

Meeting With Christ

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

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DO ALSO TO THEM

Matthew 7:12

One of the most well-known statements that the Lord Jesus ever said is found in Matthew 7:12. It is often called the ‘golden rule’ of life. Here is what Jesus teaches.

Matthew 7:12. Therefore, whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them, for this is the law and the prophets.

God’s will revealed

This verse begins with the word ‘therefore.’ *Therefore, whatever you want...* This ‘therefore’ tells us that this is not a detached statement. It connects the sentence to what goes on before. But what is the connection? How does v. 12 connect with what goes on before? Some say that it looks back to the previous verse which speaks about prayer (v. 7-11). It would imply that just as God is generous and good to all those who seek Him in prayer so His children must be good to all men. Or it may refer back to the ‘judge not’ command (vv. 1-5). In that case, it can be considered as the summing up of this whole matter of our judgment of others.

Personally I tend to think that the connection does not have to be with one or the other specifically. The sentence itself does not tell us how far back its reference goes. I think it is safe to say that it is a recapitulation of all that the Lord Jesus has been teaching in the Sermon on the Mount so far concerning the righteousness required of His disciples in their dealings with all men.

But there is more that we can say about this connection. Look at the end of the sentence. *For this is the law and the prophets.* The term ‘the law and the prophets’ is a technical term that the Jews use to speak about the Scriptures, the word of God. So here Jesus is telling us that all that is said in the Scriptures concerning our duty towards our neighbor can be summarized in this rule: *whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them.* How does that connect with what goes on before? Well, it indicates that God will answer the requests that come from a particular kind of person. What kind of person? It is the person who does God’s will, because the law and the prophets is where the will of God is revealed to us. God answers in His generosity to those who do His will.

The law of prayer cannot be separated from the law of justice. We cannot expect good things from God if we live a life that is disgraceful to Him. God gives us a promise but He doesn’t just throw His promise to anybody. If you want God to answer you, if you want to hear God dealing with you and speaking to you, then you must pay attention to v. 12. And what does v. 12 mean in one sentence? It means that God will answer those who do His will. If you are not sincerely committed to do His will, then don’t expect that He is going to answer you. If we want the Lord to answer us, if we want to

experience God in this living way, then it is important to know what He expects from us. God expects that we do His will. And what is God's will that we may do it? Very simple. *Whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them.* This statement indicates that a disciple of Christ can know the will of God concerning his relationships with others by consulting his own interest.

The negative version of the golden rule

Let us now consider more closely what the Lord Jesus is saying to us here. 'Whatever you wish other people should do to you, so do to them.' This golden rule already existed in the negative form. In the negative form, we would have something like this: what you don't want other people to do to you, then don't do to them. That is quite easy to understand. If you don't want other people to punch you on the nose, don't punch them on the nose. If you don't want other people to steal your belongings, don't steal what belongs to them. We can even say that if you don't want other people to kill you, don't go and kill others.

As I mentioned, the negative form of the Lord's teaching can be found in Jewish literature, in classical literature, and even in Chinese literature. For example, the well-known Jewish rabbi, Hillel, said, 'What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor, that is the whole Torah, while the rest is commentary.' As you can see, this is very close to Matthew 7:12. In the apocryphal book of Tobit, we find the statement, 'What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor' (Tobit 4:15). Isocrates, a Greek orator and teacher said, 'Do not do to others that which angers you when they do it to you.' Confucius, the famous Chinese philosopher, is credited with having said, 'What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others.' We must admit that even in this negative form, it says something valid. It still fulfills the law to some extent in the sense that you will not murder someone with the understanding that you will not do to him what you don't want him to do to you.

However, there is a world of difference between the negative statement and the positive teaching of the Lord Jesus. Because not to do a thing is not the same thing as doing something. The man of the world, if he wishes to accept any morality at all, may be willing to go as far as the negative form. In everyday language, it means something like this: I wish other people to leave me alone, so I will leave them alone. And so we tell people, 'You leave me alone. I leave you alone. With this understanding, we will be on good terms.'

