

## **The Citizen's Golden Rule**

### **Matthew 7:12**

#### **Introduction**

The Sermon On The Mount lays down the principles and rules that govern God's Kingdom. We are called to be followers of Jesus and Citizens in God's Kingdom.

The theme of Jesus' Sermon has been true righteousness as opposed to false righteousness (as seen in the religious leaders—the Scribes and Pharisees). In chapter 5:17 Jesus said, "Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill." The Sermon invites the listener to consider that true righteousness is pictured in Christ our King (chapter 5:48) and practiced by Christ's followers—citizens in the Kingdom. Righteousness is not simply outward but inward. Jesus has covered a lot of ground in His sermon; Jesus has spoken about worship (giving, praying, fasting) and wealth (store up treasure in heaven) and our walk (don't judge hypocritically, superficially, unjustly); we can help others get rid of sin; but make sure you are more severe with sin in your own life. Be careful in your distribution of holy things (pearl's before swine); ask, seek knock (for strength, wisdom, discernment). We will need supernatural grace and our Father is ready willing and able to make sure we are not in short supply. In that context Jesus speaks and invites us to consider our treatment of each other.

#### **Our Preference: To Do Right To Others (v.12a)**

*(v.12) "Therefore, whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them."*

"Therefore" summarizes the whole Sermon on the Mount and more specifically vv.1-11.

W.H. Griffith Thomas writes; "What is called the Golden Rule is based on God's willingness to give; since we have yielded ourselves to Him in prayer with perfect confidence that He will give everything that is good, we in turn are to imitate Him in our conduct towards those around us"

And ". . . This law is definite, simple, universal, beneficent; under authority of Christ, its observance would provide solution of all problems, preserve all rights, enforce all duties, conciliate all differences, silence all discords, prevent all wars" (*Outline Studies in Matthew; p. 98-99*).

**This single sentence incorporates an ideal for all human behavior.** The Golden Rule insists on true Law and Justice and Love.

The verse is known and quoted by Atheists, agnostics, skeptics, humanists; philosophers past and present have rallied around this verse. Even Thomas Jefferson said; "Of all the systems of morality, ancient or modern, which have come under my observation, none appear to me so pure as that of Jesus."

Like many verses in the Bible, this is one of the most quoted but least understood in the Bible. "This statement is not the sum total of Christian truth, nor is it God's plan of redemption. We

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should no more build our theology on the Golden Rule than we should build our Astronomy on “Twinkle, Twinkle little Star” (Warren Wiersbe p. 30).

I think Wiersbe is right—but only partially because a good theology incorporates right ethics. The statement is good theology (it comes from Jesus own lips) and is a great place to explore what the whole Bible has to say about our behavior and our expectations of how we should conduct ourselves amongst ourselves. It appears to me, based on all that Jesus has said, up until this point, the statement is impossible to do—apart from believing the Gospel, receiving Christ and walking in the power of the Holy Spirit.

The unbeliever might admire the statement; repeat the statement; even seek to live by the statement; but always fall short! Do you want to know why? Human beings are consistently selfish, self-serving and find themselves seldom living in the rarified atmosphere of such a lofty moral and ethical peak. Like climbing a mountain—you may make the journey and breath the summit's air—but rarely will anyone decide to stay on the mountain's peak.

Am I suggesting you disobey Christ's command? No. Look at the statement again: “Whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them.” Have you ever asked yourself the question; “What should I do, or how should I behave toward this person?” Remember the Bible says; “Love your enemies; bless those who curse you; pray for those who despitefully use you.” When people treat you like dirt; you are to treat them like gold!

The single sentence incorporates a plan for what not to do (lie, steal, cheat, abuse, injure). And what to do! Help. Care. Give. But it goes even further. The golden rule is looking, searching, seeking ways to treat others just as you want them to treat you (adapted from *The Preacher's Outline & Sermon Bible; Matthew 1; p. 155*).

If God makes the rules (and He does), then God is the best source to determine what we should do! If there is no God, then all behavior is ordained by man for man!

