



The Real Golden Rule

Charlie Brown is a kind-hearted character. Despite the abuse he receives from friends and foes alike, he continues to practice the Golden Rule. In one strip Charlie is lined up behind a bunch of other kids to see a movie.

Lucy walks up to him and says, "Have you been here long, Charlie Brown?"

"No, I just got here. Actually, I shouldn't be going to the movies at all. I have homework to do. If it weren't for the fact that they're giving away free candy bars to the first fifteen hundred kids, I wouldn't even be here."

Lucy, who had been listening to the ticket agent counting kids while Charlie Brown talked, asks him, "Do you mind if I go ahead of you, Charlie Brown?"

Charlie responds, "No, please do. 'Ladies first' is always my motto. I don't think this is a very good movie. I just came for the free candy bars for the first fifteen hundred kids. I really should be home doing my reading, but you know how it is when they're giving away something for free."

As Charlie Brown is talking, Lucy walks in front of him and pays for her ticket. When she's finished, the ticket agent announces, "Fifteen hundred!" He looks at Charlie and says, "Sorry kid, that's the way it goes."

The world is full of Lucys, and when you practice the Golden Rule, you don't always get back what you give. In Matthew 7 Jesus speaks to us about how to deal with the Lucys in our life. All of us have people like this in our lives. There may be people like that at work. They seem to think it's their personal mission to make life difficult for us. Sometimes we try to share something of God's love with them but they find a way to use even that against us. How do we deal with that? Sometimes they are in our neighborhood. The loud music never stops, or the dumpy car never gets moved. You bake them a pie, but it's like it gets thrown right back in your face. Sometimes they are in our own home - a spouse, a child, a parent. You try to practice the Golden Rule, but it doesn't work. You get walked on; taken advantage of. How do you deal with that?

This is what Jesus addresses starting in Matthew 7:6. He just got done talking about judging others. He said we should not judge; we should not operate with a self-righteous, condemning spirit towards others. Why? Because our judgment will backfire as we stand before God. Because we're not very good at it; we can't see all there is to see about that person; we're not God. Because it's hypocritical; we have issues in our own life that need to be dealt with first. And because it does

great damage to our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Now you might have wondered this week as you tried to live this out, if I don't judge others, what do I do? Do I just treat everyone the same? Do I just let difficult people run me over? Am I to go through life like some kind of gullible fool? Where do I draw the line? After telling us not to judge, Jesus addresses this starting in v. 6,

I. We are to operate with discernment (7:6)

"Do not give what is holy to dogs, and do not throw your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you to pieces."

The first thing Jesus says is that, though we are not to judge, we're to operate with discernment, especially towards a certain group of people. He talks about "dogs" and "pigs." He's not giving us a lesson in how to treat our pets or farm animals. He's using a metaphor. He's talking about people. It's not hard to get at what he means. Dogs and pigs were despised animals. The dogs we read about in the Bible were not "a man's best friend." They were scavengers. They were more like wild animals than the cuddly creatures that jump in our laps to have their heads scratched. We all know that pigs pay no attention to Emily Post, but the pigs of Jesus' day were worse. They were half-wild creatures derived from the European wild boar. They weren't the plump and well-scrubbed Miss Piggys who sing love songs to Kermit the Frog.

There are people like this. In Psalm 22:16 David wrote, **"Dogs have surrounded me; a band of evil men has encircled me."** David was being mistreated, and he says his enemies are like a pack of drooling dogs ready to tear him to pieces. In Phil. 3:2 Paul wrote, **"Watch out for the dogs, those men who do evil, those mutilators of the flesh."** He's talking of those who were violently opposed to the gospel. Even more significant is how Peter describes false teachers in 2 Pt. 2:22. They are like **"a dog that returns to its own vomit, and a pig that, after washing, returns to wallowing in the mire."**

It's clear that Jesus is talking about people who strongly oppose him and his message. He's not talking about just ordinary unbelievers; he's talking about those who are hostile to Christ and his message.

