will you kindly show me a field where my soldiers can cut the grain and carry it off for our army?" The old man led the soldiers through the valley for about a mile, and in the distance they saw a field of barley waving in the breeze.

"This is just what we want. We'll stop here," exclaimed the captain.

And then, the old man looked troubled. "No, not yet," he said. "You must follow me a little farther."

After another mile or two, they came to a second field of barley. The soldiers dismounted, cut down the grain, tied it in sheaves, and rode away with it.

Then the captain said to the old farmer: "Why did you make us walk so far? The first field of barley was better than this one."

"That is true, sir," answered the honest old man, "but it was not mine."

That old farmer is like most of us. When asked to perform a task, he first thought about his own interests. But, he changed his thinking and, in the end, did what the Golden Rule commands us to do.

**The only way we can defeat pride so we can love others as we love ourselves is to first love God.** It is our love for God that helps us understand the way we should treat other people. And, we should always treat other people in a way that will cause them to know God better. Isn't that how we would want them to treat us? It should be.

May God grant to us the grace we all need to practice love. May God help us to love Him more and more so that we know how to love other people. May God give us the strength we need to follow the Golden Rule.