The real purpose of the Golden Rule is to release the love of God in our lives, so we can truly love and serve one another. This means loving people, helping people—who want to hurt us! **We are foolish or at best naive if we think practicing the Golden Rule will keep us from harm!** Do you desire God's best? Do you desire God's will? Do you desire heart when it comes to you, your family, your church, your community, your country? We live in a world that rejects God's best—and resists God's plans and opposes the Gospel of Jesus Christ. **Your flesh will oppose you. Your neighbors will oppose you. Satan will oppose you. This means you might be harmed. God has not called you to live a life free from injury or harm, God has called you to be salt and light. Salt stings the open wound. Salt cleanses, but family, friends, society, government, educational systems would just as soon flush you from their wounds! The world has their own—Base Rule—the opposite of Christ's Golden Rule—“Do to others, before they do it to you”. Or worse—“He who has the Gold—rules”.**

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The Lord Jesus invites us to treat others (reasonable) as we would have them treat ourselves (reasonable). Surprisingly, Jesus does not add “if they deserve it”; or “if they extend to you the same courtesy or respect”. Saying this and doing this—is a very wide divide. This is a paraphrase of the second commandment; “You shall love your neighbor as your self” (Matt. 22:39; Lev. 19:18).

The way you treat someone is a reflection of what you really think about them. No wonder Paul writes to the Galatians and says; “Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith” (6:10).

Does the commandment suggest that we should expect similar treatment?

Some suggest that others in history came up with the Golden Rule long before Jesus. It is true that history records in the famous sayings and philosophies of men similar statements. Hillel—the Rabbi was approached by a person and asked if he could summarize the law and the prophets while standing on one leg (meaning keep your answer brief). The Rabbi responded; “What is hateful to yourself do not to someone else”. The book of Tobit in the Apocrypha teaches; “What thou thyself hatest, to no man do”. Confucius taught; “What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others.” The Greek philosopher Epictetus said, “what you avoid suffering yourself, do not afflict on others.” In all the cases of history—it is always phrased in the negative “don’t”. As noble as these sentiments are they fall short.

What the ancients taught were expressions of self-interest not love! We are nice so people will be nice. We don’t hit people so they won’t hit us. It is self-interest to refrain from hitting and hurting so that we won’t hit and hurt. It is useful—but it is not what Jesus had in mind.

John MacArthur writes (p.447) “Man’s basic problem is preoccupation with self”. Remember Jesus earlier hinted; “you then being evil” (v.11) suggests that we are evil. The Bible teaches, “There is none who does good, there is not even one” (Rom.3:12). The Bible paints a bleak picture of the human soul apart from God and Christ. “We like sheep have turned away, each of us has turned to his own way” (Isaiah 53:6). Narcissism is a condition named after a Greek mythological figure named Narcissus. He spent his life gazing on himself on the big screen (not really it was a pool). He was fascinated with his beauty, preoccupied, with what he perceived was the sublime perfection of his features. Sin at the source is a preoccupation with self—but also an attempt to live life apart from God. Pride in its wicked essence is the attempt to live life apart from the recognition and admission of the necessity of God in our lives. We sin because **we love ourselves apart from God. We define life in terms of my wants, my needs, my desires. It doesn’t matter who gets hurt so long as I am satisfied. Unregenerate man cannot come up with self-less love sustained over time.** Do the unregenerate have moments of selflessness and sacrifice? I think the answer is yes.

But you cannot drink from an empty cup. And you cannot love from an empty heart (tweet this).

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The Emperor Marcus Aurelius said; “We ought to do good to others as simply and as naturally as a horse runs, or a bee makes honey, or a vine bears grapes season after season without thinking of the grapes it has borne.”

If human beings make the rules—they feel free to break the rules. William Provine wrote; “No inherent moral or ethical laws exist, nor are there absolute guiding principles for human society. The universe cares nothing for us and we have no ultimate meaning in life.” His worldview expresses his belief—if there is no God—there are no inherent moral or ethical laws. If no one cares and there is no meaning—is it any wonder that people treat each other so badly.

