
The golden rule
Sydenham-Heritage United Church
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by Rev. Dr. 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. 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 - at least for Christians - is found in the sermon on the mount. "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 underlying aspiration.

[image: golden rule in different words]

As we read earlier, many groups - religious and otherwise - have their own version of the golden rule. Someday I would like to connect with other faith leaders as a group and discuss whether or not these words truly express the same truth. Perhaps there are contextual difference that we ignored by simply reading those texts together before. But there does seem to be a common theme here. And certainly, many groups want to claim that they invented the golden rule.

Given all the different versions, personally, I prefer the versions that are a bit more concrete. With apologies to Jesus, my favourite version of the golden rule comes from Islam. Not from the Qur'an, but from the Hadith, which are the writings based on the sayings and actions of Muhammad (pbuh). The version I like best goes like this, "One is not a believer whose stomach is filled while their neighbour goes hungry."

[image: One is not a believer whose stomach is filled while their neighbour goes hungry.]

I like the fact it is very concrete - not vague. But at the same time, it obviously points beyond the concrete. It is not just about sharing food. It's about equity and justice for all. 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 wants what you want. It only makes sense if the other person shares your thoughts and desires. George Bernard Shaw 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 [as yours]”.

[image: equality vs equity]

The golden rule, in a literal form, is very ethnocentric, because it assumes that what is good for me is also good for you. Understood that way, it suggests that we work for equality, giving everyone the same thing whether or not it is what they need. I do not see that as a real criticism of the golden rule itself. But rather as a criticism of the precise wording used. I have always assumed (perhaps incorrectly) that the intention of the golden rule is that we should treat others as we treat ourselves in terms of respect, tolerance, opportunity, understanding, and caring. It is about equity. Not equality. The golden rule does not really mean that because I like peanut butter that I should give a peanut butter sandwich to someone who I know is allergic to peanuts.

[image: kant]

Other criticisms of the golden rule are somewhat more insightful. And certainly more challenging. The famous enlightenment philosopher, Immanuel Kant, apparently dismissed the golden rule in a single footnote. But he made at least 3 different 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.

[image: go to jail]

In Kant's argument ... imagine that no person ever wants to go to jail. Now imagine that you and I have committed a crime together, and that we have just been sentenced for the crime. And our punishment is to spend time in jail. Now imagine that we tell the judge that since the judge would not want to go to jail herself, the golden rule demands that the judge not send us to jail either.

Well this at least is a criticism of the golden rule that is not just nitpicking and word-smithing. Kant thought that this was a serious rebuttal to the golden rule itself. I

think it 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 jail. But at the same time, you and I do not want to live in a society where convicted criminals run free. So if you and I follow the golden rule, we will go to jail voluntarily. The judge does not have to send us to jail because we will go there ourselves! The golden rule still works in this case - but for it to work, both the judge and the convicted criminals have to actually follow it!

[image: reciprocity]

And this demonstrates 1 of the 2 more serious questions about the golden rule. Does the golden rule only “work” if everyone follows it? Or, is it a principle that we can follow to the best of our abilities regardless of how others respond to us? Should we practice the golden rule when there is no reciprocity? In our day to day lives, I think we do usually balk at using the golden rule when there is no reciprocity. But let’s not forget that in the sermon on the mount, Jesus also said, “For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax-collectors do the same?”¹ Jesus pushes us to recognize our enemy as our neighbour, regardless of how our enemy views us. Jesus does not see the need for reciprocity with the golden rule. I know we like to pretend that following the teachings of Jesus is simple. Perhaps. But it is not easy. And that is not how our society generally operates. In our society, we almost always demand reciprocity. Over coffee time today I would love to discuss whether or not you think the golden rule requires reciprocity.

[image: gold]

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”. To me, the word “gold” invokes images of inequality, disparity, and the accumulation of wealth in the hands of the few. And that is pretty much the opposite of the intention of the golden rule, which is to live with equity.

[image: king’s golden rule]

This has led to many jokes along the lines of, “Golden rule: The one with the gold gets to make the rules”. But perhaps my objection to the name “golden” is simply nit-

¹ Matthew 5:46.

picking.

My significant problem 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? Even atheist and secular groups preach the golden rule. 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, mobility, access to education, access to decent health care, and so on.

[image: evolving christianity]

That question is what ultimately forced me to write my book, *Evolving Christianity: Using scientific thinking to evolve Christianity to fight racism and other social diseases*. The introduction opens with these words. “All religions preach love.

