

“The Golden Rule”

May 8, 2016

Luke 6:31

SCRIPTURE INTRO: I’m preaching a sermon series based on a book by Paul Miller called *Love Walked Among Us*. The subtitle is *Learning to Love Like Jesus*.

What Paul Miller does, and what we’re doing, is look at a bunch of stories in the Gospels where Jesus interacts with people, and look for patterns that emerge that give us insight into how Jesus loved people.

The more stories we read, the more layers we’ll add to our understanding.

You will start to see some of the things Jesus does over and over—sometimes surprising things that he does,

And then we’ll think about how this applies to us and our interactions with people God has put in our lives.

Our Scripture reading is printed on the front of the bulletin.

A familiar verse, one that Christians call The Golden Rule.

“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”

INTRO: If you look up “The Golden Rule” on Wikipedia, the first sentence says: The Golden Rule . . . is a moral maxim or principle of altruism found in many cultures and religions, suggesting it may be related to fundamental human nature.

And then what the article does is it quotes variations of the Golden Rule from many cultures and religions—such as ancient Egyptians, Mesopotamians, and Greeks, Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Confucianism, and, of course—the Hebrew Scriptures and Jesus’ words in the Gospels.

Some of the variations of the Golden Rule are stated negatively.

Whatever you don’t want done to you, don’t do to other people.

Others have the idea of reciprocity.

Do for others so that they will do for you. (So that you will get paid back.)

Some are limited in their scope.

Do for your brother what you want for yourself. (Brother limited to religion).

I’ve heard Christians say before that what is unique about the Golden Rule in the Bible is that Jesus was the first put it positively and universally.

He is the first one who said: Do unto others—take the initiative in love.

Don’t just say—I wouldn’t want that done to me, so I won’t do it.

And he is the first one who applied it to all people, even your enemies.

But that’s just not true. Because if you read through all these different versions from different religions, lots of them are both positive and universal.

Just one obscure example: The Jains, Jainism is an odd offshoot of Hinduism.

Their holy book was written 400 years before Christ.

There’s a verse in it that says:

A man should wander about treating all creatures as he himself would be treated.

I don’t know what the “wander about” part means, but it sounds like Golden Rule.

What are we to make of this—that all over the world, throughout history, in very different places and religious contexts, moral teachers have advocated versions of the Golden Rule?

Jesus wasn’t the first one who said it. And he himself would have admitted that.

He got it from the book of Leviticus—Love your neighbor as yourself.

But is the Wikipedia article then correct?

Does this mean that the Golden Rule is fundamental human nature?

The Bible has a very different explanation. It says that the law of God is written on the human heart so that men are without excuse.

The law of God is written on the heart.

After stating Golden Rule in Matt. 7 Jesus says—
this sums up the Law and the Prophets. The Golden Rule is the law of God.
So that means it is written on the heart of every man and woman and child.
But that doesn't make human nature loving.
It only increases my guilt because now I have no excuse for not
doing unto others as I would have them do unto me.

What's unique about Jesus and the Golden Rule is not that he said it first,
or that he gave it a special emphasis.

What's unique is that he is the only man in the whole human race,
the only man from any culture or religion or era of history who did it—
perfectly, lovingly, all his life.

And he doesn't just give us a perfect example—
he also forgives us for our miserable failure to love our neighbors
and he enables us, empowers us by his spirit to start to love as we should.
So let's look at how Jesus kept the Golden Rule.
It will amaze us, convict us, and empower us as we put our faith in him.

Three points, I'll give them to you as we go.

And I'm going to do something that I've never done.

We're going to flip around in the Bible and read some different stories.
My seminary preaching professor, Dr. Chapell, drilled into me this is a big no-no.
My training was choose one text, read it, preach on it, don't go flipping around.
I've never flipped around. We're going to do it.

MP#1 Keeping the Golden Rule Requires Incarnation

Mark 8:1-3

During those days another large crowd gathered. Since they had nothing to eat, Jesus called his disciples to him and said, ² "I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat. ³ If I send them home hungry, they will collapse on the way, because some of them have come a long distance."

We're told this was a crowd of 4,000 people.

They had been following Jesus and his disciples for some time.

It's a little hard to imagine, but historians tell us that in Judea during that time there was a vast population of working poor who were often quite desperate. They followed anyone who seemed to be able to alleviate some of their needs.

And being Jews, they had a hope of a Messianic future who would save them.

If you had been with a crowd of 4,000 people—teaching them, listening to their problems, having them interrupt you and want things from you, it would have been exhausting. I'm sure Jesus was exhausted.

The weight of all those problems, one needy person after another.

The sheer physical effort of projecting your voice to that multitude.

It would have been completely understandable for Jesus to need a break.

But he wasn't focused on his exhaustion, he was focused on them.

He shows he was thinking about them when he talks to his disciples.

Mark said he called his disciples to him.

I imagine them all huddling together with this huge crowd all around,

Jesus sort of lowering his voice. And certainly they expected him to say, and hopes he would say, Ok, here's our exit strategy.

