

THE MEANING OF THE GOLDEN RULE

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Isaiah 35:8 prophesied that there would be “a highway of holiness” that only the redeemed would pass over. A wayfaring man, though a fool, would not err in it. Life gets complicated sometimes, but scripture teaches one principle that simplifies it for everyone regardless of capacity or station.

On two occasions the Jewish religious leaders asked Jesus what the most important commandment was. Matthew 22:34 records one of the incidents:

When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. “Teacher, what is the greatest commandment in the law?” He said to him, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind.” This is the great and first commandment and a second like it is this: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” The whole law and the prophets hang on these two commandments.”

Paul comments similarly in Romans 13:8:

Do not owe anyone anything except to love him because whoever loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law. This “Do not commit adultery, or kill, or steal, or covet”—and if there is any other commandment—is summed up in this one expression, namely, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no harm to his neighbor; so love fulfills the law.

Another expression of this idea appears in Galatians 5:13-15.

You, brothers, were called for freedom. Only do not use your freedom as an occasion to the flesh, but through love serve one another. The whole law is fulfilled in one expression even in this, “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

Matthew 7:12 contains a now very familiar comment: “Whatever, then, you want people to do for you, do for them, because this is the law and the prophets.”

Four New Testament passages say that something fulfills the law and the prophets. Three of those passages refer to the Second Great Commandment, and the fourth refers to the Golden Rule. If they both fulfill the law and the prophets, they must mean the same thing. As a matter of fact, three main parallels exist between the Golden Rule and the Second Great Commandment:

Do for others as you would have them do for you.

Love your neighbor as yourself.

Paralleling these statements helps us appreciate the meaning of each part as defined by its corresponding element.

The Golden Rule replaces *love* with *do*. If loving means doing, it contrasts with several inadequate substitutes. For one thing, “doing” contrasts with “saying.” In James 2:8 we are back on familiar ground again: “If you fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, ‘*Love your neighbor as yourself*,’ *you do well*.” James 2 is most familiar because of its effort to correct the misuse of salvation by faith. What James says about faith and works grows out of the Royal Law/Second Great Commandment/Golden Rule. He elaborates on the implications of the Royal Law by saying in 2:14,

What does it profit, my brothers, if a person says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food and one of you says to him, “Go in peace, be warmed and filled,” and yet you do not give him the things that are needed for the body, what profit is there?

Talk does not help a person that is hungry or cold. Loving is doing, not saying.

Furthermore, if love is doing, it is more than feeling. The English word *love* emphasizes a feeling, especially a romantic feeling. Although biblical love involves feelings, it involves more, because it can be commanded. It is hard to command someone to “be happy.” Emotions can be shaped and changed but hardly as a direct act of the will; yet we are commanded to love. Love is a pattern of acting rather than a way of feeling, even though it may involve affection.

One of the most familiar passages in all of scripture is one I learned in first grade. A person distributing Bibles at our school had us memorize John 3:16 before he left. That text says something significant about love because it tells how God did it. “*God so loved the world that he gave his only Son*.” God loved the world this way: he gave. He gave his Son. Love is expressed by giving. In fact, since the Son was so dear to the Father, in giving his Son he gave himself. Most particularly, then, love is an action, a special kind of action—giving, a special kind of giving—self-giving.

Romans 5:1-10 shows that Paul appreciated the love that God expressed to us in sending his Son. He says this in 5:5 and following:

Hope does not put to shame because the love of God has been shed abroad on our hearts through the Spirit he has given us. While we were yet weak, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. Scarcely for a righteous man will a person

die. Perhaps for a good man some would even dare to die but God commended his own love for us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then being now justified by his blood, we will be saved from the wrath of God through him.

What was true of the Father was certainly true of the Son who gave himself. Love was done. It was done for others. Love is not just feelings or words but giving oneself for others.

The Golden Rule replaces *neighbor* with *other*. Evidently the meaning of *neighbor* was a matter of discussion in Jesus' day. In Luke 10:25-37 a lawyer raises this issue to test Jesus:

"What should I do to inherit eternal life?" [Jesus] said to him, "What is written in the law? How do you read it?" He answered, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind and your neighbor as yourself." Jesus said to him, "You have answered right. Do it and you will live." But wanting to justify himself, he said to Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?"

At that point, Jesus told the familiar Parable of the Good Samaritan.

Jesus is evidently correcting a current Jewish interpretation of the Second Great Commandment. His contemporaries must have been taking the *neighbor* to mean fellow Jew. *Love your neighbor as yourself* came to mean *Love your fellow Jew as yourself*. This approach removes the commandment from affecting relationships to those beyond Judaism. It is not by chance that Jesus plants a Samaritan in his parable when he answers the lawyer's question. The Lord was correcting this misinterpretation of the word *neighbor*. Similarly in the Golden Rule he broadens the Second Great Commandment by saying, "*Do to others as you would have others do to you.*" Instead of limiting *neighbor* to someone in the same class or to someone nearby, we are to understand *neighbor* as an unrestricted reference. It was not meant in a restrictive or contrasting sense—neighbor in contrast to someone else. It was a positive expression for others thought of as close to us.

