

“The Golden Rule”

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Isa. 49:8-16a

Matt. 7:1-29

[The LORD said,]

‘Can a woman forget her nursing child,
or show no compassion for the child of her womb?
Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you.
See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands.’

Isa. 49:16a

Let us pray... O God,
In a world that is full of uncertainty,
help us to trust you as we make our way in this world
and help us to be worthy of trust as well.

Amen

This third section of Jesus Christ’s Sermon on the Mount
is about Doomsday – the Day of Judgment,
though Jesus does not specifically say that.
Nevertheless, that is one way to understand what this part is about,
tying in what Jesus said earlier about forgiveness –
we are forgiven as we forgive others.

Forgiveness and prejudice are two very important themes
woven into these teachings and throughout the tapestry of the Bible.
We are not to judge if we don’t want to be judged,
still we have to do some judging to discern who we can trust.
Hyenas, swine, wolves-in-sheep’s clothing, lawless opportunists
are out there doing what they do –
but before you make that judgment, see if the shoe fits!

There is another theme that runs throughout the Bible and
it is about having a ‘heart’.
It is that aspect of ourselves related to our physical heart,
but symbolizing a person’s emotional or spiritual core.
It is like our soul or spirit, but more like a *place* within us
out of which we relate with others.
It is where our prayers form and where God can inform us.

Willard, p.2

I have come to believe that it is by the habit of our hearts
that we will be judged and not simply by what we do.

For example,

have you known a person who expressed contempt for a particular group
that was ethnically, politically, or otherwise different from them?

Yet, if they saw such a person standing by their car,

broken down on the road, they would stop to help

just because they saw a *person* who was in trouble.

Though their words may be the result of their social conditioning,

yet their actions betray a heart that is open and affirming

of our common humanity.

There are certainly bigots and abusers at work in the world,

but we have to make sure we can really see the forest

beyond the sequoias of our own prejudgments

that can get stuck in our eyes!

God will give us that insight,

as we stay alert about the outcomes – or fruits – of what people do.

In the meantime,

we need to treat each other the way we would want to be treated.

This is the Golden Rule – which exists in one form or another

in all the major religions.

Sometimes, it is in the negative form of don't do to others

what you wouldn't want them to do to you.

'An eye for an eye' for example, is a derivative of this idea

that justice should be limited to fair retribution,

as an alternative to a cycle of revenge.

The Golden Rule is evident in Jesus' parable about the Day of Judgment

which says that when we helped – or neglected 'the least of these',

the Son of Man was helped or hurt, too.

And the Golden Rule is also a restatement of the Great Commandment:

Love God and love others as yourself –

Love others as you would be loved, too.

And Jesus tells his listeners

that this is the summary of the teachings of Moses and the Prophets –

the distilled wisdom passed down through the Jewish tradition

to us as the Christian heirs of this good news.

Willard, p.3

It is the law of rational-lovingkindness – the law of love
that can be found in every tradition in one form or another
as common sense to say that
it just makes sense to be kind.

I have probably done not quite a hundred memorial services,
but in preparing for someone's funeral,
I have always made it a point to ask how love
had been at work in that person's life.
It hasn't been hard at all to find something to say about that
for the people's lives I have had the responsibility to honor that way.
But it is something that all of us could do better –
from simple courtesies of a kind word to courageous last stands
to make it a better world here for strangers as well as kin.

I do think there will be an accounting,
but it will not be in the same way that gets such emphasis
in conservative Christian theology.
It will not be so much about conforming to the right thing
as in doing the loving thing –
to be a loving person, fully alive like Jesus Christ.
Rather than being judged for any one thing we did,
the outcome or fruit of our hearts will be determined
by the habit of how we chose to do them.

And we will be judged by how well we lived up to our potential –
as much by exercising restraint as self-expression.
If we live the extremes of either licentiousness or conformity,
we will pay for it.
If we live the extremes of mercy, generosity, and creativity,
eternal life won't be something for the future –
it will be an authentic life, here and now.
You will already be in heaven.

