

Matthew 7:12 – “A Higher Righteousness”

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Intro: We come tonight to a verse that is thought by many to be a perfect summary of the Christian faith; a one verse description of all that Christianity teaches. “The Golden Rule is my religion,” they say, “This is all the religion anyone really needs.” Still others feel that this well-known principle is the true pathway to salvation. “Do this and you will live,” seems to be what they make of it. But are these ideas really what Jesus would have us make of this seminal statement? What is the Golden Rule? What does it mean? What *doesn't* it mean? If one practices it, what are the results that can be expected? Tonight we'll look for answers to these questions as we think through one of the most famous statements our Lord ever uttered. By means of full disclosure I want you to know that I will be closely following Warren Wiersbe's teaching of this passage tonight.

Proposition: Christ's call of His disciples to a higher righteousness can only be satisfied when we mirror His loving righteousness toward ourselves and others.

Our study tonight will center around three points: What the Golden Rule is not; What the Golden Rule is; What the Golden Rule does.

The “Golden Rule” itself is easily stated: **Matthew 7:12 - 12** *“So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.”* I suppose this is one of the most famous utterances of Christ among mankind at large. Almost everyone is familiar with this statement by our Lord and almost everyone accepts it as the essence of Christ's teaching. Even those who care nothing for Christianity applaud this statement as one of the finest teachings of Christ; one which places Him among the greatest moral teachers humanity has yet produced. It's often observed that Christ was not the originator of this principle; that many others have said much the same thing, though always in the negative: *“Do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you.”* Christ's particular genius, they say, is that He reversed that statements' negative point of view and turned it into a positive command: *“Do to others what you want them to do to you.”* Merely refraining from hurting others was not enough for Jesus, then. We must positively do good, rather than merely refraining from doing evil. Our attention as careful expositors of Christ's words leads to a further observation beyond this common understanding: Jesus inserted this principle at this point in His sermon because it summarizes His teaching concerning a higher righteousness that began in **Matthew 5:17–20 - 17** *“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. 18 For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. 19 Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. 20 For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”* Christ had been dealing with this command calling His disciples to a higher righteousness ever since verse 5:20. “Put away anger, lust, divorce, oath giving, retaliation,” He commanded. “Love your enemies; give to those in need; devote yourselves to prayer, fasting, and treasure in heaven. Stop worrying; stop judging others; trust God for everything by prayer,” He had been saying. He now closed this section of

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His sermon by giving this summary statement of all He had been saying before: “*Do unto others what you would have them do unto you.*” So this is the plain understanding of what Christ is saying here. But what did He really mean? Let’s begin by first examining what He *didn’t* mean.

What the Golden Rule is not – *The Golden Rule is not the summary statement of all that Christianity teaches.* Many people would reduce Christ’s entire teaching and ministry to this one statement alone. They see Jesus as merely a great moral teacher, a superb moral example. Left out is His deity; He need not be divine, they say, His death need not be atoning in nature; He surely wasn’t raised bodily from the dead, they say. Those things were all added later by His disciples, they believe. “No, no,” they say, “He was simply a great moral teacher and example; the best the world has yet produced, perhaps. And the Golden Rule is the essence of His teaching; the wonder of His moral greatness. He left us this great example to follow.” God save us from such teaching! Jesus is much more than a mere moralist; He is a Savior. *Secondly, the Golden Rule is not God’s plan for redemption.* Others turn the Golden Rule into God’s pathway to heaven. “Do this and you will live,” they say. “Jesus has summarized for us the essence of what it means to become righteous. No need to concern yourself with those difficult Ten Commandments! Just live out the Golden Rule and all will be well in the end.” The failure here of course is the failure with any kind of law: no one can follow the command with perfection. Try as we might, we can no more keep this higher kind of law perfectly than we can keep the Ten Commandments perfectly. The fault is in ourselves, not in the law we are trying to live up to. The failure in both of these misunderstanding of the Golden Rule is that men attempt to construct their whole theology on an insufficient basis. They try to make the Golden Rule carry the entire weight of morality and atonement at the same time; a task it was never meant to fulfill.

[DOCTRINAL POINT] The Golden Rule is not a summary statement of Christianity’s teachings; it is not a substitute plan for man’s redemption.

[ILLUSTRATION] “We should no more build our theology on the Golden Rule than we should build our astronomy on ‘Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star.’”¹

[APPLICATION] To conceive of the Golden Rule as a summary of all Christian theology or as a summary of Christianity’s pathway to redemption is to build a large building on a puny foundation. The whole structure is bound to collapse sooner rather than later. The Golden Rule was never meant to serve these purposes. These understandings of the Golden Rule are not held by those who are truly Christian.

