

Golden motive

Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets.

Matthew 7:12

Our Lord concludes a substantial teaching on personal interactions with this well-known “golden rule.” This precept is perhaps one of the most well-known both within and outside Christianity. While it may be expressed in various forms, it has been recognized by many, even those with little to no familiarity with Christ or the Bible, as a basic axiom of morality. This truth will resonate with the understanding of most of humanity, if allowed to sink into an open and honest conscience. While it sounds simple, it is also quite profound, as expounded by John Brown in the following observation concerning this rule: “Its obvious tendency is to *persuade* us to perform it... Self-love is the great obstacle in the way of doing our duty to our neighbour. Our Lord makes even self-love become, as it were, the handmaid of justice and charity. Having led us to change places with our neighbour to feel what are our rights, and how unreasonable it would be to withhold them, He then says, These are *his* rights, and you will be the unreasonable person to deprive him of them.” Thus, the Lord turns our own vice of selfishness to prod us toward right motive and behavior.

This rule then aligns perfectly, as He says, with the law and the prophets. As Jesus will answer and commend later in His teaching in another place, the second greatest commandment is to “love thy neighbor as thyself” (Leviticus 19.18). The apostle Paul would apply this even more specifically to husbands in the marriage relationship, to love their wives even as themselves (Ephesians 5:28).

Also, when we stop to consider what the “Therefore” is there for in this text, we find that Jesus had just finished describing the magnanimity of the heavenly Father towards His children’s requests, compared to the natural response of earthly fathers. In this context, He has accentuated the expectation of how we would desire to be treated by others, and therefore should treat them, in consideration of the goodness of God. If we would desire to be treated like God treats us, so should we be toward others.

Finally, in the bigger context of this whole Sermon on the Mount, which is filled with many other facets of the righteousness that God commends, compared to that purported by Pharisaical rules (see Matthew 5:20), we recognize once again in this golden rule our own failure to keep it. While the sermon provides an exquisite demonstration of the unfathomable righteousness required for the kingdom of God, it thereby convinces the heart of our own need for a righteousness not of ourselves – the righteousness which is of God by faith (Philippians 3:9). Without that, and its commensurate motivation, we often stop at our own self-love; yet by the enablement of His indwelling Holy Spirit, we can submit to the golden motivation of this blessed rule.