Amen

*Our Jewish Testament lesson today comes from Isaiah 49:8-16a
and is about God's commitment of compassion for the Jewish people
through whom affirmation of all people.
We are to follow God's example...*

Thus says the Lord:

In a time of favor I have answered you, on a day of
salvation I have helped you;
I have kept you and given you as a covenant to the people,
to establish the land, to apportion the desolate heritages;
saying to the prisoners,
"Come out,"
to those who are in darkness,
"Show yourselves."

They shall feed along the ways,
on all the bare heights shall be their pasture;
they shall not hunger or thirst,
neither scorching wind nor sun shall strike them down,
for he who has pity on them will lead them,
and by springs of water will guide them.

And I will turn all my mountains into a road,
and my highways shall be raised up.
Lo, these shall come from far away, and lo,
these from the north and from the west,
and these from the land of Syene.

Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth;
break forth, O mountains, into singing!
For the Lord has comforted his people,
and will have compassion on his suffering ones.

But Zion said,
"The Lord has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me."
Can a woman forget her nursing child,
or show no compassion for the child of her womb?
Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you.
See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands.

Inspired by Matthew 7:1-29

DON'T JUDGE UNLESS YOU WANT TO BE JUDGED.
FOR THE SCRUTINY WITH WHICH YOU SCRUTINIZE OTHERS
WILL BE USED TO SCRUTINIZE YOU.
SO, THE MANUEVER ROOM YOU GIVE
WILL BE THE SAME YOU GET.
AND WHY WOULD YOU NOTICE A SPECK IN SOMEONE ELSE'S EYE
BUT IGNORE THE LOG IN YOUR OWN EYE?
YOU HYPOCRITE!
TAKE THE LOG AWAY SO YOU CAN SEE CLEARLY ENOUGH
TO HELP SOMEONE ELSE.

BUT DON'T GIVE SACRED THINGS TO DOGS.
DON'T TRUST YOUR TREASURES TO SWINE.
BECAUSE THEY WILL TRAMPLE THEM INTO THE MUD
AND BREAK YOUR HEART.

ASK AND YOU WILL RECEIVE, SEEK AND YOU WILL FIND,
KNOCK AND THE WAY WILL OPEN UP FOR YOU.
FOR EVERYONE WHO ASKS WILL RECEIVE;
EVERYONE WHO SEEKS WILL FIND;
EVERYONE WHO KNOCKS WILL FIND THEIR WAY.

NOW, IF YOUR CHILDREN ASKED FOR BREAD,
WOULD ANY OF YOU GIVE THEM A STONE INSTEAD?
IF THEY ASKED FOR A FISH,
WOULD YOU GIVE THEM A SNAKE?
EVEN IF YOU ALL WERE EVIL-DOERS,
YOU WOULD STILL KNOW TO GIVE GOOD THINGS
TO YOUR CHILDREN.
HOW MUCH MORE SO WILL YOUR HEAVENLY GUARDIAN
GIVE GOOD THINGS TO YOU WHEN YOU ASK FOR THEM.

THEREFORE,
ALL THAT YOU WISH OTHERS WOULD DO FOR YOU,
YOU SHOULD DO SO FOR THEM.
FOR THIS IS THE SUM OF THE LAW AND THE PROPHETS' TEACHING.

SO, ENTER THE NARROW GATE RATHER THAN
THE WIDE AND EASY WAY THAT LEADS TO DISASTER –
THOUGH THERE ARE MANY WHO CHOOSE IT.
OY, HOW NARROW THE GATE AND DIFFICULT THE ROAD
THAT LEADS TO AUTHENTIC LIFE – AND HOW FEW FIND IT!

BEWARE OF THE FALSE PROPHETS
WHO COME TO YOU IN SHEEP'S CLOTHING,
BUT INSIDE ARE RAVENOUS WOLVES.
YOU WILL KNOW THEM BY THE OUTCOMES THEY PRODUCE.

