

The Platinum Rule

John Shuck
First Presbyterian Church
Elizabethton, Tennessee

September 17th, 2006

Jesus said,

“Consider this: Treat people in ways you want them to treat you. This sums up the whole of the Law and the Prophets.”

Matthew 7:12

The late Robert Funk, New Testament scholar and founder of the Jesus Seminar, a group of scholars who set out to try to find the authentic voice of the historical Jesus, said that Jesus was first-century standup Jewish comic.

That sounds irreverent. However, it is the comedians of today, especially those with a moral or a social conscience, that have taken on the role of the prophet.

Many feel that the church is so connected to empire that for the most part it has lost its prophetic voice. We have it over to the comedians, such as Stephen Colbert, for instance.

Jesus through his parables used comedy to disarm people. He was able through his parables, which are actually rather funny, to speak prophetically.

Another comic-prophet is Emo Phillips. This is one of his jokes:

I was walking across a bridge one day, and I saw a man standing on the edge, about to jump off. So I ran over and said "Stop! Don't do it!"

"Why shouldn't I?" he said.

I said, "Well, there's so much to live for!"

He said, "Like what?"

I said, "Well...are you religious or atheist?"

He said, "Religious."

I said, "Me too! Are you Christian or Buddhist?"

He said, "Christian." I said, "Me too!"

Are you catholic or protestant?"

He said, "Protestant."

I said, "Me too! Are you Episcopalian or Baptist?"

He said, "Baptist!"

I said, "Wow! Me too! Are you Baptist Church of God or Baptist Church of the Lord?" He said, "Baptist Church of God!"

I said, "Me too! Are you Original Baptist Church of God, or are you Reformed Baptist Church of God?"

He said, "Reformed Baptist Church of God!"

I said, "Me too! Are you Reformed Baptist Church of God, Reformation of 1879, or Reformed Baptist Church of God, Reformation of 1915?"

He said, "Reformed Baptist Church of God, Reformation of 1915!"

I said, "Die, heretic scum", and pushed him off.

-- Emo Phillips <http://cmgm.stanford.edu/~lkozar/EmoPhillips.html>

Today I want to talk about those things that unite us rather than divide us.

The one thing that unites us is the ethical teaching that is common to all religions. It is the teaching known as the Ethic of Reciprocity or the Golden Rule. I saw a website that had the Golden Rule as an ethical teaching of twenty-one religions. I had no idea there could be that many. It is a little tricky when we distinguish a religion or a denomination of a religion. None of the twenty-one religions that were listed various Christian denominations such as Episcopalian or Presbyterian. They represent twenty-one different religions with Christianity being one of them.

Can you name twenty-one different religions? I can't. Fourteen of them were listed in the Call to Worship for this morning. If you took the bulletin away from me I don't think I could name the fourteen without peeking.

The point being that of all of those different religions, they all had a formulation of the Golden Rule. Regardless of their differences. And their differences are many and vast.

They have different cosmologies, different conceptions of God, different theories of life after death, different sacred practices, doctrines, histories, authoritative texts, and revealed truths. They have different ways of symbolizing and re-enacting the sacred. These are not insignificant differences.

Yet despite those differences they all have in common the Golden Rule:
“Treat people in ways you want them to treat you.”

One could argue, “That doesn’t mean much. That is a simple rule. A child can learn it. Just because it is a common truth among all religions, that doesn’t mean it is the most important truth.”

One could then go on and make a case why his or her most essential truth is greater than the Golden Rule.

I want to pose a few questions to you. These are not right or wrong answer questions, but questions to stimulate thought.

What is a more important truth for you:

The Apostle’s Creed or the Golden Rule?

That the Bible is the Word of God or the Golden Rule?

That Jesus is the Son of God or the Golden Rule?

The Holy Qur’an or the Golden Rule?

That Atman is Brahman or the Golden Rule?

The Eightfold Path or the Golden Rule?

Your most important truth _____ or the Golden Rule?

I don’t believe that the Golden Rule is common to all religions because it is common in the sense of ordinary or obvious. I think it is common to all religions because the highest and best expressions of each religion point to it.

I suggest (and it is a suggestion, not an authoritative pronouncement) that the Golden Rule, in its various formulations, exceeds in importance any revealed truth of any religion.

Maybe that is too strong. Let me put it another way: No religious truth is true unless it leads people toward the practice of the Golden Rule.

The Golden Rule wasn’t made for religion. Religion was made for the Golden Rule.

Mohammed said as much: “Not one of you truly believes until you wish for others what you wish for yourself.”

Jesus said as much: “Consider this: Treat people in ways you want them to treat you. This sums up the whole of the Law and the Prophets.”

There are two common distortions of the Golden Rule. The first goes like this:

The one with the gold gets to rule.

This is the ethic of might makes right.

The second distortion of the Golden Rule sounds like this:

Do unto others before they do unto you.

This is the ethic of the preemptive strike.

Both of these distortions arise from fear. Religious traditions need to help our people deal constructively with our fear rather than promote fear.

The Golden Rule is not simple. It is not simple in theory or in practice. It is difficult. Because of its difficulty, we give lesser things a higher level of importance. We spend our time on insignificant things because the important things (we think) are too difficult to tackle.

We refuse to believe that spirituality is that simple. Why do we have all of these religions, buildings, creeds, meetings, and professional clergy if it can be reduced to “Treat people in ways you want them to treat you?”

