

The Golden Rule, The Royal Law & All Of Us

November 8, 2006

Most of us already know something about the *Golden Rule*, although it might challenge most of us to quote it accurately on the first try. Volunteers?

There's a newer version of the *Golden Rule* that's pretty popular, too—whoever has all the gold makes all the rules—implying that the most powerful among us sets the rules. Actually, I think that's an awfully good rule. Who is more powerful than God? Nobody. That means that God makes the rules. And he's actually made quite a few of them:

- One of his rules is that we're always supposed to tell the truth—that doesn't mean we have to say everything we think—in fact there's a rule that tells us not to do that.
- Another rule tells us not to steal anything from anyone...including God.
- He has a rule that we're not supposed to say untrue or unkind things about anyone.
- His rules state that we have to keep in mind that our behavior directly affects other people:
 - That regardless of our opinions and the personal liberties we're allowed as Christ-followers we're not supposed to be *stumbling blocks* for other people that are new Christians.
 - Another part of that rule tells us if we're not new Christians we aren't allowed to be easily offended, and that the personal practices and liberties of others, even when we disagree with them, aren't things we're allowed to be offended by.
- His rules require us to forgive people when they've wronged us—even if they don't ask, don't care or aren't deserving.
- There's also a rule that tells us we have to apologize when we've done the offending and do whatever is within our power to make things right, up to and including restitution.
- There's a rule that tells us how to treat people when they've succumbed to temptation—humbly and gently.
- It's God's rule that we always act in love toward other people—*all* people:
 - Family members.
 - Neighbors.
 - Employers.
 - Employees.
 - Co-workers.
 - Telemarketers.
 - Waitresses, etc.

GOD MAKES THE RULES...WE OBEY THE RULES...OR NOT.

- I may chose to obey God's rules or I may chose not to obey his rules.
- But my attitude about God's rules don't change God's rules.

Fortunately, God is good. He is kind and fair. God is just. His rules, then, are good rules. They're also kind, fair and just. Amazingly, Jesus indicated that all of his rules are summed up in this one Golden Rule...the original one:

I. The Golden Rule

Matthew 7:12

In everything do to others what you would have them to do you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.

- Rabbi Hillel was challenged by a prospective proselyte to teach him the entire law of God while standing on one leg. So he said: *"What is hateful to yourself do not do to anyone else. This is the whole law; all the rest is only commentary"* (Recorded in the Talmud: Shabbath 31a.). That's a good rule.
- Confucius taught: *"What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others."* That's a good rule, too.
- From the Greek philosopher Epictetus wrote: *"What you avoid suffering yourself, do not afflict on others."* Another fine rule.
- In the book of Tobit from the Apocrypha: *"What thou thyself hatest, to no man do."* Again, a fine, fine rule (Tobit 4:15, NEB).
- They're good rules...but they aren't gold.

There's an easy-to-miss difference between what Jesus said and all the other statements. You can satisfy Hillel, Confucius, Epictetus and the Apocrypha without really doing anything.

But Jesus' words demand action. By placing a positive spin on this rule of conduct Christ engages his followers in a life of active goodness toward each other.

IT WOULD BE IMPOSSIBLE FOR ME TO OVERSTATE THE IMPORTANCE OF THE FOLLOWING STATEMENT.

**THE GOLDEN RULE CAPTURES THE HEART AND SOUL OF ALL THAT'S TAUGHT THROUGH THE LAW AND BY THE PROPHETS.
A CHRIST-FOLLOWER THAT CHOOSES TO LIVE IN THIS MANNER, CONSISTENTLY AND CONSCIENTIOUSLY, IS ONE WHOSE LIFE IS A PICTURE OF ALL THAT'S RIGHT AND GOOD ABOUT OUR FATIH.**

DISCUSSION

The Golden Rule admonishes us toward a life-long pattern of wise and godly choices (the: words we say, decisions we make, help we give, forgiveness we offer,

and etc.) that represent active goodness toward other people that is in direct proportion to the manner and amount of goodness we would like extended our way by those same others.

1. Does that knowledge allow you to think of *The Golden Rule* as something you can use personally at home, work, leisure? Yes _____. No _____. Not sure _____.
2. What are some possible applications of *The Golden Rule* that you could use today when you get to work; tonight when you get home?

II. The Royal Law

There's a second issue we can look at that's sort of like the Golden Rule. It's called the Royal Law:

- It's first mentioned in the Old Testament:

Leviticus 19:18

Love your neighbor as you love yourself.

- It was quoted by Jesus:

Matthew 22:35-40

A lawyer, asked Him *a question*, testing Him, ³⁶“Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?”

³⁷And He said to him, “**YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and WITH ALL YOUR MIND.**” ³⁸“This is the great and foremost commandment. ³⁹The second is like it, ‘**YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.**’ ⁴⁰On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets.”

- It's also quoted by Paul:

Galatians 5:14

The entire law is summed up in a single command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

- And it's quoted by James:

James 1:1-9

My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism. ²Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in. ³If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, “Here's a good seat for you,” but say to

the poor man, “You stand there” or “Sit on the floor by my feet,”⁴ have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

⁵Listen, my dear brothers: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him? ⁶But you have insulted the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? ⁷Are they not the ones who are slandering the noble name of him to whom you belong?

