

Becoming Golden Rulers Matthew 7:1-12

Call: Ps 106:1-3

Scripture: Matthew 7:1-12 (ESV); 1 Cor 13

I. Introduction

Every year at our public elementary school, our 3rd graders act in a play called “Character Matters.” I think it’s a popular play for elementary age children. The play humorously uses fairy tale characters and Disney characters to talk through different ways that character matters. The theme song for the play is called “Character Matters” and goes like this:

*Character matters, you must care how you act,
Character matters as a matter of fact,
Character matters, ‘cause you are what you choose,
Character matters, It’s the one thing you can’t lose.*

For instance, the dwarves in the Snow White story should show gratitude because it's the “proper attitude” versus complaining which is what they do. Cinderella should deal with her anger issues by “count to 10, walk away, take a breath, you’re okay.” Goldilocks should forgive the bears instead of wanting to get revenge. And, on and on it goes. The culmination of the entire play is “The Golden Rule.”

They sing the song called The Golden Rule. It goes like this:

*The Golden Rule, The Golden Rule
Oh it’s a very useful tool
To figure out what you are to do
The Golden Rule, The Golden Rule
At work and play
At home and school
Treat others like you want them to treat you.*

When both of my children were in 3rd grade, I remember sitting in the audience listening to 75 3rd graders sing this song, and looking around at 100+ parents and teachers and wanting to ask everyone, “Does anyone even know who said the Golden Rule?” And, I wanted to tell them all that it was Jesus.

II. Review

After a week off, we enter back into our studies in the Sermon on the Mount. And, today, we do come to the Golden Rule. And, everything comes together with this one statement. This one statement sums up all of his teaching from the sermon, but he even says it sums up the entire Old Testament. Yes, it is here we reach a high point of Jesus’ teaching.

III. The Golden Rule (12)

Matthew 7:12 says this,

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

Therefore, in everything - which the Greek clearly says but the ESV did not translate – in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, which is how the NIV translates it.

That is the Golden Rule, and it is brilliant! It is one simple sentence and no one in history has summed it up so succinctly and so brilliantly as Jesus. Of course, some people have said similar sounding statements as Jesus. However, I would argue that there is a distinct difference from what others have said compared to what Jesus says:

- For instance, Confucius was asked, “Is there one word which may serve as a rule of practice for my whole life?” He replied, *“Is not reciprocity such a word? What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others.”*
- Likewise, Socrates said, *“What stirs your anger when done to you by others, that do not do to others.”*
- In the intertestamental book of Tobit, Tobias says this, *“What you yourself hate, to no one do.”*
- Then, there were the two great Jewish philosophers around the time of Jesus, Rabbi Shammai and Rabbi Hillel. The story goes that a man goes to Shammai and says that he will convert to Judaism if Shammai can summarize the entire law while standing on one foot. Shammai drives him away, so he goes to Hillel. Hillel answers him on one foot, *“What is hateful to yourself, do to no other. That is the whole law and the rest is commentary. Go and learn.”* (Most of these examples come from Darrell Johnson’s class).

Although it appears that Jesus is saying what all these other great teachers have said before him, is that the case? Let me re-state them so you can hear them one more time:

- Confucius: *“What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others.”*
- Socrates: *“What stirs your anger when done to you by others, that do not do to others.”*
- Tobias: *“What you yourself hate, to no one do.”*
- Hillel: *“What is hateful to yourself, do to no other.”*
- Jesus: *“Do to others what you would have them do to you.”*

Are they the same? No. All the others are negative and passive. In other words, the other great thinkers exhort one to refrain from doing to others what you would not want them to do to you. On the other hand, Jesus’ exhortation is positive and active: “Do to others what you would have them do to you.” Not doing to you what I don’t want done to me is really not that difficult. I can simply ignore you. Or I can simply stand back and do nothing. I don’t want anything bad to happen to me, so I’ll do nothing bad to you. I’ll just do nothing. But, doing to others what I want done to me requires effort and is an altogether different thing, in my

opinion. Some commentators do not think this is significant. I think this is significant, and it matches with how Jesus taught the fulfillers. If you remember studying the turning the other cheek fulfiller, Jesus' answer was not passive, turning the other cheek, it was going on the offensive in love. And, that's the key – going on the offensive in love! That's essentially what he is saying here again. Go do good to others. Go do something in love for others because we all like to be loved and cared for ourselves, don't we?