What do you believe? What do you believe about the human condition? In our fallen human nature we often slide to the lowest common denominator of criticism. Jon Courson writes; “I read that when Stan Musial, the Saint Louis Cardinal Hall of Fame player came up to the big leagues, he hit a single the first time at bat. His second trip to the plate he hit a triple. The third time he hit a home run. Single, triple, home run. The press went wild. A superstar had emerged. As they interviewed Bobo Newsom, the pitcher who had given up the hits, he said, ‘Aw, Musial’s not perfect. He can’t hit doubles’ (p. 156). We just have to find the right flaw.

Jesus turns it around and gives the truth.

“Selfless love does not serve in order to prevent harm or insure its own welfare. It serves for the sake of the one being served, and serves in the way it likes being served—whether it ever receives such service or not. That level of love is the divine love, and can be achieved only by divine help” (MacArthur p. 448).

### **Our Pursuit: To Fulfill The Law Of God (v.12b)**

*(v.12b) “. . . for this is the Law and the Prophets.”*

What is Jesus saying? Everything in the Bible; all the past, all that the Law anticipated and foreshadowed; all the revelation of the Prophets; as it relates to how human beings should conduct themselves among themselves can be summed up in the simple statement; “whatever you want men to do to you, do to them”. This is the spirit and intent of all that God has given in His Law; in all that is revealed by His prophets.

Twisted and perverted people might say; “I don’t mind if you kill my family, take my wife, steal my property.” Most people value their family, value their life, value their property.

When I was a pre-teen I joined with some friends and went on a rampage of destruction. We got some baseball bats and destroyed new properties. We would break mirrors, fixtures, doors, walls. It was wicked evil—we were a builder’s nightmare. I can remember destroying people’s property, not caring, feeling no guilt, no remorse. It never occurred to me that my actions cost someone money, heartache, pain. It never occurred to me that I was destroying someone’s

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home. I had no real concept or appreciation of what it meant to own something valuable or care about something or invest in something. Looking back it is hard to imagine how I could be so callous, so cruel, so uncaring. I deeply regret my wickedness. When Jesus came into my life a radical change and outlook took place in my life. The horror of sin and its destructive power became very real. I understood—not completely—but I understood the power and grip of sin to hurt and destroy. For the first time—it made more sense—not to steal—to refrain from destructive behavior—and to ask and answer the question what does it mean to honor God?

Being arrested by the police did not change me, feeling some sense of remorse or regret did not change me, understanding the fundamentals of God's law did not change me. Jesus had to change me. Jesus had to give me a new heart and a new life and new outlook before I could even attempt to act differently towards people. Thank God Jesus in the business of changing people's lives.

The law and the prophets contain the plan of God and the will of God for mankind. A careful reading of the Old Testament reveals that human beings disobeyed God; our father and mother Adam and Eve sinned—and were alienated from their loving Creator. The whole Old Testament is devoted to God's plan of redemption, the arrival of a Savior who would release us from sin's curse and bondage and restore us to a right relationship with God.

In law, there are statutes, ordinances that are made in order to regulate people's behavior. All law compel behavior. Our tax law is so dense not a single person understands it. In the Civil and social world we have rules and regulations that govern our behavior. But can you imagine if the Constitution required the Golden Rule as the single statute required of all its citizens?

If it were possible—to make this Law—most Law would be eliminated. Has anyone ever asked you the question; What in the world is the Bible all about? The Bible is a book about Jesus. The Bible is also a book how we treat people. The Bible is not simply a book about human generosity—but divine generosity.

### **Our Plan: To Know And Do God's Will**

Sir Thomas Browne said, "We are beholden to every man that he doth not kill us." To put it in the modern vernacular; Thanks for not killing me.

The basics of civilization require that we not kill each other. You may make a conscientious effort to refrain from doing evil. But the Bible requires more. Not simply the absence of evil but the presence of good. We might do well to adopt the Physicians' Golden Rule; "Do no harm".

But for the Christian—the Christ follower—we cannot be content to simply refrain from doing harm. We must be willing to do good. He has shown you O man what is good and what the Lord requires from you; do justly, love mercy, walk humbly with your God.

