

Words of Encouragement: Do Unto Others...

We are all familiar with the golden rule: “Do to others what you would have them do to you.” Or, “Treat others as you yourself would want to be treated.” Even non-Christians are familiar with this motto. Indeed, the golden rule has become as common as the grass is green in our culture, although perhaps most people could not tell you that Jesus was the one who first coined the expression.

Interestingly, the complete statement that Jesus made was, “So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.” (Matt 7:12) The Law and the prophets? That phrase suggests there’s more to this terse little statement than we realize. Consider another place where Jesus makes a similar statement:

*“Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?”
Jesus replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.” (Matt 22:36-40)*

What comes to mind when we think of the golden rule? Benevolence? Kindness? Generosity? What kinds of things do we hear about when people mention the golden rule? Gentleness? Compassion? Yes, all of these, certainly. This is the friendly side of the golden rule. But in our culture today we also hear other things tied to the virtue of the golden rule: Reduced sentencing for felons. Condemnation for those who take a stand on moral issues. Complete license for petty sins that ‘don’t affect anyone else.’ We could even cite the cultural disdain for the disciplining of children.

It should be obvious that these latter examples *do not* sum up the law and the prophets. But how did we arrive at this point? And how do we respond to these vain speculations?

The answer is found in Matthew 22. The command we find there is to “love your neighbor as yourself.” The problem comes when we take this statement as universal truth, outside the context of the biblical revelation of God. Jesus starts by telling us that we must love the Lord our God with our entire being. This is the first and greatest

command. The second command is like the first, calling us to express an undefiled love—this time to our neighbor.

By implication, the only context in which the golden rule may flourish is in a complete and utter, fully abandoned love of God. Jesus tells us what it means to love God—namely, to do what he says: “If you love Me, you will keep My commandments.” (John 14:15) To put it bluntly, we are incapable of loving our neighbors unless we are first taken up with a captivating love of God. Apart from that truth, the sole measure of our love for others is our love of self—and that is surely the poorest measure of love imaginable.

With this in mind, consider now how our unregenerate culture hears and heads the golden rule: Love your neighbor with the same idolatrous and envious self-willed love that you lavish upon your godless self. To this the world cheers and says, “Here, here!” for they wish not to be ruled by *anyone* except self. Self has become the measure of all things. Surely this is rotten to the core. And it is the hallmark of our culture and our times.

What then does the golden rule mean when rightly understood? It means first that “as you love yourself” is covered with Christ’s redeeming blood. We are to love God with our entire being, which means laying down our lives, denying ourselves, and taking up our cross daily to follow the only king worthy of our unwavering allegiance. (Luke 9:23) The standards are exacting! They require living by faith and reliance upon the power of the Holy Spirit.

Loving our neighbors in this context takes on a radically different meaning from the examples noted above. It means holding people accountable to the gospel as surely as we hold ourselves accountable to it. It means commending people to live solely for the glory of our incomparable and amazing God. It means helping others as God has helped us. It means that as we pause and worship God for his rich and abounding forgiveness, we extend this same forgiveness to those around us. It means encouraging and commending our brothers and sisters in the faith, just as we have been encouraged by people of faith and by the indwelling Holy Spirit. It is not using self as an excuse for lawlessness, but self sacrifice as an example of holiness.

May we put the first and greatest command back at the helm and demonstrate to this culture a golden rule worthy of the title.