Christ’s unique ‘golden rule’

Text: Matthew 7:12

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**Scriptures:** Exodus 20:15; Matthew 7:7-14

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 184, 503, 116, 502, 531+532

Series: Heidelberg Catechism (HCLD42 Q&A111)

Theme: Jesus teaches the positive command of treating others as we would like to be treated as a way of life which is grounded in gratitude for God’s grace towards us, enabled by God’s life-giving spirit and which conveys the gospel to our neighbours.

Proposition: Live out the gospel by treating others as you would like to be treated by them and speaking to them about Christ.

**Introduction**

There’s a phrase in the English language “there is honour among thieves”; which means that even corrupt or bad people sometimes have a sense of honour or integrity or justice, even if it is distorted. I’ve heard it said that it can be quite safe to live close to the headquarters of a gang because they will not steal from close neighbours- although they may have no qualms about those living a bit further away. How many people would like to have something that is theirs taken from them by somebody else? Surely nobody wants to be the victim of a robbery. Surely everybody would rather have something good given to them, than something good taken away from them.

The Heidelberg catechism brings out the positive aspect to the 8th commandment “You shall not steal”, the requirement being stated this way in answer 111: “*That I do whatever I can for my neighbours good, that I treat him as I would like others to treat me, and that I work faithfully so that I may share with those in need*’. The golden rule ‘emphasises the empathetic essence of morality’ it is grounded in the reality that all human beings have dignity which should be mutually respected.

This ethical principle has been stated by many people in many different religions down through history, including Judaism, Hinduism, and Buddhism; often in the negative. For example, the Chinese philosopher Confucius is reputed to have said: “*Do not do unto others as you would not want done to you*”; which is sometimes called the ‘silver rule’.

As we look at our text in Matthew 7:12 within the context of the whole of Scripture, we’re going to see that when Christ said: "*So, whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets*” (Matthew 7:12) His ‘golden rule was unique because it is:

1. Motivated by the character of God
2. Enabled by love for God
3. Proclaimed by the gospel of God
4. **Motivated by the character of God**

Motivation is the reason or reasons for behaving in a particular way. Many people around the world believe in the principle of Karma; the concept of a cause and effect connection between what we do to others and then what is done to us. It’s seen as being like a cosmic equation - if you do good to others, then you will receive good from others. A self-centred motivation could ultimately be behind the ‘silver rule’ Do not do unto others as you would not want done to you” and also the ‘golden rule’ – ‘do unto others as you would have them do to me’. There’s not really much difference between the positively phrased ‘golden rule’ and the negatively framed ‘silver rule’. Don’t steal from others because you would not like to have your possessions taken by someone else. Protect yourself from harm by others by doing them good.

The motivation which Christ reveals in our text is completely different. You can see this from the first little word ‘So’. This means ‘therefore’; because of what has gone before. This ‘golden rule’ of Christ is grounded in love for God. It is rooted in gratitude for God’s good gifts which He freely gives to His children as Jesus explains in verse 11: **“***If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!*”.

God the Father does not give good gifts to His adopted sons and daughters because He Himself would like to receive gifts from them! What then is God’s motivation to give? It is most certainly not self-interest in receiving a return because the Almighty is not in need of anything from any creature in His Creation. God’s motivation to do good to people like you and me is grounded in His generous character. He is perfectly gracious, kind and compassionate. He does unto others as He Himself is.

However, we are not naturally like Him. Jesus describes those listening to his ‘sermon on the mount’ as ‘evil’. This is a very strong word. This is very clear because, Satan is described by Christ as ‘The evil one’ (e.g. Matt 13:19). Doing evil to someone is not treating them as you would want to be treated yourself. The fundamental natural condition of all humanity descended from Adam and Eve after their fall into sin is evil as Scripture affirms e.g. Psalm 14:2-3 (quoted in Romans 3:10-12). “*The LORD looks down from heaven on the children of man, to see if there are any who understand, who seek after God. They have all turned aside; together they have become corrupt; there is none who does good, not even one*”.

A theological term which describes this is ‘total depravity’. By this we mean that every part of us (mind, conscience, will, and passions) is affected by the corruption of sin. This does not mean that we are as bad as we could possibly be. Jesus acknowledges this reality when He notes that parents, who have been corrupted through sin are still able to give good gifts to their children.

The logic of Christ is from the ‘lesser to the greater’. If parents who are by nature fallen human beings are able to give good gifts even though they are by nature evil, how much more our Heavenly Father who is perfectly good. This is why we are to be confident people of prayer, presenting our needs to our Heavenly Father, knowing that he will give us what we require (understanding that this is not necessarily what we want). This is also why we are to treat others well – as we ourselves would want to be treated.