Why then is love so absent on our streets? Consider these observations:

- 84% of the global population are religious.
- If 84% of the population of the planet are preaching love, why is there so much hatred?
- Christianity was the religious powerhouse in North America for 100’s of years, and for over 1000 years in Europe, and yet sexism and racism persisted in both places. Doesn’t Christianity preach love for all?
- Right now - in 2020 - we are in the middle of Black Lives Matter and a global pandemic that is revealing massive inequalities between the people of the world. These demonstrate lack of love.

What gives? Is it possible that religions simply do not work? If religions worked they should be injecting love into the world in significant ways. Why did Christianity not eliminate racism and sexism when it had the clout to do it? Something does not make sense.”²

It seems to me that either the golden rule does not really work, or else we are just too selective about when we choose to use it. And usually we don’t even talk about it outside the church. Do we only follow the golden rule 1 hour every week? Or do we try to bring it to life during the other 167 hours?

² *Evolving Christianity* by Paul Shepherd, 2020. Page i.

[image: b1 bomber]

About 10 years ago, US statesman Ron Paul actually referred to the golden rule in a public debate about foreign policy. Paul said, “if another country does to us what we do to other countries, 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. Do not do to other nations what we do not want them to do to us. We endlessly bomb these countries and then we wonder why they get upset with us.” He later continued, “We bomb and invade and occupy nations we falsely accuse of possessing [certain] weapons. We would never stand for being bombed and occupied even though we [actually] have those weapons. Therefore we should stop doing that to other nations”. And he closed later with, “But that does not prove that the golden rule is wrong. On the contrary, it proves our foreign policy is wrong.”

[image: when Jesus said love your enemies]

What I found fascinating was that the audience in the debate booed Ron Paul for suggesting that the US should consider following the golden rule in its foreign policy. But the audience cheered when Newt Gingrich proposed that the way to deal with your enemies is to kill them.

[slide: quote we are all connected tutu]

I think that most of the criticisms of the golden rule boil down to nit picking about the precise words. And about how other people are not us and therefore might not want what we want and all of that. And that is all true. But we do not talk enough about what I believe is the single critical flaw in the golden rule. A flaw that allows the golden rule to sound wonderful. That allows it to truly become a global ethic. While at the same time draining the golden rule of virtually all of its transformational power. The flaw is in a single word. The word “others”. We say, “do unto others”. But who are these “others”? Does “others” only mean people that we like? Does “others” mean only people who reciprocate? Or does “others” include everyone, even our enemies? In Mark’s version of the golden rule, the word is “neighbour”. But it’s the same problem. Does “neighbour” only mean people that we like? Who is our neighbour?

In a different version of the gospel, the story continues, and a pharisee asks Jesus, “but who is my neighbour”. And Jesus responds with the story of the good Samaritan.

The point of the good Samaritan story is of course that your neighbour is that person who you think of as an outsider, an enemy, different from you. Someone you would never think of to help you but who helps you without even being asked.

[slide: we are all connected]

The answer to the question, “who is my neighbour” is this. “Who isn’t?” We are all connected after all. We like to pretend otherwise. But we are all connected.

Jesus said that the golden rule represents the second most important commandment. What about the first - the most important commandment? How are we to give God our complete devotion? Should God really dominate all of our desires? What about other rivals for our affections? 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?

I like to imagine that Jesus intended the commands to be heard together, because - just possibly - they are the same commandment. On the Sojourner’s web site, Martin Smith expressed this 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.”³

It sounds so simple. Love others because they are vessels of divine presence. And love ourselves because we ourselves are also vessels of divine presence. But I’m sure we all know it’s easier to say that than to consistently do it.

[image: golden key]

Perhaps the name “golden” is actually a problem. Perhaps by calling the rule “golden” we lock it away in a safety deposit box. We do not use it on a day-to-day basis. Perhaps we protect the rule like gold instead of using the rule to guide us into living better lives. Perhaps we don’t use the rule until we are guaranteed reciprocity. Perhaps we

³ Sojourners subscriber materials.

limit the use of the rule only to neighbours who are already our friends. But if we only love those who love us, what reward should we expect for that? However, if we can draw the circle wide - and draw it wider still. If we apply the golden rule even to our enemies we will find better lives for ourselves. Perhaps we will find ourselves not far from the kingdom of God.

Amen.