What the Golden Rule is – The Golden Rule is useful when applied as Christ intended. His point is that this is an attitude that governs our relationships with others and results in our living a life of righteousness toward ourselves and all those around us. It is important for us to remember that Christ was speaking to His disciples when He taught the Golden Rule. In other words, the Golden Rule applies to believers alone. It is not a pathway to righteousness because the

¹ Wiersbe

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perfect righteousness of Christ has already been imputed to those who believe. It is not a pathway to salvation, because Christ’s atoning death on Calvary has already opened the way to eternal life to all who believe. Rather, the Golden Rule is Christ’s appointed means of believers demonstrating the grace that His coming and sacrifice has already brought into the world. It is a forerunner of the new creation; a harbinger of the restoration that God will eventually complete when Christ returns. It is intended that believers would live out this practice in every area of life. “The person who practices the Golden Rule refuses to do or say anything that would harm himself or others,” notes Wiersbe. This foreshadows the coming peaceable kingdom of Christ and proclaims now what God has been working at ever since man’s fall in the Garden: the reversal of sin’s damage to man’s relationship to God, other men, himself and the creation. To live the Golden Rule is to live as if the eternal state has already arrived. It is to live now as we will live eternally when the whole story of man on planet earth has come to its conclusion. There are consequences when believers fail to live up to this higher righteousness. “If our judging of others is not governed by this principle,” warns Wiersbe, “we will become proud, critical, and our own spiritual character will degenerate.” There are serious consequences to a believer’s failure to live by the Golden Rule.

[DOCTRINAL POINT] When we practice the Golden Rule we demonstrate the reality of Christ’s gospel message and the coming restoration of all things.

[ILLUSTRATION] It is a well-known adage that the best salesman is a satisfied customer. When we have benefited from a product or service, we become the best recommendation to others of its value. In just that same way, a Christian who faithfully practices the Golden Rule demonstrates the true value of the gospel he or she has believed.

[APPLICATION] As believers we have received the greatest gift of forgiveness, healing and love imaginable. Jesus has done for us what we could never do for ourselves. Now He asks us to personify that love by doing for others what we would want done for ourselves. This is an act of love that foreshadows our eternal destiny and can be irresistibly attractive to those who do not yet know the Savior. Even if they aren’t interested in Jesus, they will be blessed by the good deeds of His people. It is said of the early Christians that one reason their faith spread so rapidly was that no one in pagan society had ever seen people as nice as they became after putting their faith in Christ. A satisfied customer is always the best salesperson.

What the Golden Rule does – When we put into practice Christ’s command we benefit personally, and those around us are blessed as well. How do we benefit from this self-sacrificial way of living? Wiersbe notes that this practice, “releases the love of God in our lives and enables us to help others, even those who want to hurt us.” What an arresting thought! First of all, living out the Golden Rule releases God’s love in our lives because Christ Himself is living out His love through His people. Whenever we do the right thing for Jesus’ sake, it is really the life of Jesus that is entering the world through our obedience. We can only do these things in His strength and through the encouragement of His indwelling Spirit. Secondly, our living out of Christ’s love blesses those who experience this supernatural kindness. Not only are they blessed spiritually, but the actions we take truly benefit the recipients materially, physically,

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and emotionally. When we practice the Golden Rule, we benefit, and we benefit others. But what about those people who won't accept our offering of Christian kindness? There are such people. What about them? Are we exempt from practicing Christian love in those cases? We are not exempt, and we need to accept the fact that living as Jesus lived will invite opposition. Those who resist God's love in Jesus will resist Jesus' love drawing near to them through our practice of the Golden Rule. “We are salt, and salt stings the open wound. We are light, and light exposes dirt.”²

[DOCTRINAL POINT] When the Golden Rule is practiced by believers it will result in both blessings and resistance in those around us.

[ILLUSTRATION] When an individual is ill, sometimes a high-powered medication is needed to treat their condition, but it is often the case that the same medication that can heal can also harm if the patient's body is not ready to receive it. When we follow Christ's command to practice the Golden Rule toward everyone around us, all the time, we will doubtless become a blessing to many and a real pain to a few, for the Golden Rule is more than just a way of life; it is medicine for the soul.

[APPLICATION] Isn't it worth the risk? If our greatest testimony for Christ is living out the Golden Rule, surely we must see that the possibility of helping others far outweighs the cost of any resistance we may encounter for Christ's sake. Jesus Himself came to earth, accepting that His gift of selfless love would heal only a few, and be rejected by the majority. He considered it worthwhile to do for others what He would want done for Himself, were He in their position. Now He invites us to follow Him into this life of love.

Conclusion: Far from being simply a moral maxim, or an alternative form of salvation by works, the Golden Rule is an invitation. Christ invites us to join Him in His work of doing for others what they can never do for themselves. He points them forward to a time when all nature will be healed from sin's corruption and all the redeemed will practice the Golden Rule eternally. He demonstrates the power of the gospel to change lives through the transformed testimonies of His faithful servants who accept His invitation to practice the Golden Rule. Who wouldn't want to accept the Savior's invitation?

² Wiersbe