Satan, the Evil One, is a thief. He steals glory which is not his own. He steals joy and peace by promising a good life and delivering death instead. He steals the good Word which has been sown in the human heart (Mat 13:19). Motivated by rebellion against God, Satan steals from others. He constantly breaks the 8th commandment.

In contrast, God is a Giver. He gives to others. He allows His glory to be reflected by people like you and me when we also give to others, doing them good and treating them well; as we would wish to be treated. He gives joy and peace, promising and then bestowing life in Christ. He gives the Holy Spirit so that His Word may live and grow within our hearts and not snatched away by the Evil One…which brings us to our 2nd point:

1. **Enabled by love for God**

In our text Jesus says, "*So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets*”. What does He mean by saying that this rule **is** the Law and the Prophets? He means that this rule sums up the entire revealed will of God. This is summarized by Jesus in Matthew 22:37-40: "*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets*."

We could frame this ‘golden rule’ by saying *So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this love for God and for your neighbour.* Fulfilling Christ’s golden rule is only possible for a person who first and foremost loves God. To love God, it is necessary to be spiritually alive. To be spiritually alive, it is essential to have received the regenerating gift of the Holy Spirit. As Jesus said to Nicodemus: “*Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God*." As Paul writes to the Romans “*Those who are in the flesh (that is without the Spirit) cannot please God*”. Obeying the golden rule of Christ is part of ‘*working out our own salvation in fear and trembling*’ (Phil 2:12) as we reflect the love which we have received from God to others. “*We love because he first loved us*” (1 John 4:19).

So how do you love other people? In summary, by treating them as you would like to be treated. This is a simple rule which applies in any situation – notice that Jesus indicates how universal this is when he says “*So whatever you wish…*” This rule has been described by some as being a like a pocketknife with many different tools all in one. Something which you can carry with you at all times so that it is always ready at hand when different situations arise

Christ’s golden rule is a helpful rule to apply as we love others both within this congregation and outside at this present time when the threat of COVID-19 is close at hand. Here are some practical suggestions which we are becoming more and more familiar with: Regularly wash your hands for 20 or more seconds with soap and water (or hand sanitiser) and dry your hands well. Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth. Adopt non-contact greetings and consider social distancing when gathering. If you develop flu like symptoms (sore throat, cough, fever, body-aches), self-isolate at home, do not attend work or school or church or other public gatherings.

Try to arrange for someone to fill in for you if you have been rostered on to do something and must stay home or can’t do it because you have symptoms. As we consciously adopt these new patterns of behaviour, remember that our motivation is to love others by treating them as we would like to be treated.

The ‘pocket-knife’ of Christ’s golden rule is very helpful in practically loving others because we love God. We will have ample opportunity to actively obey the 8th commandment in the days ahead. We also have opportunity to proclaim the gospel, which brings us to our 3rd point:

1. **Proclaimed by the gospel of God**

Jesus Himself fulfilled the law and the prophets (Matt 5:17) by loving others so much that He laid down His life for God’s people. He did not wish to die at Calvary (think of His words at Gethsemane) but He was willing to do for others what He would wish for Himself; to have life. Christ fulfilled the positive part of the 8th commandment through His active obedience to God.

In the words of HCLD42 he did whatever he could for his neighbours good, and treated others as He would like others to treat him. He spoke the truth, healed the sick, comforted the downhearted and warned those who were in danger. He worked faithfully so that He could share the Word of life with those in need. The Law and the Prophets – God’s written revelation in Scripture - all point to Him.

So, we could frame the ‘golden rule’ by saying: *So, whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is Christ.* When we treat others as we would like them to treat us, because we know that God is a generous Giver and because we love Him, we proclaim the gospel.

However, others will not see this unless we use words! Our actions (by themselves) do not convey our motivations. At a time when people are either sick or fearful of becoming so, we have the Words of life! Here are some Scriptures that we can lovingly communicate to others:

**Isaiah 53:4-5** “*Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed*”.

**John 3:16** "*For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life*”.

**Romans 8:32** *He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?*

Put yourself in the shoes of someone who has never heard the gospel: surely if someone had the ultimate answer to your health and wellbeing concerns, you’d want them to tell you! "*So, whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets*”.

Actively obey the 8th commandment being motivated to do so by:

1. The generosity of God
2. Love for God
3. The gospel of God

AMEN.