I'm going to dismiss the crowd, and then we're heading over to Martha's house and she's been cooking all day and has a big spread for us.

But instead, he talks about how concerned he is that they are hungry.

He makes several observations:

They have been with me three days.

They have nothing to eat.

Some of them have come a long distance.

If I send them home hungry, they will collapse on the way.

Paul Miller asks this question:

Is there anything deep or insightful about what Jesus says?

His answer is: No.

There is nothing deep or insightful. Jesus' comments are actually a little

disappointing. They're rather mundane. We could read right by this, thinking of it as a filler or nice introduction to the miracle that follows.

We expect that Jesus will always have something deep or mystical to say.

We think that if we could find out what Jesus was thinking, it would be so deep. And then we find out, and it's so simple, so plain.

Why are these comments of Jesus even in the Gospel of Mark?

Aren't they obvious? What's Jesus doing here?

Nothing is obvious if it's not happening to you.

Jesus was putting himself in other people's shoes.

He knew what hunger was like. He once fasted 40 days in the desert.

Every year at Christmas we think about the doctrine of the incarnation.

The Latin root of incarnation is in plus carnes (flesh). In someone's flesh. The incarnation is the eternal Son of God, the Second Person of the Trinity, taking on human nature and being born as a baby in human flesh of the virgin Mary.

What we have in this story is a mini-incarnation.

Jesus put himself in the flesh of these hungry people in the crowd.

And it moved him to compassion. He felt for them and moved toward to help. It wasn't only physical needs he felt.

Another time he looked at a crowd and said the he felt compassion for them because they were distressed and helpless and like sheep without a shepherd. He also saw their heart needs and was moved with compassion.

To keep the Golden Rule, you have to incarnate another person.

Jesus did it perfectly by coming into our world and taking on our flesh and blood through the power of the Holy Spirit.

We do it by thinking, that's what this command tells us to do, to think—

What would I want if I myself were in the same situation?

That's incredibly hard, actually impossible without supernatural help, because we are naturally focused on ourselves and our particular situation.

So it takes the power of Christ's Spirit to incarnate into another person's world.

So ask him for his Spirit. Ask him to give you the same incarnational insights that he had—so that when you see the needs of people, you feel compassion.

Let's move on to the next story and next point . . .

MP#2 The Golden Rule Requires Discrimination

John 11:20-36

Jesus' friend Lazarus died. Lazarus, the brother of Martha and Mary.
Jesus came to their home to be with the sisters. This is what happened.

When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home.
²¹ "Lord," Martha said to Jesus, "if you had been here, my brother would not have died." ²² But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask." ²³ Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." ²⁴ Martha answered, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day." ²⁵ Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; ²⁶ and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" ²⁷ "Yes, Lord," she told him, "I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world." ²⁸ And after she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary aside. "The Teacher is here," she said, "and is asking for you." ²⁹ When Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to him. ³⁰ Now Jesus had not yet entered the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. ³¹ When the Jews who had been with Mary in the house, comforting her, noticed how quickly she got up and went out, they followed her, supposing she was going to the tomb to mourn there. ³² When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." ³³ When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. ³⁴ "Where have you laid him?" he asked. "Come and see, Lord," they replied. ³⁵ Jesus wept.

We met Martha and Mary last week and noted that even though they were sisters and both followers of Christ, they were very different people.
Their brother Lazarus had died. Jesus had heard he was sick, but delayed coming.
He had a bigger plan and purpose.

When he arrived, which of the sisters was first out to talk to him? Martha.
And she sounds just like the Martha we know.
"Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."
Don't you admire her frank speech? You could have healed him if come earlier.
And then she adds: But I know God will give you whatever you ask.
Which must mean she knew Jesus could raise the dead if he wanted.
She's talking to Jesus. She's grieving but she has it all together and she's looking him in the eye and looking for answers.

Let's skip to Mary. She's in the house.
Martha comes and tells her that Jesus has come and he's asking for her.
She comes to him weeping and falls at his feet.
Sounds just like the Mary we know. A tender soul.
And she says: Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.
The very same thing Martha said. But much more emotional.

And she didn't say that next thing, that God would give him whatever he asked.

Now there's a particular point that Christians through the ages have noted about this story—it's very important and very moving.

Both sisters had lost a brother. Both sisters said the same thing to Jesus:

Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.

But Jesus responded to each sister differently.

To Martha, matter-of-fact Martha, who is grieving and looking him in the eye, and talking to him about what God can do, asking questions, Jesus talks theology. He talks to her about the resurrection, which good Jews believed would happen on the last day, and then he expands her view by explaining that he himself is the resurrection and the life, and that resurrection can be had now by faith. It's deep stuff and it's just what Martha needed.

And then with Mary, emotionally sensitive Mary, who is grieving and falling down.

He says: Where have you laid him? He goes to the tomb with her.

And then there is that famous verse, shortest in the whole Bible—Jesus wept. Although the scene is not described, you can see it, with his arms around her, like a big brother to her, and she is just sobbing and Jesus is weeping with her.

I'm sure you see the point: Love discriminates. That's the Golden Rule.

You treat people differently according to what they need.

