

Pastor's Message – Maundy Thursday, 2021  
The Golden Rule  
Matthew 7:12

The Golden Rule seems simple enough. A lot of people will proclaim this as the way they live and believe and as the foundation of their Christian faith. We are to treat others as we would like to be treated. “So, whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them,” Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount. “For this is the Law and the Prophets,” he says. Jesus doesn’t call it the Golden Rule. Over time, people saw this saying as perhaps the highest of ethical principles, thus “golden.” The rule makes us pause before an ethical decision and ask, “What I’m about to do or say here—is this something I would like done or said to me?”

There is no question that such a pause before we decide to act can be helpful. Too often we just act and figure out the ethics of our decision after we find ourselves in a mess. Or we just speak or act and never deal with the ethics involved. This may be what is meant by “amoral behavior.” The whole matter can get very complicated.

Take, for instance, a conversation from the classic old *Honeymooners* television series. Ralph and his neighbor Norton are at the supper table. It went like this:

Ralph: “When she put two potatoes on the table, one big one and one small one, you immediately took the big one without asking me what I wanted.

Norton: “What would you have done?”

Ralph: (*self-assuredly*) “I would have taken the smaller one.

Norton: (*surprised*) “You would?”

Ralph: “Yes, I would.”

Norton: “Then what are you complaining about? You got the small one!”

(*The Honeymooners*, as quoted in *The Science of Good and Evil: Why People Cheat, Gossip, Care, Share, and Follow the Golden Rule*, Michael Shermer, 2004.)

One can actually find something close to the Golden Rule in many religions. It's in the Jewish Talmud, Confucianism, Buddhism, Hinduism and even in the ancient pagan Greek and Roman philosophers. Usually, though, it is presented in the negative form: "Do not do to others what you would not like done to you."

There is a difference here. This negative form of the Golden Rule, sometimes called the Silver Rule, just instructs us in what not to do. "Don't do this if you wouldn't want the same thing done to you," it counsels. Jesus' version, on the other hand, has us looking at a positive action, not at what is forbidden, but at what must be done out of love for the neighbor.

Jesus says that the Golden Rule "is the Law and the Prophets." He had to be thinking about the command that we love our neighbor as ourselves, which goes all the way back to Leviticus 19:18. Later he summarizes the moral law with two great commandments, "to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength" and "to love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:29-30).

As Jesus does repeatedly in the Sermon on the Mount, he affirms the Law and the Prophets and at the same time expands their meaning in the life of his followers. So on this night, Maundy Thursday, we can affirm the beauty and the power of the Golden Rule, but we know that Jesus has more for us than the Golden Rule to guide what we say and do.

The *Maundy* in Maundy Thursday, the name for this night, comes from the Latin word, *mandatum*, which means mandate or command. It was on this night in an upper room in Jerusalem that Jesus gave his command to his disciples to love one another. He said, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this, all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34-35).

This is where the Golden Rule takes us in Jesus' teaching—to his challenging mandate that we act in love toward others. On Maundy Thursday, Jesus goes beyond the Golden Rule with its focus on self,

asking “Would I want to be treated like this?” His Maundy Thursday mandate asks selflessly, “How can I lose myself in serving others?” In case we have a hard time imagining what this might look like in practice, Jesus first washes his disciples’ feet. He takes the role of a servant. Can you imagine what it must have been like for those first followers of Jesus to find him on his knees at work with basin and towel to clean up their dirty, stinky feet! Peter even protests! Perhaps he speaks for everyone?

When all their feet were clean, Jesus says, “If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you” (John 13:14-15).

For all the beauty and wisdom of the Golden Rule, Jesus on Maundy Thursday gives us another ethical measure for what we say and do: Is this an act of genuine Christ-like love, that is, a word or a work of selfless service? This goes beyond asking, “Would I want this said or done to me?” It asks, “Is this what Christ would say? Is this what Christ would do?” It was a cliché a while ago, often worn on bracelets, “WWJD, what would Jesus do?”

A firefighter was once asked, “What would send you into a burning building to risk your life to save another’s?” His response was a Golden Rule response” “If I were in that building, I would want someone to do the same for me.” The Christian response takes it a step further to say, “Christ-like love moves me to serve and sacrifice for my neighbor.”

Tonight, begins the walk of Jesus from the upper room to Gethsemane, from trial to execution. Did the Golden Rule cross his mind on the Way of Sorrows? Perhaps. Maybe he thought, “If I were a sinner, I would want someone to do this for me.” Even more significantly, though, he did the loving thing. He said the loving thing. He paused for fervent prayer. He found the will of his Father. Then Jesus went willingly. Love was his mandate. Those same hands that washed feet were pinned to a cross. We know what love looks like because of him. Amen.

*Based on a sermon by Dean Nadasdy.  
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