The positive teaching of Jesus

The man in sin may consider this as a high point in the morality of the world but when we become a Christian, more is expected from us. Becoming a Christian involves such a change that in the Lord's teaching, it means that we have to go out and do what He is teaching us to do. And this does not come automatically because most of us are used to a mentality which just wants to keep our distance from other people. Many of us have been brought up to stay away from people for fear of being hurt. The Lord Jesus is concerned with true love and with positive, active behavior. You see, love is always outgoing. You cannot say that you love somebody but that you don't want to see his face. If you are truly a Christian, the Lord is telling you that you have to break down the barrier in your own heart. You must go out to the other people and invite them also to break down their barriers in their own hearts. This is how the family of God's people can have an authentic fellowship.

So if you want to fulfill the teaching of the Lord Jesus in Matthew 7:12, the first step is to come out of your own shell and to reach out to other people. It is not going to be easy. You will find that to reach out, to come out of your shell, to open the steel door of your heart, it seems that you are exposing yourself to considerable danger. And immediately, your first reaction is to shrink back and to hide behind those doors again. Nobody likes to go out of his comfort zone. You find yourself secure behind those doors. But you cannot live all your Christian life in this way. If you want to obey the

word of God, if you want to do God's will, you must be prepared to go out and accept in faith the risks involved in reaching out to people.

Passivity condemned

Some Christians might be tempted to say, 'If I don't do anything, I can't go wrong. I can't commit any sin. So I prefer to play safe and not venture forth too much.' It is true that there is an aspect of the golden rule that teaches man not to do wrong. You must not lie, cheat, steal, and so on so forth. But the Lord's teaching here is more than not doing wrong. In fact, I dare to say that it is more than just doing good. It is looking, searching, and seeking for ways to do the good that you want others to do to you. It is seeking ways to treat others just as you want them to treat you. We do not have the permission to withdraw into a world where, perhaps, we offend nobody, but accomplish no positive good either. Passive Christianity is simply not part of what Jesus taught.

If you think that you are playing safe by doing nothing, I would like to invite you to look again at the Lord's teaching concerning the judgment. You will see that those who are judged are not only those who committed this or that sin. Some are judged for not doing what they should have done. They did nothing while they should have done something.

Let me give you a few examples. We will limit ourselves to three parables. Take for example the parable of the talents. What do we read in Matthew 25:30? *And cast the unprofitable servant into the outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.* The servant who is punished is the one who did nothing with the talent that was committed to him. He just buried it in the ground and did nothing with it. That was his crime. The lesson of the parable is this: it is not enough not to hurt; we must do what is good.

Then we have the parable of the last judgment (Matthew 25:31-46). We read that the sheep and the goats are separated out, and that it is the goats who are being punished. Why are they punished? Because they did a lot of bad things? Not at all. They were punished because they did not do what they should have done. 'When I was in prison,' the Lord Jesus says, 'you did not visit me. When I was hungry, you gave me nothing to eat. When I was thirsty, you gave me nothing to drink. When I was cold, you gave me nothing to wear. Depart from Me, you evildoers.' This is surprising, isn't it? The goats are punished because they did not do anything when somebody was in need. Again, that was their crime.

And finally, we have the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31). The rich man's fault was precisely that he did nothing. When Lazarus was outside his door, asking for food, he gave him nothing to eat. He ignored Lazarus and just left him outside the gate to die. He committed a sin by doing nothing when somebody desperately needed his help.

Practicing the golden rule appropriately

In order to avoid mistakes in applying the golden rule, we must be clear about what it does not say. Here are four practical points that I would like you to keep in mind.

The golden rule does not teach that we are to do to others what we would like them to do to us in order that they will do it to us. For example, I buy you an ice cream. So you will owe me an ice cream later. Jesus speaks of an unconditional love. When we do good to others, we expect nothing in return.

Secondly, the golden rule does not teach that we are to treat others the way they treat us, i.e., good for good, and evil for evil. You punch me on the nose; I punch you on the nose. I don't bother

you; you don't bother me. That is the way of the world. The way of Christ is not to do to others as they do to us. We should not treat men the way they treat us.

Thirdly, the golden rule does not teach that we are to treat others the way they think they should be treated. Of course, everybody wants to be well treated, and treated according to their own definition of what that means. As believers, we treat other people on the basis of love and righteousness. And sometimes, people might not like the way you deal with them, even though what you do is born out of love and justice. A Christian is not a people pleaser. Love, sometimes, can be tough.