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There is a big difference between saying; “I will refrain from hurting you” to “I must seek out people to do good to them.” In this command Jesus gives orders to both individuals and churches. Do go out of your way to find people, to love them, and to serve them. This will require a kind of love that only Jesus can provide by His Holy Spirit.

Let me put another way. What if the Law required that you get a driver's license in order to drive; and then made you promise not to crash into other people? But what if it went one step further? It required you to pick up people who need a ride?

### **Who Really Makes The Rules?**

*The Human Manifesto II* says in part: “Ethics stems from human need and interest. To deny this distorts the whole basis of life. Human life has meaning because we create and develop our futures. Happiness and the creative realization of human needs and desires, individually and in shared enjoyment, are continuous themes of humanism. We strive for the good life, here and now” (*Understanding The Times p. 204*).

Do all people agree with Christ and the Bible? No. Humanists believe that ethics (the ought of behavior) “stems from human need and interest”. The humanists present a proposition that human life has meaning because we create our own meaning. But the humanist has to borrow from the Christian Worldview—but still want to retain the right to root and ground human behavior in personal interest. But what if personal interest comes from Mao, or Hitler, Pol-pot? You pay your money. You make your choice. Decision and desire are king. What is good is what satisfies me, and what furthers my own self-realization.

Who makes the rules in your life? Do you? The prophet Amos (5:15) wrote; “Hate the evil and love the good, and establish judgment in the gate.” If God makes the rules in your life, does it seem far fetched that He should be Ruler? If you are the ruler in your life—what forms the basis of self rule? Passion? Desire? Will? Your will is never far from your character. God's will is never far from God's character.

When you make a decision on how you will treat others; your wife, your husband, your children, your friends, your enemies; who's voice do you hear? Do you hear Jesus' voice? Do you ever ask—do my words and actions conform to the character of Christ? Do you ever ask; “How would Jesus respond?” David Noebel in *Understanding the Times* writes; “Justice, holiness, love, faith, hope, mercy, forgiveness, kindness, and truth are all characteristics of the moral order because all are characteristics of the nature of God” (p.243).

Prior to his conversion C.S. Lewis claimed a kind of determined atheism. He admits what mattered most to him was his deep-seated hatred of authority, his monstrous individualism, and his lawlessness. Lewis wrote;

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“No word in my vocabulary expressed deeper hatred than the word Interference. Yet Christianity placed at the center what seemed to me a transcendental interferer. If its picture were true then no sort of “treaty with reality” could ever be possible. There was no region even in the innermost depth of one’s soul (nay, there least of all) which one could surround with barbed wire fence and guard with notice of NO ADMITTANCE. And that was what I wanted; some area, however small, of which I could say to all other beings, “This is my business and mine only” (ibid p. 248).

Jesus does not leave room for us to say, “leave me alone, get out of my face, mind your own business.” If Jesus makes the rules does he also have the power to enforce the rules? If Jesus makes the rules does he have the right to say; “treat others as you would have them treat you?”

### **Conclusion**

What does the passage suggest?

We can demand true justice. We can insist that all people be treated justly on all occasions.

We can include real love. We can insist on expressions of goodness and decency.

We can embrace the whole Law of Christ. We can affirm Christ’s commands.

And what is required of me? To know what Jesus taught. To believe what Jesus taught. And to do what Jesus taught. Quoting the passage invites us to live the passage.

We can no longer simply treat people the way they treat us; good for good; evil for evil; abuse for abuse. We can not even treat people simply the way they hope to be treated or expect to be treated—but rather what Christ requires. We must treat people the way we want them to treat us. Perhaps one simple way to practice this passage is to simply ask the question; “How do I want to be treated?” Then treat the other person that way. “Well done is better than well said” (B.Franklin).

“People are unreasonable, illogical, and self-centered. Love them anyway. If you do good, people may accuse you of selfish motives. Do good anyway. If you are successful, you may win false friends and true enemies. Succeed anyway. The good you do today may be forgotten tomorrow. Do good anyway. Honesty and transparency make you vulnerable. Be honest and transparent anyway. What you spend years building may be destroyed overnight. Build anyway. People who really want help may attack you if you help them. Help them anyway. Give the world the best you have and you may get hurt. Give the world your best anyway”.

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