Jesus calls us away from egocentrism and ethnocentrism (nation-centeredness as among the Jews). It is not race that makes us acceptable to God or to one another. It is not a matter of financial, social, educational, or economic status. It is not where we live. These limitations are swept aside when Jesus uses the word *others*, because *others* has no such limitations.

A second misunderstanding of the Second Great Commandment is evident from the way Jesus deals with it in Matthew 5:43-48:

You have heard that it was said, "Love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I tell you, "Love your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you that you may be the sons of your Father who is in heaven, because he makes his sun rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the just and the unjust. If you love those that love you, what reward do you have? The tax collectors do that. If you greet your brothers only, what are you doing more than anybody else? The Gentiles do that. So be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect."

From Jesus' reactions to this perversion of the commandment, we understand that *neighbor* does not mean friend. Relating positively to our friends is natural and easy: that is what it means to be a friend. Being friendly to friends is almost a redundancy. There is no reason to command something like that. Everybody naturally relates well to people like themselves—to people who have first treated them the way they want to be treated. There is no call to higher ground in such a thing, but Jesus says something that is very much above where people automatically live. He commands us to love our "enemies," who are included in the substitute word *others*. Treat others the way you want to be treated, even if they are people that do not get along with you all that well—people you find it hard to relate to, who call for everything you have just to get along with them.

We all run into people that really tax our ingenuity at relating to them positively. Sometimes we have been that way ourselves. But in loving other people, we can make none of the exceptions that contemporary Judaism was making.

Thirdly, the Golden Rule replaces *as yourselves* with *as you want to be treated*. There are several alternate expressions that people substitute for *as yourself*. *As you would have others do to you* contrasts, for example, with doing to others "so they may do to you." This is the manipulation we often see in advertisements and salesmanship. It happens when people do things for other people to get something in return. When I was a boy, we had one neighbor that would come down every once in a while and just start helping us do something. Then soon afterward he would ask us to help him do something. Every year in the fall he would put away his farm implements up in the loft of his shed to get them out of the way. He would put oil on his plows and disks to keep them from rusting. It was too big a job to do by himself; so he wanted to get me or Dad to help him. He was a good neighbor, but he was an interesting example of what a person will do with his neighbors. Instead of treating them the way they would want to be treated, they treat them so they may be treated in return.

Another alternative is doing to you neighbor "because he has done unto you." This is a response to duty. If someone has done us a good turn, we feel obligated to do him a good turn. This pattern puts us in secondary position, where we are responding to good done first by someone else. Instead of taking the lead in loving other people, we are just responding to their

prior love. We are reacting to our environment, which does not bring us much above where people already live. We are simply responding to the stimuli in our environment instead of initiating good and thereby being a light to other people.

Another thing set aside is doing to others “what they have done to you.” This is especially important because immediately ahead of 5:43-48 Jesus deals with the eye-for-an-eye principle (38-42). He may have intended to picture revenge as another opposite to the Second Great Commandment and therefore the Golden Rule. We do not do to others what they have done to us. That limits our good to their good. Furthermore, it could get us into doing what we ought not be doing—trying to get even with evil.

Jesus also does not say to do to others “if they do to you.” That would make love conditional. If we are supposed to love our enemies, love is not something we withhold if people are not what they ought to be. God did not wait till we were what we should have been before he sent his Son. He took us the way we were—when we were yet sinners (Romans 5:8)—and acted toward us in a loving way, giving of himself that we might be filled with joy. In its highest sense, then, love is not conditioned on what the other person is like or what he has done. Love takes the initiative in doing good because God has called us to change people in the same way he changes us.

Lastly, Jesus does not say to do to others “before they do to you.” Sometimes we use this way of protecting ourselves because we are afraid to love. There is always a certain amount of risk in love. Sometimes when we give of ourselves for the joy of other people, they start taking advantage of us instead of responding in kind. They seem to think that what worked once they may as well try again. That is always the chance we take. There are probably limits beyond which it would not be in the other person’s best interest to go, because we would be teaching him to take advantage; but that is no reason for not giving him an opportunity to experience being loved. God has been willing to take that chance with us, and he is our example in loving as we ought. So we must set aside any urge to get the other guy first.

Matthew 7:12 implies a full definition of love when taken as a restatement of the Second Great Commandment. The parallel with Leviticus 19:18 makes three items prominent. Love is doing in the form of self-giving. Neighbor is an unrestricted reference to other people. As ourselves is the way we decide how to act toward them. We can imagine being in their shoes and then act accordingly. Love is self-giving for the joy of others. It is something we can do even to God. Although we cannot benefit him, we can bring joy to him.

“Treat other people the way you want to be treated.”