YOU DON'T GET GRAPES
FROM THORNS AND THISTLES.

LIKEWISE, YOU EXPECT TASTY FRUIT FROM AN APPLE TREE
AND NASTY FRUIT FROM A CRABAPPLE TREE.
A HEALTHY TREE IS NOT ABLE TO PRODUCE
ROTTEN FRUIT,
NOR IS A ROTTEN TREE ABLE TO PRODUCE
HEALTHY FRUIT.
EVERY TREE NOT PRODUCING HEALTHY FRUIT IS CUT DOWN
AND WILL BE THROWN INTO THE FIRE.
SO, YOU WILL KNOW THEM
BY THE FRUITS THEY PRODUCE.

NOT ALL THOSE SAYING TO ME,
'LORD! LORD!' WILL ENTER THE BELOVED COMMUNITY
OF THE HEAVENLY KINGDOM.
IT WILL ONLY BE THOSE WHO DO THE WILL
OF MY HEAVENLY GUARDIAN – WHICH IS TO LOVE.

MANY WILL SAY TO ME ON THAT SUNRISE TO ETERNITY,
'LORD, LORD, DIDN'T WE PROPHECY IN YOUR NAME
AND DIDN'T WE CAST OUT DEMONS IN YOUR NAME?
AND DIDN'T WE DO MANY MIGHTY WORKS IN YOUR NAME?'
AND THEN, I WILL DECLARE,
'YOU NEVER REALLY KNEW ME.
BEGONE, YOU LAWLESS OPPORTUNISTS!'

SO NOW,
EVERYONE WHO HEARS MY WORDS AND FOLLOWS THEM
WILL BE CONSIDERED LIKE THE WISE PERSON
WHO BUILT A HOUSE UPON A ROCK.
AND THE RAIN CAME DOWN,
AND THE RIVER ROSE,
AND THE WIND BLEW AGAINST THAT HOUSE.
BUT IT DIDN'T FALL BECAUSE ITS FOUNDATION
WAS UPON THE ROCK.
AND ALL WHO LISTEN TO MY WORDS,
BUT DON'T FOLLOW THEM,
WILL BE LIKE THE FOOLISH PERSON
WHO BUILT A HOUSE UPON SAND.
AND THE RAIN CAME DOWN,
AND THE RIVER ROSE,
AND THE WIND BLEW AGAINST THAT HOUSE.
AND IT ALL FELL DOWN AND ITS COLLAPSE WAS COMPLETE.”

AND SO IT CAME ABOUT, AS JESUS FINISHED SPEAKING,
THAT THE MULTITUDES OF PEOPLE WERE AMAZED BY HIS TEACHING.
FOR HE DID NOT TEACH THEM LIKE THEIR RELIGIOUS EXPERTS,
BUT RATHER AS ONE WHO HAS AUTHORITY.

Matt.7

[1] "Judge not, that you be not judged.

[2] For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get.

[3] Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?

[4] Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when there is the log in your own eye?

[5] You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.

[6] "Do not give dogs what is holy; and do not throw your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under foot and turn to attack you.

[7] "Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.

[8] For every one who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened.

[9] Or what man of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone?

[10] Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent?

[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!

[12] So whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them; for this is the law and the prophets.

[13] "Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is easy, that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many.

[14] For the gate is narrow and the way is hard, that leads to life, and those who find it are few.

[15] "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.

[16] You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles?

[17] So, every sound tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears evil fruit.

[18] A sound tree cannot bear evil fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit.

[19] Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

[20] Thus you will know them by their fruits.

[21] "Not every one who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.

[22] On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?'

[23] And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you evildoers.'

[24] "Every one then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house upon the rock;

[25] and the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat upon that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock.

[26] And every one who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house upon the sand;

[27] and the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell; and great was the fall of it."

[28] And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching,

[29] for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes.