

Sermon Notes of Rev Dr Ivor J.W.Oakley (17-9-2000 Guisborough Evangelical Church)

**Matthew 7 v 12**

Additional Reading Galatians 5v16-25

**The Golden Rule**

Introduction

This text contains probably the most famous thing Jesus ever said. For many people, this is all they know of Christianity. Known as the “Golden Rule”, it is well known but not very well practised. Here the Sermon on the Mount reaches its summit and peak, all gathered up into one sentence. Some have described it as the top-most peak of social ethics, the Everest of all ethical teaching. It perfectly fits in with immediate context where Jesus is forbidding the judging of others, when the judging is hypocritical, censorious carping and faultfinding, looking for others’ weaknesses. Here in the Golden Rule is the perfect answer. You would not like to be treated this way, would you? Then, don’t treat others like it.

There is no better brief rule of thumb guide in dealing with so many decisions. Here is the benchmark in all doubtful questions in our relations with others. Do not treat others as they treat us, but as we would like them to treat us.

We will begin by seeing how unique and unparalleled the Lord’s teaching is. It is far more deep and comprehensive than other teachers. Then we shall look at the meaning of this statement and how we can apply and implement it.

Uniqueness of the Lord’s teaching

Some people are always anxious to show that others, either in the Old Testament or by Jewish Rabbis, had already said some of the things that Jesus taught. Their motive is to say he is not so special after all. But Jesus was a great artist, not because he manufactured his paintings, but by the way he used them to paint a noble picture. It is worth adding that though there is some parallelism, there is a great deal of chaff mixed up with the wheat in the rabbi’s teachings. In Jesus’ teaching, all is wheat.

However, Matthew 7:12 is absolutely without parallel anywhere. It was never said before. It was new teaching, a new view of life and life’s obligations. What we do have is similar statements in a negative form – *don’t do* to others what you do not want them to do to you. No other teaching presents the positive – *do* to others what you want them to do to you. There is a world of difference. Jesus’ positive teaching is far wider and deeper and more comprehensive.

Rabbi Hillel in 20BC was asked if he could summarize the whole Jewish law while standing on one leg. His reply was: “What is hateful to you, do not do to anyone else. This is the whole law, the rest is commentary”. Also in the book of Tobit (Apocrypha, held to be canonical by Roman Catholics), written about 200BC, it says “What you hate, do to no man”. It is also found in the classical writers of Ancient Greece and Rome. The Roman Emperor in the third century, Alexander Severus, had the negative

version of the golden rule engraved in gold on the wall of his palace so that he might never forget it (Not a bad example to follow). The Chinese philosopher, Confucius, said “What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others. This should be the rule of practice for the whole life”.

But only Jesus said “Do to others...” Many negative voices, only one positive voice. The negative command is only pure common sense, the basis of all civilized life, not to harm or injure or lie or steal. It is not difficult to keep. The non-Christian could say “Of course I don’t do any body any harm”. This is nothing wonderful; it means simply in actions he is good – for nothing! How this negative goodness is condemned in the Gospels. The Scribes and Pharisees used it constantly. It drove the Rich Man to the place of torment, though there was no evil with him. The servant who did not use his talent did not do any harm – he just did nothing – and yet he was called “wicked and slothful”. The Priest and the Scribe in the parable of the Good Samaritan passed by on the other side, they did no harm, but neither did they do any good.

Jesus points out that it is not about the negative only; there must be the positive and the good. And this happens when a new principle enters life, a new attitude to fellow men. It is one thing to say “I must do no one any harm”, but it is very different to say “I must go out of my way to do good to others”.

A man with a motorcar is compelled by the law to drive so that he does not injure another. But there is no law to compel him to give a weary footsore traveller a lift. He simply has to refrain from harming. It is far harder to make it a chosen and deliberate policy of life to go out of our way for the benefit of others.

Jesus tells us to treat others not as the Law allows, but as love requires.

