

THE GOLDEN RULE

A Meditation on Matthew 7:12

In the book *Children's Letters to God*, compiled by Stuart Hample and Eric Marshall, little Darla writes to God, "Did you really mean do unto others as they do unto you, because if you did then I'm going to fix my brother?" This of course is a distortion of Jesus' words in Matthew 7:12, which we commonly refer to as the Golden Rule: "So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets."

There have been some other nefarious alterations of the Golden Rule. One version says, "Do unto others *before* they do unto you." In the cutthroat world of business the Golden Rule is: He who has the most gold rules.

Different forms of the Golden Rule have been around for a long time. About 500 years before Christ, Confucius said, "What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others." About 400 years before Christ, a Greek philosopher said, "Whatever angers you when you suffer it at the hands of others, do not do it to others." About A.D. 20, Rabbi Hillel was challenged by a Gentile to summarize the Law in the short time that he could stand on one leg. The Rabbi responded, "What is hateful to you, do not do to anyone else. This is the whole law; all the rest is commentary. Go and learn it."

It's crucial to observe that all these forms of the Golden Rule are stated in the *negative*—they tell us what *not* to do. It seems that while some version of the Golden Rule has been apart of different religions and philosophies for some time, Jesus was the first to state it positively, instead of negatively. Many say that Jesus' shift from the negative to the positive isn't all that significant. "After all," it is argued, "the point is fundamentally the same: Think of the thoughts and feelings of others, and not just yourself." However, if we pause and reflect for a moment, we'll see that there is an immense practical difference between the two approaches.

I know this is a depressing reminder for some of you, but winter is upon us, and just this last week our driveways were assaulted with almost a foot of heavy, white, wet powder that had to be removed. Now imagine that your neighbor across the street from you has a snow plow on the front of his truck; can you see the possibilities? The negative version of the Golden Rule says, "Don't plow your driveway and then pile the snow in front of your neighbor's driveway." Confucius says, "Don't do that." Okay, you don't do that. Confucius is satisfied, but how about Christ?

Now imagine you are the neighbor with the plow. You haven't done anything wrong, yet you haven't done anything right either. Then you remember Jesus' words, so in joyful obedience you drive your plow across the street and clear your neighbor's driveway—now you have kept the negative and the positive dimensions of the Golden Rule. How do you think your neighbor will feel? They will feel blessed. I know because our neighbor did that for us a few winters ago.

One time my mother called me and asked if I mowed her lawn. I said, "No, why do you ask?" She said that she came home from work one day and found her grass cut. It turns out that one of my mother's neighbors was mowing her lawn and then for some reason continued on and mowed my mother's lawn as well. "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

Can you imagine what kind of world we would live in if this simple teaching was applied every day in practical ways? For instance, when your wife is doing the dishes, Confucius says, "Stay out of her way." Jesus says, "I hope I don't have to spell it out for you."

The Golden Rule is fulfilled, not by being passive, but by being active. I know a Christian couple who divorced after thirty years of marriage. The wife was the one who filed for divorce. The husband, a respected Christian leader and author, could never be accused of doing anything harmful to his wife—there was not a hint of physical or verbal abuse. However, neither could this man be accused of actively showering his wife with affection. He did not wine and dine her. He did not surprise her with flowers at odd times just to express his love. Nor did he go out of his way to participate in the activities that she enjoyed. As a result, the inevitable happened.

Christianity is about far more than staying out of trouble and keeping our evangelical noses clean. That may make you a morally upright citizen, but it doesn't make you a Christian. On the Day of Judgment Christ is going to ask what we did by grace (Matt. 25:31-46). He is going to ask if we followed the Golden Rule.
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