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“A Rule That is Golden”

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Matthew 7:7-12

My sermon series for the next several weeks is on Life Lessons, because I have been thinking about all of the important foundational things we need to know as we maneuver through life. My interest in this subject is personal. In less than 3 months Fred and I will have an empty nest when our youngest goes off to college. So I have been thinking about all of the things you hope your children will know before they leave home, and not just how to manage money and change a flat tire!

There are lessons about how to treat others and how to honor yourself, how to make good choices and follow the path of God. And they are important for us all, because if we have some of these lessons internalized, life will be so much easier. We will be happier, more content, productive and peaceful. There are ways to live that are consistent with God’s intentions for us, yet when we do **not** do those things, life is much more difficult. Think of a screwdriver. If you decide that you know best and you do not want to use this end, you will use this end—it does not work. You would be turning this thing for a long, long time to get the desired result. But if you use it the way it is meant to be used, it’s easy. If you live life the way it is intended to be lived, everything works better. Not always without challenge, pain and struggle, but it does work better.

Our Scripture lesson today is from the Sermon on the Mount. This particular teaching was a key component of Jesus’ instructions for living. Would you please join me in reading this passage from Matthew 7:7-12.  
(Project on Screens)

The last verse is the text upon which I am basing my sermon today. This teaching, known as the Golden Rule is not unique to Christianity. It actually predates Christianity, and is found in nearly every ancient religious, philosophical or ethical system. It is a moral code which places an emphasis on justice and reciprocity. It is found in Islam, Buddhism, Confucianism, Hinduism, Judaism, different versions of the same principle—treating others as you wish to be treated yourself. Generally it is taught in this way:  
“Do **not** do to others what you would **not** want them to do to you.”

The version Jesus offers is somewhat different.

Jesus said: “**Do** to others what you would have them do to you.”

How is that different? On the one hand we are refraining from harm. But Jesus takes it a step further. He tells us not only to refrain from doing harm, but to actively do good, to do what brings blessing to others. Remember those 3 Simple Rules of John Wesley we learned a few weeks ago?  
Do No Harm, Do Good, Stay in Love with God.  
Doing no harm is important and valuable, but Jesus wants his followers to take that a step further.

That means that you not only avoid harming and hurting others, but that you also go out of your way to help and bless them. You think about how you would want to be loved, honored, respected, and helped. You inconvenience yourself—you go the extra mile, step out of your comfort zone. You take time, spend money, make effort, doing for others what you would want them to do for you, although they might never be able to do anything for you.

Jesus says that there are essentially three things that summarize the entire Bible. Of course the Bible Jesus was referring to was the Hebrew Bible, the law and the prophets.

He says that he could summarize everything in just 3 simple commandments:  
Love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength.  
Love your neighbor. Love yourself.

Then in the Sermon on the Mount he adds one more thing:  
Do unto others as you would have them do unto you, for this summarizes the entire law and the Prophets.

In the Sermon on the Mount, the Golden Rule comes right after Jesus describes the nature of God. He says that God is so eager to help and bless us, that all we have to do is ask and we shall receive, knock and the door will be opened. God is more than ready and willing to give good things to those who ask. In turn, we need to be ready and willing to help and bless others.

Now, the Golden Rule has become tarnished over time. It is so contrary to the values of our culture which tell us to satisfy every desire. This is a practice which challenges us to move beyond self-absorption. Left to our own devices, most of us really are quite self centered. We think primarily about ourselves, what we want, what we need, how we

compare to others, how we can satisfy our own desires and those closest to us. The beauty of our Christian faith is that it moves us beyond this stage to help us see the world through the eyes of others, putting ourselves in their place.

Living this way requires great empathy and sensitivity.

I remember hearing a business executive speak at a professional seminar, and he said that he knew that the way he treated the custodian in his building was just as important as the way he treated his Chief Financial Officer. He said, "I recognize that the person who cleans the toilets and empties the trash in our building makes our work possible, and we rely upon them.

I try to know them by name, help them feel appreciated and honored." It is one thing to be kind and considerate to those who have something to give you, those from whom you might benefit, but it is another thing altogether to be just as kind and considerate to those from whom you have nothing to gain.

How do you treat the people who wait on you in stores or restaurants, the people who clean up after you and fix things for you? A telling indicator of how well we have learned this life lesson is in how we treat those people who serve us.

I am so proud that the leadership of this church has made a very conscious commitment to embody the Golden Rule in our mission and ministry.

We want to be sensitive to those who are often overlooked. This of course drives our wonderful Missions Ministry, but it also drives our Ministry of Hospitality.

We are always asking ourselves, "How does it feel to walk into this place for the very first time?"

"How would I find the Nursery, the Sanctuary, coffee and donuts?"

"How would I feel if I were a visitor coming here after I had just learned my spouse wants a divorce, or my job has ended?"

"How would I feel if I had never said the Lord's Prayer or taken Communion?"

We try to put ourselves in another person's place and treat them the way we would want to be treated ourselves, or more to the point, to treat everyone as if they were Jesus himself.