And fourthly, the golden rule does not teach that we are to treat others the way we think they should be treated. What do we mean by that? You see, we all have the tendency of having a more favorable opinion of ourselves than we do of others. And therefore, because of this inconsistency in being totally objective, it is not a good idea to treat other people on the basis of how we think they should be treated.

The best and perfect way is summarized in the golden rule: we should treat others the way we want them to treat us. We are to do to others as we would like to have done to ourselves if we were placed in their condition. If you do that, you can never go wrong.

A rule of equity

You can see how the golden rule makes all men equal. How we wish to be treated is how we should treat others. And how others wish to be treated is how they should treat us. Your social status doesn't count. Your money will not change anything.

I remember that one day, the hospital where I was working received a notice announcing that in a week time a very important person from another country will be staying in the area for a few days. In order to prepare ourselves for his coming, we were given a list of instructions telling us what to do if this dignitary needed a medical treatment. Why should he get such special favor? Because this person is a VIP. He has a high rank in the government of his country. Well, God's way is not like that. Jesus teaches a rule that makes everybody equal. All people, the wealthy, the famous, and the powerful as well as the poor, the unknown, and the unimportant, all are to treat each other just as they would wish to be treated.

The simplicity of this rule is quite amazing. Its principle removes the necessity of laying down endless rules for our conduct in personal relationships. All that we need to do is to consult our own feelings. Jesus is saying, 'If you are in trouble as to how you should deal with others, this is what you should do. Ask yourself, 'What are the things that I like? What are the things that encourage me? What are the things that I don't like? What are the things that bring out the worse in me?' Then put yourself in the other person's shoes. What is true for you is also true for the other person. Therefore, in your conduct towards others, you must be careful to do and not to do the things that you have found to be pleasing or displeasing to yourself.'

An OT principle

Behind this principle, there is the assumption that we all want the best for ourselves. Self-love is a powerful force in our lives. It often guides us in our own affairs. You don't choose what is bad for you. You are interested in getting what is good for you. Jesus knows that and here, He is asking us to let that natural inclination become our guide in our behavior to others.

Jesus' teaching in Matthew 7:12 has its root in the OT which already alluded to the concept of self-love. In Leviticus 19:18, we are commanded to love our neighbor as ourselves. *You shall love*

your neighbor as yourself. In other words, we are to give the same sensitive consideration to others as we would give to ourselves. You can see that it says very much the same thing as the golden rule.

Notice that the Lord Jesus quotes Leviticus 19:18 in the context of his teaching concerning the two great commandments. In Matthew 22, it is presented as the second commandment. *The second is like it, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself (Matthew 22:39).'* And what is the first? *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind (Matthew 22:37).* Notice also that he concludes this passage in Matthew 22 in the same way than in Matthew 7:12. *On these two commandments hang all **the law and the prophets** (Matthew 22:40). **The law and the prophets**,* exactly the same expression that we find in the golden rule.

What does all this mean for us? Jesus is saying that both the golden rule and the two great commandments contain all the law. They are a summary of the revealed will of God. When Jesus says that 'the second is like the first,' He implies that the two great commandments cannot be separated. This means that the second can never be obeyed without the first. We will never be able to love our neighbors in the way we would like to be loved until we love God with all our heart, soul and mind. In the same way, we will never be able to treat others as we would like to be treated until we love God with our heart, soul and mind. Therefore anyone who is serious about putting into practice the golden rule must start with God. To care for others with such sensitive consideration requires that we function in relationship to God, loving Him to the ultimate degree.

God's will done on earth as it is in heaven

The golden rule is a very practical statement of God's love. God has done to us just as He wants us to do to Him. He has treated us as He wants us to treat Him and everyone else. For example, we have the Scriptural teaching that when we were still sinners, He loved us. He loved us first because He wants us to love Him. He took the initiative and does for us what He would like us to do for Him.

Also, the golden rule reveals the heart of God. It tells us specifically how God's heart long for us to live. It is a simple statement that shows what love really is and what life is like if we were in a perfect world. In fact, when we put in practice this teaching of the Lord Jesus, we are giving the world a taste of heaven where God's will is perfectly done.