

Golden Rule

Matthew 7:12, "So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets."

Question: What is true religion?

Key Verses: James 1:27; Micah 6:8; Isaiah 1:11-17.

The Golden Rule

No one in history changed religion more than Jesus. And no single sentence of Jesus changed the history of religion more than the Golden rule. What many do not realize is that this is not the first time something like this had been said. Long before Jesus' golden rule, there was the "silver rule". Hundreds of years before Jesus, Confucius supposedly said, "Do *not* to others what you would *not* wish done to yourself." Again, between Malachi and Matthew, the apocryphal book of Tobit 4:15 said, "Do not do to anyone what you yourself would hate." The great Jewish rabbi, Hillel, whose retirement overlapped with Jesus' birth, was once challenged by a potential proselyte. The man was off-put by the hundreds of meticulous Jewish regulations. So he challenged Hillel to explain the entirety of Jewish law while standing on one foot. Hillel raised one leg and replied, "What is hateful to you, do not do to anyone else. This is the whole law; all the rest is only commentary" (Shabbath, 31a). Hillel punctuated the point by dropping his foot back to the ground. Several had pronounced the silver rule prior to Jesus' ministry. Yet Jesus' subtle change not only transformed the rule but all of religion.

The silver rule and the golden rule read similarly. There is just the sliver of a difference from the negative to the positive. Yet this slight difference separates the two rules into different worldviews. Sixty seconds of putting each into practice will make the difference overwhelmingly obvious. As you read these words, sitting sedentary, you are perfectly practicing the demands of the Silver Rule. You are doing nothing to anyone that they would consider repugnant. At the same time, you are doing nothing that would satisfy the demands of the Golden Rule. Until these words result in action, the Golden rule is never satisfied. It demands relentless attention in some actionable response. Such is the difference between the extraneous rules of religion and Jesus' call to sacrificial service. One can satisfy the letter of the law while weaseling their way out of actual righteousness. Jesus' clarion call to right religion has a simplicity that fits in a tweet yet encompasses our entire existence. The power and purity of the Golden rule inspires our best efforts to emulate Jesus. It is pure genius, like $E=mc^2$, only with far more explosive implications.

Pure and Undeified Religion

In many ways, the letter from James is a practical commentary on Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. This is only natural. James grew up with Jesus, his older half-brother, and was surely

influenced by his prophetic pronouncements around the woodshop. In another sense, however, it is quite extraordinary. After all, James rejected his brother's claims to be Messiah, particularly when they bled over into divinity! It was not until after the resurrection, when James met his brother face to face, and very much alive, that he had a tidal shift in allegiance. By that time, he had missed the bulk of Jesus' public ministry and teaching. So, we can assume that the teachings recorded in the Gospels had an earlier rendition as Jesus was maturing in early adulthood in the privacy of his home and hometown. James was privy to that. This is, of course, an advantage to us who read the New Testament book of James. While it post-dates the resurrection, its content may also predate Jesus' public teachings.

That makes most sense of James 1:27. In a sense, it is a practical application of the golden rule that bridges Jesus and the Old Testament. Let's read the verse and then establish the connection: "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world." The purpose of religion is NOT to keep oneself unstained by the world. The purpose of pure religion is to serve the community, particularly its most vulnerable represented in this verse by widows and orphans. Anyone familiar with the Old Testament prophets recognizes the theme of caring for orphans and widows as a primary religious obligation. Does this mean that personal morality is unimportant? Of course not. However, as a matter of practicality, personal morality is less a cause of service than a result of it. Why?

When personal morality is our motivation we tend to be isolationists rather social servants. Isolationists avoid bars so they won't drink. They avoid neighbors who don't follow God's law. They avoid inner cities where crime and drugs are rampant. The means of morality is avoiding "sinners" who become stumbling blocks (with no inconsiderable dose of disdain). When service is our motivation, our mechanism for expressing our love for God, then avoidance gives way to engagement. We purposely enter the places and relationships where God's love is most needed. As a consequence of serving the lost, lonely, and disenfranchised, the religious person postures themselves as God's envoy. What does that do to our personal morality? Rather than endangering it, we are more often motivated to live to a higher standard because another is spiritually dependent on us. This is always true: responsibility breeds personal growth more than self-control. Personal morality (or "keeping oneself unstained by the world" to use James' vernacular) is far more likely through engagement than avoidance.

So let's be clear, neither Jesus nor James is replacing ethics for social service. Loving our neighbor does not reduce our responsibility to personal morality. The biblical word "righteousness" implies both. The question is how best to achieve both. Many assume that going to church, reading the Bible, and prayer will lead to a life that honors God. Yet too often it only leads to arrogance, isolationism, and judgment. The Bible is clear, serving others is the most effective mechanism for self-improvement. Now that both Jesus and James have given their stance, let's look at the genesis of this idea.

What does the Lord Require of You?

“He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you; but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8). This is one of the more famous statements from the Old Testament, rightly so. It is one of those rare jewels that reduces religion to its barest essentials. It has massive implications that form the foundation of Jesus’ Golden rule.

First, we should put this on a mental map. The book of Micah opens with a list of three kings who ruled Israel from 750-687 B.C. It was during their reign that Micah preached. This would be an irrelevant historical detail *except that* the northern ten tribes of Israel were conquered right in the middle of Micah’s prophetic career in the year 722 B.C. A glance at an ancient map shows how the kingdom was torn in half, dividing the north from the south. That devastating defeat marked Micah’s ministry, shaping his words and warnings. During this same period in Micah’s lifetime the Greeks launched the first Olympic games (776) and the Romans founded their nation (753). Assyria is the local super-power but two other major players are on the rise *at the very time* that Israel’s borders are shrinking!

Therefore, Micah’s message is a warning that if they didn’t repent history would repeat itself. Their nation would fall as others had before them. Does this sound at all familiar? We stand at a similar point in history—a great nation whose moral failure may be its own undoing. So this critical question: How are we to repent? The answer might surprise you. It certainly surprised them. What we need to understand is that they were doing many of the things God commanded. They were going to the Temple, they were praying, they were even making sacrifices. But listen to Micah’s critique: Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? (Micah 6:6-7). This is a foundational principle throughout Scripture: *The right actions with the wrong heart are offensive to God.* Why? Because when we go to church, say our prayers, and perform our religious duties without the right heart our sacrifice becomes a bribe, not obedience.

This is a familiar theme throughout Scripture. The prophet Samuel said to King Saul, “to obey is better than sacrifice” (1 Samuel 15:22). King David sang a song about it: “Sacrifice and offering you did not desire ... burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not require” (Psalm 40:6). This very Psalm is quoted again in Hebrews 10:5-6. It was that big of a deal. David’s son Solomon said, “To do what is right and just is more acceptable to the LORD than sacrifice” (Proverbs 21:3). But probably the closest comparison is Micah’s contemporary, the Prophet Isaiah. He opens his book with this devastating critique: “The multitude of your sacrifices—what are they to me?” says the LORD. “I have more than enough of burnt offerings, of rams and the fat of fattened animals; I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats. When you come to appear before me, who has asked this of you, this trampling of my courts? Stop bringing meaningless offerings! ... Take your evil deeds out of my sight! Stop doing wrong, learn

to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow” (Isaiah 1:11–17).

That brings us *right back* to Micah 6:8. What does the Lord require of us? Three things: **(1) To do justice**—the word literally means to make or create justice. This is not an internal attitude but a social structure. We use our influence and resources to reshape our communities so that the poor and oppressed have a fighting chance. **(2) To love kindness**. This word “kindness” is one of the weightier words in the Old Testament. It implies the covenantal loyalty of God. We would use it today in relation to marriage, adoption, or perhaps a last will & testament. It is more than that “nice guy” in the next cubical or the friendly checker at the store—it is a covenantal loyalty! **(3) To walk humbly** with your God? Why does this take humility? A quick look at one last passage will make it apparent.

In Matthew 23, the last week of Jesus’ life, he criticizes the religious leaders in the very temple of God. Here’s his charge: “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former.” Notice that his concern is the same as Isaiah, the same as Micah. People did their duties with the wrong motives and their religious actions became bribes rather than sacrifices. Pride can blind us to the motives that God sees right through. We think we are very religious because of our behaviors but God judges our motives. How does God view our religious activities? Are they sacrifice or bribes? The quickest way to tell is if our religious deeds improve the plight of the poor in our communities. If our church doesn’t care for the community God cares for then history will inevitably repeat itself.

Key Points:

- Jesus’ Golden Rule tweaked the Silver Rule thus massively transforming religion.
- Jesus’ brother James shares the same perspective only isolates religious obligation to widows and orphans.
- James reflects multiple OT prophets who talked about social service trumping religious duties of the temple.

Action Step: Try to live for one hour today in alignment with the Golden Rule.

Further Resources: Dale Carnegie, *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, (1936).