⁸If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing right. ⁹But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers.

1. Love Your Neighbor As You Love Yourself.

James 2:8

If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing right.

James calls it *The Royal Law*—it’s royal because it’s part of the most important law God ever gave:

Keeping the Royal Law means that I’m supposed to gauge my behavior based on what’s best for my neighbor, regardless of who that neighbor is, rather than on what’s best, easiest, convenient or expedient for me.

- Before I say something that’s rude or sarcastic to, or about, someone else I should stop and ask myself:
 - “Is this in their best interest?”
 - “Does this represent a godly sentiment?”
- Before I do something that’s going to have an effect on someone else’s life I need to ensure that my actions keep their best interest, biblical principles and God’s reputation in mind.
- On the other hand if I have a friend who’s about to do something that can only be described with the word STUPID I should ask myself if my silence is in their best interest.
 - Sometimes silence is golden...
 - Sometimes it’s yellow.

DISCUSSION

Re-read Matthew 22:39-40 and Galatians 5:14.

1. Have you ever stopped to consider just exactly how important it is to God, and us, for you and me to learn how to treat other people as he wants us to?
2. What theological implication do these verses hold for you personally?

2. Love The Poor Like They're Rich.

James 2:9

But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers.

The second component of the Royal Law calls for Christ-followers to extend our willingness to love people beyond our circle of friends to include those that aren't like us. Most notably James applies this principle to people that are poor, and it comes at a very good time in our church year. Because we're going to try to help as many poor people through the holiday season as we can. It's going to cost many thousands of dollars collectively and take an enormous amount of energy and time at a very busy season—and most of the people we help won't even send a thank-you note. They never do.

It's hard not to be at least entertained with the trappings of wealth, and that's makes is awfully hard not to cater to the rich. And it's not their fault—it's ours. Not that rich people don't like being treated deferentially, or try to make it happen, but I'm the one that actually makes the decision about how I feel and act toward other people. The *Royal Law* requires me to treat everyone the same way...

1. And that's pretty hard for most of us.
 - Why?
 - Because while the Royal Law applies to all people it applies most significantly to those least likely to expect royal treatment from us:

Matthew 5:46-47

If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Even the tax collectors do that. ⁴⁷If you greet only your own people, what more are you doing than others? Even people who are ungodly do that.

- Two guys walk into a meeting...
- Two families visit your church...
- Two teenagers enroll at your school...
- You know the drill...
- One looks successful, dresses nicely, speaks well, the other...well, the other one doesn't look like that.
 - Who are you drawn to?
 - Which will you give more of your time to?
 - Who do you want to move on your block?
 - Who gets invited to home group?
- It's okay to like the successful guy...it's just not okay to ignore the other one...
 - Moses was the son of parents that had nothing.
 - Gideon was a farm hand.

- David was a shepherd.
- Amos was a herds-man.
- The apostles were all without benefit of formal education.
- Jesus was the son of a carpenter, and probably was a carpenter himself.

DISCUSSION

1. Why do you think it's so hard for most of us to resist the influence of wealth, power, beauty, fame, prestige, and etc.?
2. What are some possible positive benefits we could take away from this if we were willing to do what James says?

WE GATHER AS EQUALS OR WE HAVE NOT GATHERED AS WE SHOULD.

Conclusion

QUOTE

"If we put ourselves sensitively into the place of the other person, and wish for (them) what we would wish for ourselves, we would be never mean, always generous; never harsh, always understanding; never cruel, always kind."¹

I think that's what Jesus wants us to take away from this lesson—the royal law means learning how to see life from another person's perspective and make the appropriate adjustments to love them and treat them the same way we want to be understood, loved and treated if we were them.

How different it is from the habits of the religiously addicted and the self-righteous.

Prayer

Father, many of us may have developed some habits that need to be corrected; we may need to do some damage control and set some things straight with someone, maybe more than one.

It might be a member of our own family that comes to mind as we think about the Golden Rule; maybe it's a colleague or somebody at work...but we've really blown it as far as the Golden Rule is concerned.

It may be the case that for some of us this Royal Law involves an entire race of people. Prejudice is such an ugly sin, and the Royal Law takes it away from those of us who are Chris-followers as an acceptable option.

We know you don't want us to live and let live without regard to the standards you have set for us, but that we are to love people...even when they're far different from us...maybe especially then.

¹ John R. Stott, *Sermon on the Mount*, p. 192

If we haven't taken seriously what it means to love our neighbor as ourselves and to love the poor as though they were rich, help us to do so now...even at the cost of a humble confession, which we never enjoy. But help us to do it; we confess that we all too often ignore what you tell us in the Golden Rule...because we don't always see the need nor feel the desire to treat others the way we want to be treated. It is our sin and we're sorry. And we confess that your Royal Law doesn't always carry much weight with us either. We've developed habits, attitudes and prejudices that can, and that sometimes do, allow us to live as though the Royal Law wasn't even in your holy Word. This, too, we confess as sin. May we be forgiven.

And may your own Spirit begin a process of change within us that would cause us to monitor our thinking and adjust our behavior toward other people so that through our life-choices they would find themselves the happy recipients of both The Golden Rule and The Royal Law. I can only imagine the difference it can make.