We are deeply committed to welcoming and loving all varieties, persuasions and conditions of humanity.

Now, practicing the Golden Rule is not always simple or straightforward. I heard an example of this recently shared by a father who took his daughter's car

into the dealership where it was purchased to get something fixed. He started arguing with the Service Manager about whether or not the problem was covered under warranty. So finally he says to the Service Manager: "Let me just ask you, if this was your daughter, and this was her car, what would you be saying right now?" The Service Manager replied: "Let me just ask you, If you were the owner of this dealership and had sold this car, what would you be saying right now?" The Golden Rule cuts both ways and it is not always simple to put into practice.

This past week as I thought about this sermon, I tried to be attentive to my actions. But there were several times when I caught myself behaving in ways which were utterly contrary to this principle.

I got annoyed by slow people when I was in a hurry and running late, I failed to hold the door for someone carrying a heavy load, and I know that I failed to really understand the situation of someone who was hurting, refusing to take the time or effort to put myself in their place.

It brought back memories of a Pastoral Counseling class I had in Seminary where we did role plays of counseling sessions.

These sessions were videotaped and the entire class watched and critiqued them.

One student was the counselor, and one student the one being counseled.

Well I was stunned to watch the tape of myself as the counselor, because this person came to me with a serious problem, and I instantly assumed a rather authoritarian air and told them about what I would do if I were in their place, and then shared a similar situation I had faced. I went on and on about myself!

How difficult it is to really walk in another person's footsteps.

Essentially, it requires emotional intelligence.

Now emotional intelligence is not some vague touchy-feely concept, but a combination of qualities such as empathy, sensitivity, self-control.

It is practicing care and wisdom in the way you conduct your life and treat others. Someone once said: "Anyone can become angry—that's easy. But to become angry at the right person, to the right degree, at the right time, in the right way, that is difficult." This is emotional intelligence.

It is different from IQ, which is fixed and has been shown to predict about 10 to 20% of success in life.

Emotional intelligence is not fixed, it can be developed, and some studies suggest that it predicts between 80 to 90% of success in life.

Human intelligence is not very effective without healthy emotions to guide it.

Think of those people you know who are too smart to come in out of the rain. Think of the “evil geniuses” in history, who were highly intelligent, but did not have the compassion or vision to guide their thinking.

As followers of Jesus Christ, we are expected to use our heads and our hearts in the living of our lives. To be smart and sensitive, wise and compassionate. Jesus tells us to turn the other cheek, forgive 70 times 7 times, to pray for those who persecute us, to take on joy, peace, patience, kindness, humility. He tells us that if we try to live that way, incorporating this lesson into the fiber of our being, life will be better for us.

But sometimes practicing this rule requires great moral courage.

I was reminded of that recently in remembering Bulgaria during World War II. In March of 1943, Bulgaria, which was aligned with the Axis powers, the Nazis, received the orders from Berlin that they were to begin to fulfill the Final Solution in Bulgaria. This meant the deportation of all 49,000 Jews from Bulgaria to the concentration camp Treblinka.

Now the order came to the King of Bulgaria and to the Parliament, and although they did not want to do this, they did not feel that they had any options.

They passed along these commands.

But when the people in Bulgaria learned this they had other ideas. Now the Bulgarian Jews were rounded up and taken to local elementary schools to be placed on the trains for Treblinka.

Plavded was one of those towns, and in Plavded the Jewish people were told to bring only what they could carry, and they went with the soldiers to the elementary school, where they stood behind a chain link fence.

They knew what was going to happen. They began to cry out to their neighbors, some were weeping, utterly helpless.

But Orthodox Bishop Corell came to see them, to see what he had heard rumors about. He comes to the fence, places his hand on the fence and says:

Children, the Christians of this country will not let this happen to you.

I will not let this happen to you.

I will place my body on the railroad tracks and they will have to run over me.

This is not going to happen to you.

And he and the people of that town began to speak out.

Others began to speak out.

It was taken to Parliament, and a few politicians spoke out.

But these courageous people refused to allow the trains to leave, and there is a sign in Plavded that marks their courage to this day.

Months later, the German Ambassador to Bulgaria wrote back to Berlin: "I am firmly convinced that the Prime Minister and Government do long for a final and permanent solution to the Jewish problem.

However, they are hindered by the mentality of the Bulgarian people who lack the ideological enlightenment we have."

Yes, they did. Instead they were enlightened by the teachings of Jesus. Who said you do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

We know this Golden Rule. So let's try to live it.  
Then our lives will be increasingly blessed.

Let us pray...

Help us gracious God, to consider the needs of others before our own.  
Help us to live in such a way that brings peace and not discord, love and not hatred, pardon and not injury, hope and not despair.

Free us for joyful service that our lives might be increasingly blessed.  
In the name of that one who taught us to do unto others as we would have them do unto us, we pray together by saying...

Remain seated as we sing a song based upon the prayer of St. Francis

"Make Me A Channel of Your Peace"