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The Flange Rule  
Wesley Mimico United Church  
November 4, 2012  
by Paul Shepherd

Based on Mark 12:28-34

Jesus's words today are such familiar words - "love your neighbour as yourself". They are so familiar that they are perhaps even a bit hard to hear. And yet, they are familiar. One reason that they are familiar is that they are one form of the so called, "golden rule". The other very familiar form of the golden rule is found in the Gospel of Matthew chapter 7, "whatever you wish that people would do to you, do so to them." The rules sound different - one rule speaks about doing things, and one rule speaks about loving, but when we love people it very naturally leads to action. So, to me, the rules both express the same truth. But of course there are other versions of the golden rule as well.

I also appreciate the golden rule as expressed in the Qur'an - actually, it is expressed in numerous ways in the Qur'an, but I particularly like the one that says, "None of you is a believer if you eat your fill while your neighbour has nothing". I'm pretty sure in that case that the point of the expression concerns more than just eating. In any case, many religious groups claim to have their own unique, but similar version of the golden rule. The golden rule has come to be seen as a sort of "global ethic".

And yet, in spite of the popularity of the golden rule, the rule has its critics too. One common criticism is that the golden rule "do unto others as you would have them do unto you" only makes sense if the other person wanted what you want - it only makes sense if the other person shares your thoughts and desires. George Bernard Shaw famously criticized the golden rule by saying, "Do not do unto others as you would that they should do unto you. Their tastes may not be the same". But I don't see that as a fundamental criticism of the golden rule itself, but rather as a criticism of the precise wording used. The intention of the golden rule is clearly that we should treat others as we treat ourselves in terms of respect, tolerance, understanding, and caring. It doesn't really mean that because I like peanut butter I should give a peanut butter sandwich to someone who is allergic to peanuts.

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Other criticisms of the golden rule are somewhat more insightful, and certainly more challenging. The famous philosopher of the enlightenment, Immanuel Kant, apparently dismissed the golden rule in a single footnote. But he made at least 3 points, so the footnote was at least a long one! In Kant's footnote, he points to one legitimate concern about the golden rule, which is situational. In Kant's argument ... imagine that no person ever wants to go to jail. Now imagine that you yourself have committed a crime, and that you have just been sentenced for the crime, and your punishment is to spend time in jail. Now imagine that you tell the judge that since the Judge would not want to go to jail herself, that the golden rule demands that the judge not send you to jail either.

Well this at least is a criticism that is not just nitpicking and word-smithing. Kant thought that this was a rebuttal to the golden rule itself. That's because we are supposed to agree that the convicted criminal - that's you and me remember - should go to jail. But I think it just brings up an interesting point. And I will simply agree that the judge - if she wants to follow the golden rule - should not send us to prison. But at the same time, you and I do not want to live in a society where convicted criminals simply run free, so if we also follow the golden rule, we will go to jail voluntarily - the judge does not have to send us to jail because we will simply go! The golden rule still works in this case - but for it to work, both the judge and the convict have to follow it!

And this leads directly to another real concern about the golden rule - which is this – does the golden rule only “work” if everyone follows it? Or, is a principle that we can follow to the best of our abilities regardless of how others respond to us?

In any case, I have my own reservations about the golden rule. One trivial reservation and one significant one.

My trivial reservation is to the name - "golden" rule. To me, "gold" implies inequality, disparity, and the accumulation of wealth in the hands of a few - which is pretty much the *opposite* of the intention of the golden rule, which is to promote equity. But perhaps my objection to the name “golden” is simply nit-picking.

My significant reservation with the golden rule is this. If all of the major world religions claim to have – and to follow - the golden rule, then why is our world in such a mess? If

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everyone sees everyone else as a neighbour then why do we have so much war and hostility? Why do we have so much disparity globally in every important aspect of life: money, food, water, access to education, access to decent health care, and so on.

It seems to me that either the golden rule doesn't really work, or else we are just too selective about when we choose to follow it. And usually, the subject does not come up too often anyway. But this January, a US statesman actually referred to the golden rule, and people reacted strongly and negatively to it. The statesman said this, "if another country does to us what we do to others, we're not going to like it very much, so I would say that maybe we ought to consider a golden rule in foreign policy. Don't do to other nations what we don't want them to do to us. We endlessly bomb these countries and then we wonder why they get upset with us." At that point the speaker was cut off, but he raises some interesting points. The United States has military bases in approximately 150 countries, while at the same time, it would never tolerate foreign military bases on its own soil. Another statesman said, "We bomb and invade and occupy nations we falsely accuse of possessing weapons. We would never stand for being bombed and occupied even though we really *have* those weapons. Therefore we should stop doing that to other nations". And he closed later with, "But that doesn't prove that the golden rule is wrong. On the contrary, it proves our foreign policy is wrong."

Strong words indeed. And whether or not we agree with the pros and cons of military bases, I think it's pretty clear that the existence of US military bases on foreign soil is a violation of the golden rule. Personally, I was just surprised that these statesmen were even referring to the golden rule at all.

The golden rule represents the second most important commandment - according to Jesus. What about the first - the most important commandment? The command to "love God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength". How are we to give God our complete devotion? Should God really dominate all of our desires? What about other rivals for our affections and our time? You can expect me to preach against the rivals of money, power, and other forms of addiction, but what about rivals for God's affections that are wholesome, worthwhile, and good - like family, like community - or even like the second commandment itself?

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I like to imagine that Jesus intended the commands to be heard together, because - just possibly - they are the same commandment. Martin Smith expressed this well saying that we need to understand the two aspects of Jesus's commandments within "a kind of enlightenment - a discovery that God is one, as the all-inclusive one, undergirding, permeating, and connecting all. God is not a rival of anything, but a secret presence in all things. So the second commandment is a window into one of the implications of the first. Love of neighbor and of self are all possible when we see our neighbors - and our enemies! - and our own selves as vessels of hidden divine presence."<sup>1</sup>

Albert Schweitzer once said, "Compassion, in which all ethics must take root, can only attain its full breadth and depth if it embraces all living creatures and does not limit itself to mankind." Personally I think Schweitzer was an optimist. I do not believe that we have yet embraced all of humankind - let alone embraced all living creatures. Martin Luther King Jr. expressed a similar idea this way, "It is not possible to be in favor of justice for some people and not be in favor of justice for all people".

So perhaps, it's not a question of whether the golden rule "works" unless we apply it to all people. Perhaps the golden rule is not even meaningful unless we apply it to all people.

And when we can see that - then as Jesus says we will find ourselves right on the very edge of God's kingdom.

*Amen.*

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<sup>1</sup> Sojourners Magazine subscriber materials.