

In Nomine Iesu

The Eighth Sunday after Holy Trinity 2023 Worth its weight in gold ... and then some – Matthew 7:12-14

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

“Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.”

Grace be to you and peace from God the Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who is the way, the truth and the life. Dear fellow redeemed in Christ.

Today's sermon text comes from the Sermon on the Mount, in which Jesus spoke publicly for the first time to thousands of people who ascended a mountain to hear Him. Many of them thought that He was the promised Savior, others were not sure, but hoped that He might be; and still others opposed Him. Matthew summarized the result of His speaking this way, “And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes.” (Matthew 7:28-29) Among Jesus' sayings was, “So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.” Or, put another way, Jesus said that all the Old Testament Scriptures, Moses and all the prophets, teach that this is true. It is the will of God. We have come to call this Biblical teaching the Golden Rule.

I

Everyone here knew the Golden Rule before you came to church this morning. You probably remember it this way, “Do unto others what you would have them do unto you.” You can find a definition of the Golden Rule on the internet many places. Here is how Wikipedia defines it: “The **Golden Rule** is the principle of treating others as one wants to be treated. Various expressions of this rule can be found in the tenets of most religions and creeds through the ages.” An extensive article follows, giving examples from those many different religions.

The Golden Rule is so widespread as an idea because it agrees with the conscience of mankind. Man knows in his collective heart that it is true and right. When Jesus spoke these words, everyone knew what He said was indeed true, knew that Moses and all the prophets testified to this. No one on the mountain would have disagreed with Him, not the scribes, not the Sadducees, nor even the Pharisees.

But some would have disagreed with Jesus about the meaning of His words, “this is the Law and the Prophets.” The Babylonian Talmud, the authoritative teaching of the rabbis, written in the centuries immediately after Jesus' ascension, has this version of the Golden Rule: “What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow: this is the whole Torah; the rest is the explanation; go and learn.” (*Babylonian Talmud, Shabbath* 31a). In other words, according to the Pharisees, the entire content of the Torah, the books of Moses, is the Golden Rule; the rest of the Old Testament is its explanation. Dear friends, Jesus spoke of the Golden Rule on the mountain that day

because it was the chief teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees, the elders, the priests, and scribes of Israel. It was their teaching in all the years following His earthly ministry. It is the popular understanding of the relationship between God and man in our day. Be good to your neighbor and God will be good to you. That is the way most people, ancient and modern, understand the Golden Rule.

But there stands Jesus in the same Sermon on the Mount saying, “You therefore must be perfect, as your Father in heaven is perfect.” (Matthew 5:48) There too He warns us all, “I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 6:20) So, let us consider the Golden Rule, in light of what Jesus says about righteousness before God, perfection, and entrance into the kingdom of heaven. To be sure, we know what the Golden Rule is, and our conscience agrees with it. But who of us has truly kept it, treating everyone as he or she desires to be treated? Have you? Perfectly? Have you kept it in a manner exceeding that of the scribes and Pharisees? And there, you see, is the real problem. None of us has kept the Golden Rule.

We have not been perfect, even as our Father in heaven is perfect. Far from it. Our righteousness has not exceeded that of the scribes and the Pharisees. We have not followed the Golden Rule that we all understand and agree with. We have, in other words, streamed into the wide gate with all the rest of humanity and found the way easy, and surely are on our way to destruction.

II

Let us return to the Golden Rule for a moment. Is there anyone who actually kept it? In the years that followed the Sermon on the Mount, all the Pharisees and the Sadducees kept a close eye on Jesus, together with all the leaders of the Jewish people, elder, priest, and scribe. They listened to His every word. They watched His every deed, looking for any breaking of God’s law, any failure of His to treat any neighbor He encountered with anything less than the love and respect that the Golden Rule demanded. But they could find no fault. Even at His trial before the high council, no two witnesses could agree on any infraction He had committed. He had, as the Evangelist Mark noted, “done all things well.” (Mark 7:37)

When it came to the Golden Rule, His behavior truly was gold. So now, let us read the two verses that immediately follow Jesus’ endorsement of the Golden Rule.

Jesus said, “Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.” Enter the gate, to where? Enter the gate, whether wide or narrow, but where does the path from it lead to? Well, according to the context of the entire Sermon on the Mount, the goal is the kingdom of heaven. There were those who thought the gate to the kingdom of heaven was wide and the way to it easy. They thought the Golden Rule had to be understood in a way favorable to man, doable by man. But you see, Jesus put it forth in the way God Himself originally meant. God demanded a righteousness of keeping that far, far exceeded that of scribe or Pharisee. He demanded a perfection of keeping that He Himself would judge, and not any man.

And that is exactly why this just and perfect God, who so loved the world, sent His only Son into the world to enter the narrow gate, walk the hard path, and keep the Golden Rule in the way it was meant to be kept - with gold medal perfection. And that is why Jesus would later say, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me." (John 14:6)

There is a way to God that seems right to many. And they look to their friends and acquaintances for agreement. And they find many who agree, and so they walk into the wide gate that they think leads to the kingdom of heaven. But the end of it, as Jesus says here, is destruction. There is only one way to the Father. There is only the narrow gate - we could say - the Golden Gate, and the hard path that was followed by Him who did all things well, who did everything for us, for He was and truly is the good neighbor, the Keeper of the Golden Rule for us all, who did unto us as we desire to have done ... and yet do not deserve. His way is worth its weight in gold, and then some. For He has paved the way to the kingdom of heaven for you with the gold of His life and His death.

+++

So, dear friends, whenever we recall the Golden Rule of how to treat our neighbor, let us remember why we should do so: Because our Good Neighbor, Jesus Christ, first loved us and gave Himself for us. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria