

Put God Back in the Golden Rule

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Our world is awash with sound bites of moralistic advice, some straight out of a fortune cookie. Recently on a train, I noticed two large posters advertising an insurance company. One said, “Offering all you have makes life deep beyond measure,” and the other, “Living for others unlocks all the joy you’ll ever need.” It seems that no office space is complete these days without a few wise words of inspiration decorating the walls.

Jesus’s Golden Rule cannot be domesticated and downsized to the equivalent of an insurance aphorism or a fortune-cookie slogan. That’s not to say that many haven’t tried. Here’s how the Golden Rule is usually quoted: “Whatever you wish others would do for you, do also for them.”

But that’s not what Jesus said. That version removes God entirely from the picture, making Jesus’s teaching a godless rule for good people. The real Golden Rule goes deeper and stretches higher. It’s a God-centered rule for grace-filled people. Jesus’s actual teaching requires greater

effort, provides deeper motivation, and is intended specifically for Jesus's followers (see [Matthew 5:1–2](#)).

Is God in the Golden Rule?

Here's what Jesus actually 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](#)).

God bookends the Golden Rule. He is the first word ("so") and the final word ("for this is the Law and the Prophets").

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The word *so* indicates that Jesus's teaching is his conclusion from what he's said previously. The entire Sermon on the Mount might be in view. But it may be that Jesus is thinking more specifically of what he has just said, in [Matthew 7:7–11](#). There he tells his followers that God is their loving Father and always gives good things to those who ask. *Therefore*, because God is so generous to us, we're to be lavishly generous to others. The Golden Rule is glorious overflow.

Jesus's second reason for living out his command is this: "for this is the Law and the Prophets." In other words, obey it, because God himself said it — and always has. The Golden Rule sums up and fulfills God's commands found throughout the Old Testament (most pointedly in [Leviticus 19:18](#)).

Jesus knows we need deep, God-centered foundations and motivations for his command because his rule for life soars high above how we naturally think and desire to live.

Greatness of the Golden Rule

Many world religions have taught a negative version of the Golden Rule, saying essentially, "Don't do to others what you don't want them to do to you." The problem with that kind of teaching is that it can be obeyed by simply doing nothing. Jesus's command is much more demanding. It requires action, creativity, and ongoing love toward the people in our lives.

Three Things Jesus Didn't Say

To see the demand and delight of Jesus's teaching, consider three things he does not say.

1. Jesus does not say, "Whatever others have done for you, do also for them." He doesn't limit our good deeds that way. The measure of our service to others is not their actual service to us, but what we'd *like* that service to be. "Whatever you *wish* that others would do to you, do also to them." There's an invitation, limited only by our own desire and imagination. One of the distinctive marks of Jesus's followers is that they regularly go above and beyond what others expect.

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2. Jesus does not say, “If there are a few things you wish others would do to you, do these also to them.” He doesn’t limit our good deeds that way. Instead, he says, “*Whatever* you wish that others would do to you, do also to them.” The word “whatever” (literally, “everything whatsoever”) is very broad. It may include cutting a neighbor’s grass when he’s out of town, having a lonely friend over for dinner, writing a note to express appreciation, and so much more. The upper limit is our desire and imagination.

3. Jesus does not say, “Whatever you wish your best friends, and fellow Christians, and people who like you would do to you, do also to them.” He doesn’t limit our good deeds that way. He says, “Whatever you wish that *others* would do to you, do also to them.” *Others* encompasses anyone in our lives. It includes the grumpy neighbor, the kid in your class no one likes, the spouse or child you’re struggling to understand, even the people who don’t love you back.

We Need God in the Golden Rule

Jesus envisions an ongoing way of life, not a one-off activity. He knows it will be challenging — that’s why he begins and ends with the kindness and command of God in our lives. And he knows we *need* to be challenged — that’s why he doesn’t include all sorts of disclaimers about establishing appropriate limits and boundaries on our service. Most of us need urging to give more, not less.

If we will put God back in the Golden Rule, we will see that it is not a bland bit of moral counsel intended to improve us slightly. It is a radical way of living that can be followed only by those who daily experience the infinitely great generosity of God in their own lives.

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