

Title: Discipleship and the Golden Rule

Text: Matthew 7:12

The Golden Rule (Matthew 7:12) demands this separate study for at least three reasons.

1. It is separate, with no close connection with what immediately precedes and follows. Luke places it more appropriately at the beginning of the section about loving our enemies.
2. It is golden even in the wealth of the Sermon, and it is a rule that Jesus evidently regarded as the highth of his teaching.
3. It has been misunderstood, and even falsified to the point of abuse; and we should, therefore, be doubly clear about its meaning. Have you not heard people say: "My religion is the Golden Rule"? Have they not sometimes added that they see no use for "The hairsplitting of theology" or "the nonsense of going to church?" Such people are not likely to suffer from brain fever because of too much thinking.

So let us study the Rule.

The Golden Rule of itself is blind until Christ gives it light. It cannot mean literally "whatever you wish," for some of our wishes are evil. Such a weak interpretation might spell not only a dull trade for trade, but even a lust for lust. "Whatever you ought to wish" — but what ought we to wish? "Whatever a man may wisely wish." But what is wisdom in that instance or in this instance? Clearly what we need for the fulfillment of the Rule is a standard of wishing. But where shall that be found? The Golden Rule cannot be understood except in the light of the whole Sermon on the Mount and of the whole gospel. The Rule is a directive for those who would ~~follow~~ follow Christ and live in His Spirit. *The rule was*

*given for those who follow Christ — to others, says,  
it has no testing meaning*

The Rule was not new with Christ. There ~~are~~ have been various forms through out the history of mankind. Twenty years before Christ, the rabbis Shammai and Hillel were challenged by a mocking Gentile to teach him the whole law while he stood on one foot. Shammai angrily told the man to leave, Hillel answered: "Do not unto others what you would not have others do to you. That is the negative form. Christ gave us the positive form. "Whatever you wish men to do to you, do also to them." The difference is important, but perhaps not monumental, for every positive creed carries a negative implication. For example, we cannot believe in integration without ~~disbelieving~~ disbelieving in segregation. Yet, when we think of the Rule nowadays, we think of Christ. Why? Because he gives us a standard of wishing.

1 For what should we wish? Peace of mind? Perhaps Christ had little peace of mind --because of the trouble that people like ourselves daily gave him. He had something better than peace of mind; namely, the peace of God. That is a better wish than hankering for more cash than we need, or for a flashlight bulbe called status. Then, how can we get the peace of God? We cannot. It is given, not gotten. Now we are back with "the hair-splitting of theology," for we must understand what kind of God gives peace of mind; and we are back with "the nonsense of worship," for we can only pray that God will give us what we cannot get.

2 Again, the Golden Rule is a burden, until Christ gathers it in grace. Have we kept the Golden Rule, you and I? Have we kept it for even one day, not to mention a lifetime? Only a very weak mind could say: "My religion is the Golden Rule." We do not keep even the Ten Commandments, much less the Golden Rule, for we are all convicted under such words as: "Thou shalt not covet." I heard a preacher ask: "Can we keep the Golden Rule?" and confidently answer: "It's clear, isn't it? So we do, or we don't." Well, it's not clear, as we have just seen; and -- we don't.

There is a gas station nere here called the "Golden Rule Station." I am sure the owner tries to fulfill the name. But the Golden Rule means far more than honest dealing; though, we must add, common honesty nowadays is far from common, for a recent survey of gas pumps in the New York area showed tham many of them were "rigged."

The Rule means far more than honesty; it means putting ourselves in our neighbor's place: "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." (Maybe the original Hebrew of that commandment ~~means~~ means: "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thine own kin.") What would my neighbor in a hospital bed or a shut-in room wish of me, or my neighbor who lives behind me or works by me wish of me. If you care to go to still deeper ground, our life is always risky, and, therefore, we are always caught in self-concern: how can a man constitutionally caught in self-concern fulfill the Golden Rule? There is an even sharper question: since we have broken the Golden Rule, how can we be forgiven?

Now, I hope you are beginning to understand why we must think of Christ when we think of the Golden Rule. We must: the Rule is for disciples. "The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners." He said to men such as you and me: "Your sins are forgiven." How do we know? We know by the cross, for there all sins converged(the callousness of empire, the worldliness of the Temple, the greed of commerce, the treachery of discipleship, and the blood curiosity of the crowd,) and they were not enough. The cross itself was worse by far than our electric chair, for it was under a curse: "Cursed by everyone who hangs on a tree." But what is the cross now? We tool it in the leather of our Bibles, wear it as ornament, set it against the skyline of our cities, and even raise it in stone above our graves.