What's astounding about Jesus is that his love was so attuned to others, that he did it perfectly.

In the same situation, there are some of us who would be petrified and tongue-tied if we thought we had to comfort someone with some stout theological talk.

And there would be others of us who would be looking at our shoes and feeling mighty uncomfortable if we thought we needed to hug person and weep with him.

Thank you, Lord Jesus, for the church. For all the different personalities in church.

Often times this is how the Lord works it out, right person in right place.

But also we must recognize that there will be times when we realize that what this person needs, and the love I need to show him or her is not what I feel comfortable with or my strength.

Here's one more occasion to lean on Jesus.

MP#3 Keeping the Golden Rule Requires Participation

Matthew 20:29-34

As Jesus and his disciples were leaving Jericho, a large crowd followed him.³⁰ Two blind men were sitting by the roadside, and when they heard that Jesus was going by, they shouted, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us!"³¹ The crowd rebuked them and told them to be quiet, but they shouted all the louder, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us!"³² Jesus stopped and called them. "What do you want me to do for you?" he asked.³³ "Lord," they answered, "we want our sight."³⁴ Jesus had compassion on them and touched their eyes. Immediately they received their sight and followed him.

When I say, the Golden Rule requires participation, that's not very clear.

Let me explain what I mean.

What's the odd thing Jesus says in this story?

Two blind men calling out to him for mercy and he asks them:

What do you want me to do for you?

Wasn't it obvious? They were blind. Obviously they needed to be healed.

But Jesus wanted to hear from them what they needed.

He didn't want to presume or patronize.

One time Jesus asked a man if he wanted to be healed, and all he got was a long whine from him about how pitiful his life was. John 5.

He had built his self identity around his disability. He needed more than healing.

It's so easy to approach a needy person with your plan to fix him.

You look down from your lofty place and decide you know what the person needs and then set about to meeting that need.

No matter how sincere you may be, he won't feel loved, he'll feel fixed, she'll feel like a project.

But if you ask someone this question, you don't know what the person will say.

In Paul Miller's book he gives an illustration from the life of a Christian friend. This woman, Lynette, had a father who was dying of cancer.

She was dreading the visit because of what a selfish man he was.

While she was there, he started complaining to her about his bridge club.

Turned out that this bridge club he had been a part of for years had a tradition. At ever meeting, everybody put \$10 in the pot, and then once a year they went on a trip and used that money for some big blowout.

He started complaining to her that with his advanced cancer he wouldn't be going on the trip so he thought he was wasting his money.

But he was too proud to bring it up with his friends.

Her first thought was to tell him:

So what about the money. Are you going to take it with you when you die?

You are so selfish.

She wanted to give him a rule to straighten him out.

But she listened to him and then phoned his friends and explained the situation and they all agreed that he shouldn't be putting his \$10 in the pot.

Here's what Paul Miller says:

Some people might think she should have stood up to her father and stopped enabling him. Others might think Lynette was not being honest by not dealing with her father's selfishness. But Lynette's love for her father was shaped by his need. She felt his fear and sensed his desire for his friends to acknowledge that he was not going to be around much longer. Her practical love for her dad wasn't dishonest. Instead of giving her father a stiff dose of the truth, she got her hands dirty by finding out what he wanted, and took some time made some phone calls and got things worked out for him.

When we help from a top-down position, it insulates us from risk.

We get to set the terms of our help.

I'm not saying it's insincere, but it's safe.

What do you want me to do for you? That's a risky question.

But don't read this story of Jesus and think the lesson is to ask people:

What do you want me to do for you?

Sometimes Jesus didn't ask, he just saw a need and acted.

Jesus doesn't give us a love formula.

He doesn't say things like: Always ask questions, or just listen to the person.

We like legalistic formulas like that because they offer a level of protection.

Keeping the Golden Rule means taking the risk that you might have to give things to people or do things for them that are costly in ways you don't want to spend.

You may be willing to give your money or your advice—

but your time, your presence, your emotional involvement, your consistent prayer—that may be very hard.

And there's no guarantee you will be treated the same way in return.

No one knows this better than Jesus.

As he was dying on the cross, the chief priests and teachers of the law mocked him among themselves and said: He saved others, but he cannot save himself.

If he did that for us, gave up his very life, by faith in him, we can be empowered to love in risky, participatory ways that we would never choose by nature.

Yes, the Golden Rule is found in many religions and cultures—without a doubt.

But is it fundamental human nature? Not at all.

There is only one man, the man Christ Jesus, who kept this rule perfectly,
and so the only path for us to keep it, is that our natures are changed
to be like him.

He does this by sovereignly by his Spirit,
and at the same time, he expects us to ask for it and cooperate with him.

This week the Lord will put people in your life for you to love according
to his Golden Rule. Be ready for those encounters, and keep your mind on Jesus.
The English hymn writer Kate Wilkinson put it this way a long time ago:

May the mind of Christ, my Savior, Live in me from day to day,
By His love and power controlling All I do and say.

May the love of Jesus fill me As the waters fill the sea;
Him exalting, self abasing This is victory.

Let's make that our prayer.