### Meaning of the Lord’s Teaching

If we are wondering how to deal with others, we should not begin with the other person, but begin with ourselves, as human beings. What do I like? What helps and encourages me? If I am ill or lonely or unhappy or discouraged – how would I like other people to respond? If I have done wrong and need to be corrected – how would I like people to speak to me and deal with me and put me on the right lines? Also, what do I dislike? What upsets me? What brings out the worst in me? What discourages me? Not only concerning deeds, but also thoughts and words. How would I like people to deal with me, speak to me, and speak about me, think about me and assess me? Make a list in detail about these things, and then remember that other people are just like you. Put yourself in their shoes. Be in their position.

We ought to be of such a disposition and nature that we spontaneously seek to do what we would like others to do to us. Need for sympathetic imagination to be woven into warp and woof of thought and life. This principle would settle hundreds of little points, and relieve us of remembering hundreds of little rules. Key to unlock many a problem of attitude and conduct. This is a summary of Old Testament Law and Prophets. Not only avoid adultery and murder and theft, but also **if you come across your neighbours ox or donkey wandering off, be sure to take it back to him. If you see the donkey of someone who hates you fallen down under its load, be sure you help him with it** (Exodus 23:4-5).

How this teaching would transform our society if people behaved like this in families, husbands and wives, neighbours and fellows, in industry and commerce, in international relations. Not only would there be no adultery, violence, crime, theft, dishonesty, oppression, murder, vice, injustice, hatred, but there would also be a greater amount of compassion, kindness and thoughtfulness. And people tell us the Bible has nothing to say to modern man, and is out of date! Has anyone ever suggested a more effective solution to problems? Has anyone put in a nutshell anything better than this principle?

### Means of implementing the Lord's teaching

We cannot leave the problem there. We need to do more than to state a principle and lift it up before men. The Golden Rule has been held up before men for 2000 years. And in the last 150 years we have done all we can by legislation and education to improve man. But still not obeying it. The problem is theological and doctrinal. We are foolish people if we dislike that and try to bypass it. Here is the key.

Grim but unavoidable fact of the Fall of Man. Corruption and sinfulness of human nature which hates God and his Law. Nature which centres on and worships and lives for self instead of worshipping and living for God. Self is number one. God and neighbour take a back seat. Controlled by "flesh", our sinful nature. Self-advantage is automatically our guide in all choices and attitudes. Our self-centred, independent, self-satisfying, self-protecting, self-concern leads us to restrain and hold back, if to our advantage. Or concerned with our standing before men. This is what we are at the root. This is the fundamental cause of all problems.

Two other Christian truths at this point. (1) Regeneration – the imparting of new life, God's very nature into the soul. But that new nature must grow and dominate and control, which brings us to (2) Sanctification – yielded to the Holy Spirit for him to control, fill, and master us and fill us with his fruit – **Love, joy peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control** (Galatians 5:22-23), i.e. attitude of heart and mind whereby we are impelled and set free to do to others as we would want them to do to us.

In other words, if we want to be right with others, it must begin with God. Face self in light of Holy presence. Humble self. Real problem is me, my heart, my nature. God's grace delivers us from thralldom of self into glorious liberty of children of God. God has to work that miracle of redirecting lives, shedding his love abroad by the Holy Spirit for man, knowing his compassion for them and concern for them. But this is not enough. The miracle has to continue daily. Self-centred nature is always there, ready to assert itself. A civil war continues between the sinful self-centred nature and the Holy Spirit. How do we deal with it? Take resolute action. Those who belong to Christ have crucified the sinful nature. It is rejected, resisted, refused. Then live by the Spirit and keep in step by the Spirit.

There must be daily discipline – daily crucifixion, daily yielding, daily walk in the Spirit. If we take our eyes off the Lord we are soon back where we started. Martin Luther said that the Christian life is one lifelong repentance. Changing our mind about self is a continual process. The Greek word used for repent in Mark 1:15

μετανοεῖτε is in the present imperative – Keep in repenting. Likewise, we have to keep on daily **being transformed by the renewing of your mind** (Romans 12:2), where again the Greek present imperative is used μεταμορφουσθε.

An ability to do to others as we want them to do to us will be one of those good things God will give to those who ask, seek and knock (Matthew 7:11). When we implement and practice this principle, we show the world the only way its problems can be solved. We are then missionaries and ambassadors for Christ.