

Chapter 15 – The Golden Rule

We're accustomed to thinking about "rules" in a negative way, as limitations on what we want to do. But when we talk about *The Golden Rule*, we are using "rule" in a very different sense.

We must think, instead, of a "ruler" – a measuring rod, a yardstick, a unit of measurement. That gives the term a different feel, doesn't it? The Golden Rule is not just another restrictive guideline for Christians to follow. It is a standard of measurement.

But what exactly does it measure? It measures our own behavior.

Before we discuss the basics of The Golden Rule, let's look at several places where it appears in Scripture. As the essential dimension of our love of neighbor (see Chapter 1), the Golden Rule is part of the revelation of God's love to humanity.

The Golden Rule in Scripture

Tobit 4:15	"Do to no one what you yourself hate."
Matthew 7:12	"Do to others whatever you would have them do to you. This is the law and the prophets."
Luke 6:31-32	"Do to others as you would have them do to you. For if you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them."
Galatians 5:14	"For the whole law is fulfilled in one statement, namely, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'"

Intentions vs. Actions

The question may be asked: Why do we need a Golden Rule at all? There is one very good reason. Namely, we cannot see our own behavior objectively.

We judge ourselves by our *internal intentions and needs* (which we always presume are good, right?) while we judge others by their *external actions* (behaviors) or by how their actions affect us. And in fact, sometimes we are completely blind to the way our own behaviors affect others.

In other words, we can see into *our own* hearts, but we can't see into the hearts of others. Only God can see this hidden dimension of human existence (1 Samuel 16:7).

Because of this, God tells us to measure "good" and "bad" behaviors in human relationships by another yardstick: the Golden Rule. It uses our basic human desire to be treated fairly as the standard for deciding how we will treat others. It is not based on subjective feelings or intentions.

Here's the core of it: If we don't like something other people do to us, why should we do that same thing to someone else? On the other hand, if we appreciate when someone does something good for us – or if we wish people *would do* certain good things for us – then we should do those same things for others.

If it's good for me, it's probably good for thee. If it's not good for me, chances are my neighbor won't like it either!

Removes the Double Standard

Here we have perhaps the most valuable aspect of the Golden Rule: it removes that double standard of judging ourselves differently from the way we judge others. It gives us a single standard of judgment about human behavior that applies both to ourselves and to our neighbor. Jesus gave us a parable about this:

"Oh God, I thank you that I am not like the rest of humanity," said the Pharisee (Luke 18:11) as he looked down his nose at the sinful tax collector kneeling before God in repentance. The Pharisee was the centerpiece and hero of his own religious drama.

Because of that, the Pharisee felt free to tell God about all the faults of the sinner next to him: *"greedy, dishonest, adulterous"*. It's easy to see faults in others, isn't it? It's not quite as easy to see those same faults (or any faults) in ourselves.

In other words, the Golden Rule challenges that "inner Pharisee" in each of us who interacts with others the way a superior being relates to his inferiors. It injects humility into our relationships because it reminds us that – yes – we really *are* like the rest of humanity, as much as we hate to admit it.

Sins of Omission

The fact that Jesus stated the Golden Rule in a positive form ("Do unto others...") adds another dimension to the negative principle from the Old Testament above. When Tobit was counseling his son Tobias on how to act in the world, he told him: "Do to no one what you yourself hate."

Tobit enunciates a solid principle of upright conduct, but it doesn't go far enough.

For example, what if we witnessed another person being abused or cheated out of money or attacked before our very eyes? Should we just say, “Gosh, I would never do that to another person” and then go about our own business?

That is not Christianity! That is what we call a “sin of omission”. That is, Christians are sometimes *obliged to act* in a morally righteous way in order to fulfill the law of love toward our neighbor.

In certain circumstances, we may judge that it’s impossible to help someone in need (we shouldn’t think we can solve everyone’s problems), but we *should* ask ourselves a Golden Rule question at a moment like that: “

What if I were in that guy’s shoes? Would I want someone to speak up for me or help me against this injustice?”

You may recall the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31). It’s a good example of a serious sin of omission regarding one’s neighbor. The wealthy man totally ignored the suffering of his fellow human being laying at the gate of the rich man’s own home. The man never asked himself the Golden Rule question:

“How would I feel if a man who has all the comforts of this world stepped over me and ignored my serious needs every time he entered his home?”

“Be generous to the poor orphans and those in need. The man to whom our Lord has been liberal ought not to be stingy. We shall one day find in Heaven as much rest and joy as we ourselves have dispensed in this life.” ~St. Ignatius Loyola

The Common Good

The above parable indicates that there is a social dimension to the Golden Rule which literally helps to keep society from falling apart.

Imagine how different society would be if everyone held themselves to this higher standard of behavior: I don’t cheat others because I don’t like to be cheated; I don’t attack others because I don’t like to be physically or verbally assaulted, etc.?

A lot of social ills would cease overnight if people took bad behavior *as personally* as that! The world would also be totally transformed if people asked themselves what good they could do to others to improve their lives.

The Golden Rule is the foundation of what Catholic social teaching calls “the common good”, which means the good of society as a whole. Societies fall apart when people act only in their own self-interest.

The Law of the Gospel requires us to ... put into practice the words of the Lord. It is summed up in the Golden Rule, "Whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them; this is the law and the prophets." The entire Law of the Gospel is contained in the "new commandment" of Jesus, to love one another as he has loved us (CCC, 1970).

The Challenge

When Jesus gave us this standard of judgment, He didn't say it would be easy! In fact, the Golden Rule challenges the cultural standard for viewing the world, which most people naturally view through a lens focused on their own wants, needs, or desires.

There is nothing wrong with having plans for personal advancement, but there is something deeply wrong about walking through life like the Pharisee with no regard for anyone else but oneself. The Golden Rule saves us from living a selfish life.

Like everything in Christianity, we must interiorize and practice this standard one situation at a time, throughout the course of our lives, so that it becomes our single standard of judging how to relate to others.

Without the Golden Rule ruling over people's *hearts*, this world would be a pretty dismal place.

Summary

The Golden Rule provides a standard for judging our own actions. We do to others what we want done to us. In sum, the Golden Rule:

1. Functions as a "ruler" (yardstick, standard, unit of measurement) for evaluating our behavior
2. Is a positive re-statement of a negative principle from the Book of Tobit and also helps us to avoid sins of omission
3. Overcomes a "double standard" of judgment (that is, the hypocrisy of the Pharisee)
4. Must be internalized through countless acts of conscientious judgment and self-examination over time
5. Is a basic principle of Justice and the foundation of the common good of all societies

Excerpt: Peter Darcy, *Flames of Faith: 18 Elements of Catholicism to Light Your Way* (Port Salerno, FL: Strength of Soul Books, 2025), Chapter 15.