Religious institutions, in my opinion, when they are feeling insecure, justify their existence by elevating their own peculiar doctrines to a higher level than the Golden Rule.

However, on the other hand, religious institutions, when they are feeling secure, do utilize their religious heritage, symbols and so forth to help people in their practice of the Golden Rule.

Spiritual teachers in all traditions said in one way or another that their traditions were not that important. Their reason for existence is to enable their adherents to treat others as they wish to be treated.

So how do we apply the Golden Rule?

We need to recognize that the Golden Rule has some logical inconsistencies. For instance, how does a masochist follow the Golden Rule?

For illustration, I turn again to that spiritual master, Emo Phillips:

I was walking down Fifth Avenue today and I found a wallet, and I was gonna keep it, rather than return it, but I thought: well, if I lost a hundred and fifty dollars, how would I feel? And I realized I would want to be taught a lesson.

Emo Philips

<http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/e/emophilips129007.html>

Every rule has a loophole.

It is not always easy to apply the Golden Rule. We don't know how people would want to be treated positively. So a check on the Golden Rule is the Silver Rule. The Silver Rule is the Golden Rule stated negatively.

The legend goes that a Rabbi named Hillel was asked to summarize the Torah while standing on one leg. He said: *"What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. This is the whole Torah; all the rest is commentary."*

If we don't know what to do positively for someone, at least cause no harm. Don't do what you wouldn't want done to you. If we aren't sure what to do about the Golden Rule, start with the Silver Rule.

This doesn't seem to be a complicated rule, really. Many times throughout the day we consciously apply it. Most of the time, I would say, we generally follow the Golden or Silver Rule without even thinking about it.

It is when our emotions get the better of us, that we tend to forget to apply the rule, or we feel justified in not using it. When we feel wronged we tend to throw all the rules out the window. We all know that no one wants to be treated violently, or called an evil-doer, or to have gossip spread about her or him. Yet if we feel hurt or harmed by this person or group of persons, our

emotions of hurt and anger cloud our judgment and keep us from being consistent.

The Golden Rule is still a good standard even if we feel wronged. In fact, it is at those times especially when we need to bring the Golden Rule itself to consciousness and apply it. That requires of us some discipline. It isn't about feeling badly or feeling guilty or trying to justify our actions. It is the discipline of centering ourselves and distancing ourselves from our thoughts and emotions.

We have thoughts and emotions. The thoughts and emotions are not us nor do they control us. One of the ways to keep control is simply to notice our thoughts and emotions without passing judgment on them or us. We note them and name them.

Then we are in a position of recognizing their source.

From that point, we can begin to see the humanity of the other. They, too, have emotions and thoughts and wish to be happy as we do.

Philosopher, Harry Gensler, at John Carroll University in Cleveland, wrote his doctoral dissertation on the Golden Rule, what he calls his favorite moral principle. I want to quote a paragraph from a short essay he has on his web page. He writes:

The golden rule is endorsed by all the great world religions; Jesus, Hillel, and Confucius used it to summarize their ethical teachings. And for many centuries the idea has been influential among people of very diverse cultures. These facts suggest that the golden rule may be an important moral truth.

Let's consider an example of how the rule is used. President Kennedy in 1963 appealed to the golden rule in an anti-segregation speech at the time of the first black enrollment at the University of Alabama. He asked whites to consider what it would be like to be treated as second class citizens because of skin color. Whites were to imagine themselves being black - and being told that they couldn't vote, or go to the best public schools, or eat at most public restaurants, or sit in the front of the bus. Would whites be content to be treated that way? He was sure that they wouldn't - and yet this is how they treated others. He said the "heart of the question is ... whether we are going to treat our fellow Americans as we want to be treated."

The golden rule is best interpreted as saying: "Treat others only in ways that you're willing to be treated in the same exact situation." To apply it, you'd imagine yourself in the exact place of the other person on the receiving end of the action. If you act in a given way toward another, and yet are unwilling to be treated that way in the same circumstances, then you violate the rule.

To apply the golden rule adequately, we need knowledge and imagination. We need to know what effect our actions have on the lives of others. And we need to be able to imagine ourselves, vividly and accurately, in the other person's place on the receiving end of the action. With knowledge, imagination, and the golden rule, we can progress far in our moral thinking.

The golden rule is best seen as a consistency principle. It doesn't replace regular moral norms. It isn't an infallible guide on which actions are right or wrong; it doesn't give all the answers. It only prescribes consistency - that we not have our actions (toward another) be out of harmony with our desires (toward a reversed situation action). It tests our moral coherence. If we violate the golden rule, then we're violating the spirit of fairness and concern that lie at the heart of morality.

The golden rule, with roots in a wide range of world cultures, is well suited to be a standard to which different cultures could appeal in resolving conflicts. As the world becomes more and more a single interacting global community, the need for such a common standard is becoming more urgent.

<http://www.jcu.edu/philosophy/gensler/goldrule.htm>

Harry Gensler

I agree that it is urgent that we have a common standard. Perhaps all that is needed is a name change. Perhaps instead of calling it the Golden Rule, we should call it the Platinum Rule. Perhaps the name change will raise our consciousness toward the importance of this moral principle in a time in which various forces are being used to spread divisiveness among the human community rather than unity.

