

## Information about the “Golden Rule”

### **Introduction**

One of the most famous Biblical concepts is that of the “Golden Rule”. A common way of expressing that rule in English is as follows:

“Do unto others, as you would have them do unto you.”

The Golden Rule is explicitly stated in the New Testament, in the following verses:

#### **Matthew 7:12 (ESV):**

<sup>12</sup> “So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.

#### **Luke 6:31 (ESV):**

<sup>31</sup> And as you wish that others would do to you, do so to them.

Both of those verses appear to correlate to the following verse from the Torah:

#### **Leviticus 19:18 (ESV):**

<sup>18</sup> You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.

In fact, Jesus quoted Leviticus 19:18, when he stated that “love your neighbor as yourself” is the second most important of the commandments of the Law:

#### **Matthew 22:36-40 (NIV):**

<sup>36</sup> “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?”

<sup>37</sup> Jesus replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ <sup>38</sup> This is the first and greatest commandment. <sup>39</sup> And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ <sup>40</sup> All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

There is an obvious “connection” between Matthew 22:40, and Matthew 7:12. In Matthew 22:40, Jesus states that “all the Law and the Prophets hang” on the two most important commandments – and one of those commandments is to love your neighbor as yourself. In Matthew 7:12, Jesus states that it “is the Law and the Prophets” to do to others, what you would have them do to you.

As a result, it certainly appears that the Golden Rule is right at the “heart” of how followers of Jesus should try to treat each other. So, let’s examine that concept in more detail – in order to try to draw some conclusions from it.

## The “positive” and “negative” aspects of the rule

Some people tend to think of the Golden Rule in strictly “positive” terms – i.e., they think of it as *only* referring to **good** things, that we should do for others. Certainly, that is one aspect of the rule – we definitely should try to do good to others. In fact, one of Jesus’ most famous parables – the parable of The Good Samaritan – encourages that very behavior. Here is that parable:

### **Luke 10:30-37 (ESV):**

<sup>30</sup> Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead. <sup>31</sup> Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. <sup>32</sup> So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. <sup>33</sup> But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion. <sup>34</sup> He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. <sup>35</sup> And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, ‘Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.’ <sup>36</sup> Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?” <sup>37</sup> He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” And Jesus said to him, “You go, and do likewise.”

However, there is *another* aspect to the Golden Rule as well – a “negative”, or “prohibitive” aspect. In other words, the rule *also* applies to **bad** things, that we should not do to others. This concept can be seen in another one of Jesus’ parables – the parable of The Unforgiving Servant:

### **Matthew 18:21-35 (ESV):**

<sup>23</sup> “Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. <sup>24</sup> When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. <sup>25</sup> And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. <sup>26</sup> So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ <sup>27</sup> And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. <sup>28</sup> But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, ‘Pay what you owe.’ <sup>29</sup> So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ <sup>30</sup> He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. <sup>31</sup> When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. <sup>32</sup> Then his master summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. <sup>33</sup> And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?’ <sup>34</sup> And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. <sup>35</sup> So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.”

In other words, the servant in this parable should not have treated his fellow servant so harshly – because he himself did not want to be treated that way. So, this gives us an example of not doing bad things to others.

Interestingly, Judaism tends to *focus* on this “negative” aspect of the Golden Rule. A famous rabbi named Hillel, who lived during the time of Jesus, “summed up” the entire Torah as follows:

“That which is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow. That is the whole Torah; the rest is the explanation; go and learn.”

In addition, some of the Jewish writings in the last few centuries before Jesus also mentioned this negative aspect. Here is an example of this, from the book of Tobit:

**Tobit 4:15 (New American Bible):**

Do to no one what you yourself dislike.

So, it appears to me that we should keep *both* aspects of the Golden Rule in mind, when dealing with other people. We should certainly strive to do good things for others – but we should also try to avoid doing **bad** things to others.