Who has changed the cross from curse to blessing? Not we, who still betray Christ. God has changed it, that we may know that Christ has power to forgive sins. The Rule is no longer a burden, for Christ gathers it in grace. But notice: we are back in "the hairsplitting of theology" -- in a tremendous doctrine of the atonement; and we are back in "the nonsense of worship," for the only way we can be forgiven is by asking God to forgive us. The prayer is simple: "Nothing in my hand I bring: simply to thy cross I cling." Yet it is not an easy prayer to say because, with it, we must acknowledge our complete dependence upon God for forgiveness.

3 Again, the Golden Rule is a weak reed until Christ give it power. Though we repeat the Rule a hundred times a day, it cannot of itself give us power to obey. In fact, if the Rule is no more than a rule, it may set our teeth on edge, after the order of the little girl who said to her mother: "Don't say 'You must' to me: it makes me feel 'won't all over!'".

4 There is another sense in which the Rule, when isolated, is a weak reed. Human beings cannot for long live happily under rule. Certainly they cannot be measured by a rule, and their living under a rule that is not their true desire becomes at best apain. A ruler can measure a man for a suit of clothes, but it cannot measure the man. "Whatever you wish" -- but who could ever sound the depths of our wishes? We wish for a peace that the world cannot give. We wish for a love so great that our best human love is only a token or a foretaste. We wish for eternal life.

No rule can measure a man. No man can measure a man. Only God can measure him. So the rule is poor measurement, until Christ gives it both dimension and power. The Sermon on the Mount is a directive for discipleship, but not such a directive as our mammoth corporations provide for their employees, and not a code of military regulations. Still less is it a barking at us, as if Christ were the tough kind of drill sergeant. Christ said: "I have not called you servants ... I have called you friends." *Not the*

So the Rule from his lips is better than a rule. An Indian chief, when first he heard the Rule from the lips of a missionary, said wisely: "It is ~~im~~possible. If the Great Spirit who made man would give him a new heart, he might do as you say, but know other way." Christ gives us a new heart.

So see how Christ empowers the Rule. If you were one of two men left on a sinking ship, and if there were only one place left in the lifeboats, and if the other man insisted that you take that place, and if, as the boats pulled away, he said to you, "Do as much for somebody else," that command would be more than command. Grateful love would make it your wish as well as his command, and love would be "the fulfilling of the law." The Rule must never be taken away from Christ. If it is made "a text for the day" in a newspaper that in its other columns makes fun of Christ, it has no power. Christ has died for us. So his commands are no longer commands: they are love beckoning our love, and they are power because "All power is given" (to him) "until the end of the age."

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The Sermon on the Mount is a collection of the sayings of Jesus gathered into a design by Matthew/. It is an inspired collection, for the Holy Spirit gives men wise gathering as well as sudden revealings. But we should remember that not all the teaching of Jesus is in this Sermon, much less all the gospel. Then who may dare say that this Rule is absolutely preeminent? It is a marvelous summary of what is meant by, for example: "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thine own kin." But there are other ~~com~~ commandments, such as: "This is my commandment that you love one another as I have loved you." ~~That commandment, in its second~~

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Matthew's Gospel consists of two parts. The scholars call one part the DIDACHE( a Greek word meaning, "teaching"), and the other part, the KERYGMA(a Greek word meaning, "the proclamation of the gospel"). We cannot separate the two parts: "What God hath joined, let no man put asunder.!"

So when a man who hasn't troubled the church these many moons says to me, in deference to the fact that I'm a preacher, "My religion is the Golden Rule," I shiver. Does that man have a standard of wishing? Has he kept the Rule even for one day? Can he keep it? I'm tempted to say to him: "Brother, you're either an archangel, or you've bitten off far more than you can chew and swallow." But I remember the Rule just in time, and keep silence. Then I remember that the Rule on Christ's lips is a summons to courageous witness, and that, for his sake and by his power, I <sup>will</sup> must gladly try to keep it.

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Pulpit Digest/January 1966 / page17