And, here is the other brilliant thing about it. It frees us in so many ways. For example, it delivers us from so much wondering and agonizing in personal interactions. In almost all interactions, however I want people to treat me, I treat them. Jesus' saying frees us from trying to figure out every single interaction we have every day. Jesus' saying frees us from needing to read book after book by so-called experts on interpersonal relationships. He is brilliant! Here, in this one simple sentence, we get the way to live in right-relationships in his kingdom. And, there is nothing passive about it!

Dale Bruner says this, "Disciples can know the will of God for their relationships most of the time by consulting their own interests" (Bruner, 347). And, once you consult your own interests, you are freed from your own interests. You turn to the other's interests in love, looking out for their best interests. There is an old saying that you've probably heard which says, "*Do not judge a man until you have walked a mile in his shoes.*" That's a great rule of thumb, but Jesus even simplifies it. You don't even need to walk in his shoes, you only need to consult your own interests and relate to others out of your own interests. And when we do that, we begin to get outside of ourselves by serving and loving and caring for others. It's absolutely brilliant!

Therefore, in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you.

- So, how should I treat my wife, Suzanne? Well, how would I want to be treated if I were her?
- How should I treat my children? Well, how would I want to be treated if I were them?
- Teenagers, how should I treat my teacher? Well, how would I want to be treated if I were him/her?
- How should I treat the waiter at the restaurant today? Well, how would I want to be treated if I were him?
- Moving farther out, how should I treat a colleague at work tomorrow? Well, how would I want to be treated?
- How should I treat people on the margins? How would I want to be treated if I were them?
- How should I treat Muslims? How would I want to be treated if I were them?
- How should I treat the victims of the fires in Paradise, CA? How would I want to be treated if I were them?

Do you see how transforming this simple sentence would be if we actually lived it out? Do you see how our marriages and families would be transformed if we lived this simple statement

out? Do you see how social media would be transformed if we lived this out? Do you see how the political discourse would be transformed if we lived this out? Do you see how our very church would be transformed if we lived this out? Isn't it brilliant?! Living it could transform the world?

But notice that at the beginning of the Golden Rule, we have a "therefore?"

The ESV and NIV translate it as "so." It can be translated as both. We mentioned this in chapter 6 that when we see a "therefore" in the text, we need to ask what it is "there" "for?" And, that points us to what came before it. Although verses 1-11 seem to be random topics thrown together, the Golden Rule summarizes this text for us.

So, if I want to become a golden ruler, what are some specific ways to do that?. These first 11 verses give me three specific ways to treat others, to become a golden ruler.

The first way is found in verses 1-2.

IV. Do Not Judge Others (1-2)

1 "Judge not, that you be not judged. 2 For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you.

I don't want to be judged by others, so I will not judge others. To become a golden ruler, don't judge others. These are some of Jesus' most famous, but least understood words.

What does Jesus mean by judge not? Is Jesus prohibiting law courts? Well, no. That would mean total chaos for society. Is Jesus prohibiting all judgment, to suspend our critical faculties? Well, no. Life is all about making judgments and discerning what is best. Being human is to evaluate and make judgments, especially value judgments. We cannot function in life without evaluating options. In fact, the sermon on the mount is full of discernment. There are right-side up ways of living in this world, and there are upside-down ways of living in this world, and we need to discern which is which. Those discernments happen every day. Jesus is not prohibiting discernment here.

So, what is Jesus prohibiting? Jesus is prohibiting looking down on someone with a superior attitude or critical spirit. He is prohibiting condemnation. "Judge not" means "condemn not." To condemn someone is to have no love and no mercy. To condemn someone is to refuse forgiveness, which is to go against petition five of the Lord's Prayer. To condemn someone can be to close the book on that person or to write the last statement of a person's life, to say you're hopeless or you have no chance at making it. It's the difference between a critical eye and a critical spirit. A critical eye is to have a discerning eye. A critical spirit is to have a condemning spirit. And, we cannot do that. Why? Four reasons:

1. None of us know all the facts, and therefore cannot render judgment on anyone.

2. To condemn is to play God. If we condemn another person, we fall into the sin of playing God.
3. Jesus says that when we judge others, we will be judged in the same way. God judges a judgmental person. Someone has said that this verse alone should frighten all of us into being merciful and gracious. Here we get the flip side of the fifth petition. Forgive us our debts as we forgive the debts of others. As we said there, to stand before God and ask for forgiveness while not forgiving others is disingenuous. So, here, if we refuse to show mercy to others, God will show no mercy to us.

