***PRACTICE THE GOLDEN RULE!***

John C. Peterson

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Staunton, VA

August 1, 2021

Texts: Psalm 15 and Matthew 7:12

 In his book, *What Every Christian Needs to Know About the Jewishness of Jesus,* Rabbi Evan Moffic tells the story of two ancient rabbis, Hillel and Shammai, with radically different understandings of their Jewish faith:

*[A] Roman man approaches both Hillel and Shammai and says to each of them, ‘Teach me the whole Torah while standing on one foot.’ Shammai [a strict literalist] is flabbergasted. He picks up a builder’s rule, part of a two-by-four, and smacks the man on the head. The man walks away. [The man] then approaches Hillel and makes the same outrageous request. Hillel answers, ‘That which is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow. That is the whole Torah; all the rest is commentary. Now go and learn it.’[[1]](#endnote-1)*

For Shammai the Torah was far too complex to be distilled into something that could be taught in the time one could stand on one foot. But Hillel found in that version of the Golden Rule a succinct summary of all that the law taught. And when Shammai smacked the man on the head with his two-by-four, one might wonder whether Shammai ever learned the rule himself! Hillel’s words echo the Golden Rule that we heard Jesus command in his Sermon on the Mount:

*In everything do to others as you would have them do to you;*

*for this is the law and the prophets.*

That should not surprise us, for in his teaching Jesus interprets the same Torah and prophets which were sacred to Hillel. Jesus came not to upend the law, but to fulfill it. From time to time he put additional emphasis on certain aspects of the law or offered a competing vision, but with regard to the Golden Rule, Christianity and Judaism speak with one voice: Learn it! Do it!

It is not Judaism and Christianity alone that have this rule. Most major world religions have some version of it. For instance, in Hinduism we hear:

*Knowing how painful it is to himself, a person should never do to others what he dislikes when done to him by others.*

*And [in] Islam:*

*‘None of you truly believes until he wishes for his brother what he wishes for himself.*’[[2]](#endnote-2)

Some cast it positively – *Do to others* – while others cast it negatively – *Do not do to others* – but the meaning remains the same: Treat others as you want to be treated. Perhaps that is why it is called the Golden Rule, because it is highly valued the world over. One might think that with most major religions affirming some version of this rule, it would be followed universally. The reality is that while many of us can recite it, few of us follow it well. We do to others the very thing we would whine about, complain about, or howl about were it done to us, and we fail to do the very things we hope or expect others will do for us. We seem incapable of making this simple rule the measure by which we choose to act or speak day to day.

Imagine how different the world might be were we to follow that Golden Rule in how we treat immigrants at the border or refugees from Syria, police officers and protestors alike, teachers and students, patients and nurses. If all of us were to treat one another as we wanted to be treated – with courtesy, compassion, and respect – might there be less conflict, less vitriol, less suffering in the world? To do so demands more than having compassion for someone else’s situation. As Barack Obama suggests in his book *The Audacity of Hope*, the Golden Rule is “*not simply a call to sympathy or charity, but…something more demanding, a call to stand in somebody else’s shoes and see through their eyes*.”[[3]](#endnote-3) As seen through the eyes of another, the situation or world or our actions may look very different from how *we* perceive them to be. It is not easy to do sometimes, but it is vital to living into that command to do to others as we would have them do to us!

 That Golden Rule is unqualified. It does not say: Do to others as they do to you or do to others before they do to you. It says do to others as you would have them do to you. It is not the reality of how others treat you, but the expectation of how you want to be treated that is to be the measure of our actions, and the rule does not offer exceptions for how we are to treat those who are jerks and treat you rudely or worse!

 In the third verse of the 15th Psalm, the psalmist offers commentary on the Golden Rule:

*Those who walk blamelessly and do what is right are those who do not slander with their tongues, and do no evil to their friends, nor take up a reproach against their neighbors* (or as the Revised English Bible translates it: *tell no tales against their neighbors*).

Each instance is an illustration of not doing that thing that would be hateful to the neighbor. Just as we would not want others to slander us, nor have evil done to us, nor have tales told of us, so we are to resist the temptation to do so to others. Again it is unqualified. It does not say, do not slander those who speak well of you, or do no evil to those who do no evil to you, or tell no tales against those who tell no tales against you. The measure of your actions and words is not the choices others make, but the choices you would want them to make were the roles reversed. It is a rule that does not discriminate between those who are good and kind and those who are a pain in your behind. ***In everything*** *do to others as you would have them do to you*, says Jesus. And by *everything*, I think he means – *everything*!

Jesus tells a parable about a man who was forgiven a huge debt by a king; the man immediately went out and accosted a friend who owed him a pittance; when that friend could not pay up, he had him thrown in prison. Upon hearing of the forgiven debtor’s action, the king summoned him back, castigated him for his refusal to forgive the small debt after he had been forgiven the huge debt, and had him thrown in prison until he should pay the whole thing. Forgive as you have been forgiven, suggests Jesus. But he might have said, “*Forgive the debt as you would have your debt forgiven*.” It is that same Golden Rule at work in the context of debts and forgiveness. For, ***in everything*** *do to others as you would have them do to you*, says Jesus.

 Can you do that? Can you put on the shoes of another and walk in them? Can you try to see the world through the eyes of your neighbors and allow that glimpse to be a guide to the choices you make about your actions toward them? Can you speak as you would like to be spoken to, serve as you would like to be served, help as you would like to be helped, pray as you would like to be prayed for, trust as you would like to be trusted, love as you would like to be loved, and in everything do to others as you would have them do to you? For that is what Jesus calls us to do - it is the essence of the law and the prophets, he says. That is what the psalmist urges us to do; *do no evil to your friends*, he says. That is what Hillel tells us to do: t*hat which is hateful to you, do not do to another. Now go and learn it. Or better yet, go and do it!* Amen

1. Rabbi Evan Moffic, *What Every Christian Needs to Know About the Jewishness of Jesus*, Abingdon Press: Nashville, 2015, pp.95-96 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Karl Pillemer, *30 Lessons for Living: Tried and True Advice from the Wisest Americans*, Hudson Street Press: New York, 2011, pp.246 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Barack Obama, *The Audacity of Hope*, Crown Publishers: New York, 2006, p.66 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)