**A rather “subjective” rule**

Almost all of the commandments in the Bible are completely “objective” in nature. In other words, those commandments are not “open to interpretation” – i.e., they do not require “value judgments”. Instead, they are very “black and white” statutes, that everyone must follow. Here are some examples of “objective” commandments:

**Exodus 20:15 (ESV):**

<sup>15</sup> “You shall not steal.

**Ephesians 4:28 (ESV):**

<sup>28</sup> Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need.

**Exodus 20:14 (ESV):**

<sup>14</sup> “You shall not commit adultery.

**Hebrews 13:4 (ESV):**

<sup>4</sup> Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous.

**Exodus 20:17 (ESV):**

<sup>17</sup> “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor’s.”

**Luke 12:15 (ESV):**

<sup>15</sup> And he said to them, “Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.”

However, the Golden Rule is *not* completely objective – instead, it has a subjective aspect to it as well. In other words, people do need to make “value judgments”, in order to obey the Golden Rule.

To explain this “subjective” nature, take another look at the way that the Golden Rule is stated, in Matthew 7:12 and Luke 6:31:

“So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.

And as you wish that others would do to you, do so to them.

Basically, in order to obey the Golden Rule, each and every **individual** needs to determine how **he**, *himself* wants to be treated – and then he must try to treat others in that way. This is the very definition of a “subjective” rule – i.e., it is a rule that is affected by each person’s opinions and beliefs.

As a result, in at least some cases, it is possible that two individuals will treat others in two *different* ways – and yet, both of them will be *obeying* the Golden Rule!

Here is a simple example of this: Person “A” may enjoy being involved in very loud, intense debates about theology – and therefore, he will be very loud and intense towards *others*, when he is involved in those debates. However, person “B” may prefer very calm, subdued discussions about theology – and therefore, he will be calm and subdued towards *others*, during such discussions.

In the above example, person A and person B **both obeyed** the Golden Rule – because they both treated others in the way that they, themselves wanted to be treated. However, the exact way that person A treated others was *different* than the way that person B treated others – because person A wants to be treated in a different way than person B does.

### **Some practical examples of the Golden Rule**

Here are some hypothetical situations, which provide some “practical examples” of using the Golden Rule.

First, here are some “positive aspect” examples:

- If I can’t get my car started in the morning, then I would want my neighbors to offer to jumpstart my car. Therefore, if I see that one of my neighbors is not able to start his car, then I should offer him a jumpstart.

- If I suffer a heart attack while walking down the street, then I would want other people on the street to assist me. Therefore, if I witness someone else having a heart attack, then I should assist him.

Now, here are some “negative aspect” examples:

- If I get angry and shout at someone, then I would not want him to “hold a grudge” against me, for the rest of my life. Instead, I would want him to forgive me, after I apologized for my outburst. Therefore, if someone gets angry and shouts at me, then I should not hold a grudge against him – instead, I should forgive him.

- If I steal something from a store, then I would not want the authorities to amputate my right hand (which is the penalty for stealing in some countries). Instead, I would want to be offered some way of providing restitution to the store, without being maimed. Therefore, if someone steals something from me, then I should *never* agree that his hand should be amputated; instead, I should allow him to provide simple restitution.

### A very dramatic example

Here is another hypothetical situation, which will also demonstrate the use of the Golden Rule. Needless to say, this example is quite dramatic – and severe.

Let's say that at some point in the future, I go completely "berserk" – and as a result, I try to *murder* a newborn baby with a knife. If that horrific situation ever occurred, what would I want *other people* to do?

Certainly, I would want other people to prevent me from murdering the baby – because I do not want to murder anyone. However, what are the **exact** actions that I would want others to take, while they are in the process of stopping me?

It occurs to me that there are four separate, sequential actions that I would want other people to execute, in order to prevent me from committing the murder. Here are those actions:

1. First of all, I would want people to use verbal persuasion, to try to stop me. In other words, I would want people to *convince* me not to murder the baby, by simply *talking* to me. (That is, I would want people to "talk me down".) If that action works – so that I stop trying to commit the murder – then that is the ideal resolution. Unfortunately, though, verbal persuasion does not always prevent crimes from being committed.