In parallel here is his teaching on the measure, "*the measure you use will be measured to you.*" This is a common Jewish proverb originating from grain contracts. "A measure was the weight or scoop used to 'measure' out goods purchased and came to signify the way one treats others" (Osborne, 258). It is the standard for measurement, this will be the standard by which God judges us.

4. Many times, our judgments of other people are a reflection of our own sin. This may be what Jesus was thinking of when he moves to specks and beams in the next section. A speck that we see in another's eye could be a reflection of our own sin. So, this week what I've tried to do is before judging someone else, I've tried to take 30 seconds and asked myself if this might not reveal something in me. And, most of the time I've discovered it is.

Let's move to verses 3-6.

V. Remove Then Help Others (3-6)

3 Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? 4 Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when there is the log in your own eye? 5 You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye. 6 "Do not give dogs what is holy, and do not throw your pearls before pigs, lest they trample them underfoot and turn to attack you.

Aren't we supposed to laugh when we hear this? I heard a story where this text was read to a 4-year old, and the 4-year old started laughing. The picture of someone with a log in his eye caused him to bust out laughing. But, we're so familiar with this saying, we miss the humor. I think Jesus wants us to smile when we hear this.

To become a golden ruler is to remove our log, then help others. In everything, do to others what you would have them do to you.

Verses 3-6 here unpack the topic of discernment that was introduced with verses 1-2. We get this humorous image of two siblings working side by side in a wood shop, maybe referring to Jesus' growing up around carpentry shops. But, what happens many times between siblings in

the Lord is that we judge others without first looking at our own life, which is as Dale Bruner says, “Like a redwood teaching a shrub to be low profile” (Bruner, 274).

E Stanley Jones say this, “This attitude [of condemnation] is a sign of declining spiritual life... When religious people begin backsliding, they begin backbiting” (Jones, 245). Indeed, much of this judging emerges out of gossip. And, Jesus says to first take that huge log out of your own eye before taking the sawdust out of a sibling’s eyes. In humility, become aware of your own faults **first** Jesus says. And, when you are aware, you’ll be more gracious and merciful in your judgment of others. Then and only then, after you’ve removed your log, you will see clearly to remove the sawdust from your sibling’s eye. Your sibling’s eye really does have something in it. We often forget this part of the verse.

But, here is an all-important truth about church – we are to live and move and have our being within authentic community. To be a Christian is to live in authentic community. If you are not in a small group, can I encourage you today to seek it. The more we live in authentic community, the more healthy our church will be. And why? Because we can help each other with our blind spots. “Iron sharpens iron,” the Proverb says (Prov 27:17), and this happens by living in an authentic community. This is what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. We remove our logs first then we come alongside others and help with their sawdust. Now, it has to be done in love. It has to be done within authentic relationships, which I know are more and more difficult in our individualistic society. But, this is a primary reason for doing small groups, so that we can build authentic relationships, where we are known by others and not condemned. The leadership here wants every one of you in a small group because it’s good for you, but also because authentic and healthy relationships create an authentic and healthy church. It is within these small groups where we earn the right to speak into each other’s lives. And, that takes a lot of time. But, that’s our goal. To be in relationship, to remove the logs from our own eyes so we can help our sibling with their sawdust.

But, some people do not want their sawdust removed. And, that brings us to the problematic verse 6, probably the hardest verse in the sermon to understand. One commentary I read just skipped this verse I assume because it was so hard. There are many, many interpretations of it. I’ll give you my interpretation, but know there are many others.

And, know that the dogs and pigs here are not the cute cuddly dogs and pigs of today. This is not Lassie and Babe. These are mean scavengers in the first century.

The early church fathers thought this verse related to the taking of communion. I doubt that, because Jesus hasn’t even instituted communion yet. Many other commentators take it out of context and think Jesus has switched gears talking about mission here.

