
The golden rule
Martin Grove United Church
November 4, 2018
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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 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 truth. But of course there are other versions of the golden rule, as we read earlier.

I think my favourite version of the golden rule is 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 is more than just eating, it's about 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 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".

The golden rule, in its usual 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 don't 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, understanding, and caring. The golden rule doesn't really mean that because I like peanut butter I should give a peanut butter sandwich to someone who I know is allergic to peanuts.

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, and 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 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 serious 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. 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 prison. But at the same time, you and I do not want to live in a society where convicted criminals 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 there ourselves! The golden rule still works in this case - but for it to work, both the judge and the convict have to actually follow it!

And this leads directly to 1 of the 2 real questions about the golden rule - which is this - 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 applying 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

¹ Matthew 5:46.

pushes us to recognize our enemy as our neighbour, regardless of how our enemy views us. Jesus doesn't need reciprocity with the golden rule.

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 a few - which is pretty much the opposite of the intention of the golden rule, which is to promote equity.

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This has led to many jokes that say, "Golden rule: The one with the gold gets to make the rules" But perhaps my objection to the name "golden" is simply nit-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 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, 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 use it. And usually we don't even talk about it in "normal" life. But in January 2012, a US statesman actually referred to the golden rule, and people reacted extremely 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 - who had been booed continuously - 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 whatever we think about 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 statesmen were referring to the golden rule at all, and being booed for it too. Mind you, it was Ron Paul.

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I think that most of the criticism of the golden rule boil down to nit picking about words, about how other people are not us and therefore might not want what we want and all of that. And that's true. But I didn't find a single criticism of the golden rule based on 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 rule of virtually all of its transformative power. The flaw is in one of the words. The word “neighbour”. The flaw isn't actually with the word “neighbour” of course. The flaw is in how we interpret the word “neighbour”. And 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 being asked.

The answer to the question, “who is my neighbour” is this. “Who isn't?” We are all connected after all.

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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 - or even the second commandment itself?

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."²

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.

Perhaps the name "golden" is actually a problem. Perhaps by calling the rule "golden" we lock it away in a safety deposit box, and don't use it on a day-to-day basis. Perhaps we protect the rule like gold instead of using the rule to guide us. Perhaps we don't use the rule until we see reciprocity? Perhaps we 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 - and apply the golden rule even to our enemies, we will find ourselves right on the very edge of the kingdom of God.

Amen.

² Sojourners subscriber materials.