2. If verbal persuasion did not stop me, then I would want people to use non-violent force to try to stop me. In other words, I would want people to *physically restrain* me – so that I would be *unable* to commit the murder. For example, if another person can wrestle me to the ground – and if he can keep me incapacitated indefinitely – then that would allow time for the police to arrive at the place in question, so that they can arrest me. However, it may not be *possible* for another person to physically restrain me – because I may be larger and stronger than whoever is trying to stop me.

3. If non-violent force did not stop me, then I would want people to use non-lethal force to try to stop me. In other words, I would want people to *wound* me in such a way that would prevent me from committing the murder – *and* that would not kill me. For example, in this scenario, if I am more than a few feet away from the baby, then shooting me in the legs may be able to prevent me from committing the murder – because it would prevent me from moving around very much. However, if I am *right next to* the baby, then shooting me in the legs will not prevent the murder – because in that case, I would still be able to stab the baby with the knife, even with leg wounds.

4. If non-lethal force did not stop me, then I would want people to use lethal force to stop me. In other words, if *every other action* to stop me has been tried – and has failed – then I would want people to use *lethal force*, to prevent me from committing the murder. In other words, I would rather have other people *kill* me, than allow me to murder a newborn baby.

The above list describes the actions that I would want *other* people to take against *me*, if I tried to murder a newborn baby. As a result, if someone breaks into my house, and tries to murder a newborn baby that I am taking care of, then the above list *also* describes the actions that *I* would take against *that* person.

Of course, as mentioned above, the Golden Rule is rather “subjective” – i.e., it takes into account people’s opinions and beliefs. Therefore, it may very well be that other people will have different opinions about what *they* would want people to do to *them*, if they tried to murder a newborn baby. If so, then that would certainly alter what those people would do to others as well.

In any case, there are several reasons why I came up with the four steps, above. First of all, there is one explicit reference in Scripture, which deals with the situation of an intruder *breaking in* to a home:

**Exodus 22:2-3 (ESV):**

<sup>2</sup> If a thief is found breaking in and is struck so that he dies, there shall be no bloodguilt for him, <sup>3</sup> but if the sun has risen on him, there shall be bloodguilt for him.

The above passage states that if a thief breaks in to a person’s home at night – and if the householder kills the intruder – then the householder is not guilty of murder. In other words, in that case, it is permissible for the householder to kill the intruder. However, if it is daytime, then it is not permissible for the householder to kill the intruder, just because he broke in to the home.

Note that the above passage simply states that it is *permissible* for the householder to kill the intruder, during nighttime. In other words, that passage does not specify that the householder *should* or *should not* kill the intruder – it simply gives “leeway” to the householder in that case.

So, if someone broke into my house at night, then I would try to determine what his intentions were. If he tries to murder my infant daughter, then I would certainly follow the four steps listed above, in order to prevent the intruder from committing that murder. This certainly appears to be in line with the following verse:

**1 Timothy 5:8 (ESV):**

<sup>8</sup> But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.

From what I can see, part of “providing” for my family is providing for their *safety*. As a result, I would definitely do all that I could to prevent any members of my household from being murdered by an intruder breaking in.

However, if the intruder only wants to steal my property, then my actions would be much different. In that case, I would still try to *verbally persuade* him not to steal anything – but would not go any further than that. This appears to be in line with the following verse:

**Luke 6:30 (ESV):**

<sup>30</sup> Give to everyone who begs from you, and from one who takes away your goods do not demand them back.

So, my exact actions would vary, depending upon the *intentions* of the intruder.

## **Conclusion**

The “Golden Rule” is certainly a very familiar Biblical concept. However, some of the “ramifications” of that rule are not so obvious. For one thing, the fact that there are both “positive” and “negative” aspects of that rule is a foreign concept to many people.

The even more important item to note, though, is that the Golden Rule appears to be at least partially “subjective”. In other words, each individual person needs to determine how he, *himself* wants to be treated, in order to be able to obey that rule. Since different people may want to be treated in different ways, that means that the way any given person obeys that rule may be *different* from the way any other person obeys it.