For me, I want to keep it in context. I don’t think Jesus has moved away from the church here. And, so my interpretation comes out of this fact, plus some of the verbs carry over from verse 5 to 6 (in the Greek), and the fact that only one other place in scripture ties dogs and pigs together. That is 2 Peter 2:22 where Peter says this, “What the true proverb says has happened

to them: ‘The dog returns to its own vomit, and the sow, after washing herself, returns to wallow in the mire.’” Peter is talking there about False Prophets or False Teachers, a topic which Jesus comes back to in verse 15.

So, I would argue that Jesus is talking here about false prophets in the church, which is why he uses such harsh language. They obviously don’t want their sawdust removed, and will lash out if a sibling tries. In this extreme case, siblings are called to be discerning, to evaluate our actions and if need be, step away from helping.

So, whereas verses 3-5 emphasizes great care in discerning the faults of others, verse 6 here provides a bit of a balance. Jesus is such a realist. In very rare cases, we need to discern false teachers, and be careful how much we pour into them.

Let’s move to verses 7-11.

VI. Pray for Others (7-11)

7 “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. 8 For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. 9 Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? 10 Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? 11 If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!

If I want to become a Golden Ruler, I will pray for others. I want my sibling to pray for me, so I’m going to first pray for him/her.

Many people wonder why this section on prayer is here. They think it belongs back around the Lord’s Prayer. But, it fits well right here, in thinking through the Golden Rule and having a non-judgmental spirit. The way to avoid a judgmental spirit toward another is to first pray for them. Instead of closing the book on someone, pray for them.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer says it this way, “A Christian community either lives by the intercessory prayers of its members for one another or the community will be destroyed. I cannot condemn or hate another person if I am [authentically] praying for them, no matter how much trouble they are causing me” (Bonhoeffer, 90). In other words, praying for others, or what we might call intercessory prayer, is one of the most significant responsibilities of a disciple of Jesus.

This is one of the most encouraging and hope-filled texts in the New Testament. For here, all disciples are invited to pray with confidence to a good and caring heavenly father. Just ask, just seek just knock. Just do it Jesus says.

At our men’s retreat last weekend, which was on prayer, I was struck when our speaker Bruce said that prayer is what we were made for. Prayer actually makes us more and more human. It’s the highest end to which we have been made.

And, here, Jesus says to just do it. Just pray. And, your heavenly father, who is the supreme giver, will give his adopted children good things. Note, he doesn't give everything to us, he gives what is good for us. Some people take this passage to mean that God will give us whatever we want. That's not what the text says. God is not the magic genie, who we can control. He is a good father who gives only what he knows is best for his children.

In two arresting illustrations, our good, heavenly Father is compared to earthly fathers who are, Jesus says "evil." It's a curious word choice here by Jesus, but it's the same word used back in chapter six for the "bad" eyes. Here, I think it has this same connotation as "bad" or "flawed." Even us bad and flawed earthly fathers give good gifts to our children, how much more our heavenly father, who is altogether good.

In Liberia, we use this phrase a lot. I say God is good. You say, all the time. Then I say All the time and you say God is good. God is good ... all the time.

Of course, as I have said over and over again, these verses are not promising a life of no suffering. What Jesus is doing here is trying to correct our understanding of God's character. Again trying, as he has throughout the sermon, to show us that he is good and trustworthy, which should cause us to take everything to him in prayer.

VII. Conclusion

So, how do you want to be treated? I know how I want to be treated. I don't want anyone to close the book on me. I also want to be shown when I'm out of line and need to be brought back into the kingdom life. And, I want to be carried to the foot of the cross, to the throne of grace, into the presence of our good Father. Then, Jesus says, "So treat others." Do these things for others.

I consult my own interests, then take the initiative and act in love toward others, based on my own interests. And, when I do that, I am freed from myself to love the other. It's so simple and yet so brilliant.

Isn't Jesus awesome?! Amen.

VIII. Benediction

Now, receive this benediction from Philippians 1:
Go from here with confidence & boldness
For our good Father
Who began a good work in you
Will continue to give you good things
to bring it to completion
And, may your love abound more and more
With all knowledge and discernment
So that you may do to others most excellent things
Becoming a golden ruler.

Go in peace
Amen.

Resources

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (2005)
E Stanley Jones, *The Christ of the Mount*
Frederick Dale Bruner, *The Christbook: Matthew 1-12*
Darrell Johnson, *Living in Sync: Studies in the Sermon on the Mount (Regent College Course)*
Grant Osborne, *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the NT*
Jonathan Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing*
John Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*