How do we operate towards them? He says, "Don't give them what is sacred. Don't throw your pearls before the swine." What's he talking about? He's talking about the message of Christ. He's talking about the Gospel. This is what is holy. These are the "pearls" we are to withhold from those who in opposition.

When I was on my sabbatical I took a couple of days by myself and went up to my father's cabin in the little town of Graeagle. I was playing golf and I came up to the tee and it was one of those holes where the tee looked down on a steep hill with the fairway out in the distance below. I remember my tee shot because it was straight and it came down in the middle of the fairway right near a large group of geese that were feeding. I remember seeing it bounce and roll, as did my partner. It was a thing of beauty! But when I got down to where it landed, the ball was gone. It was the weirdest thing. It didn't plug, because I saw it roll. There was no where for it to go. And then I figured it out - one of the geese must have ate it! I was pretty upset. They had no appreciation for my great tee shot! I even started to approach them to see if I could see my ball in one of their beaks. But geese are kind of nasty and I couldn't get close to them. My Tiger Woods-like tee shot was wasted!

Jesus says don't hit your best tee shots in the middle of a pack of geese! Don't spend all your energy passing out the pearls of the Gospel to those who don't want it. There is a time when it is wise to hold back. There is a time when it is better to just let "sleeping dogs lie" as they say. In Luke 23 Jesus comes before Herod and when asked several questions, remained silent. It's significant that when he was examined by Pilate, he responded. But he was silent with Herod, because Herod was in a different place.

In Matthew 10:11-15 Jesus gave his disciples instructions about evangelizing different cities and homes. He told them that when they met with rejection they should leave that city or house and shake the dust off their feet. Don't force it, he says. If the door is not open, don't try to pry it open. Don't cast your pearls before the swine. In Acts 18 Paul is preaching in Corinth. He goes first to the Jews who lived there. But we're told that they "resisted and blasphemed." So what does Paul do? Does he try to force the issue? Does he keep preaching? No! We're told, "He shook out his garments and said to them, 'Your blood be on your own heads. I am clean. From now on I am going to the Gentiles.'"

Jesus tells us it's counter-productive to try to force the issue. I went to an agricultural university. One weekend my friend was leaving town and he put me in charge of his pigs. That was an experience I'll never forget! Have you ever seen pigs feed? It's not a pretty sight. They squeal, push and shove to try to be the first to the food. If someone were stupid enough to throw a bunch of valuable pearls their way instead of grain, they would go after it thinking it was something to eat. It would just end up being trampled on. And pigs are mean! As soon as they realized it wasn't grain, they might go after you. Jesus says, "When you fail to exercise discernment, when you force the issue, you harm the Gospel; people trample on it; they see it as cheap grain. You also harm yourself. They can tear you to pieces with their words; they can also do it with their hands."

I can remember as young believers Lynn and I were traveling through Europe. We met up with an Australian

couple and began to travel with them. We were very anxious to share Christ with them, but they really weren't that interested. Well, we tried to make them interested. We forced the issue, but it backfired. One morning we got up in the little cottage we were sharing and they were gone. They just left us.

Maybe you have a hostile mate. Your wife or husband doesn't want anything to do with Jesus Christ. Or maybe it's a child who has grown up and you tried to do everything you could to expose them to the truth, but they are as far away as ever and they don't want to hear it. What do you do? Don't force it. There is a time to back off.

Now there are two questions that arise here. One question is, how do we know when a person is at that place where we should back off? I mean it's not always that clear, is it? As I said last week, we can't see into their hearts. How do we discern what our reaction to various people should be? Another question that arises is what should we do towards those people Jesus describes as dogs? Jesus has told us what not to do; we are not to throw them the pearls of the gospel, but what do we do? Here is where the next section comes in.

II. We are to persist in prayer (7:7-11)

"Ask, and it shall be given to you; seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened to you. For every one who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it shall be opened. Or what man is there among you, when his son shall ask him for a loaf, will give him a stone? Or if he shall ask for a fish, he will not give him a snake, will he? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him!"

It's very important we see the connection here to what goes before. Jesus has not changed the subject. Too many people take these verses out of context. They say, "Look here, Jesus tells us to ask for anything, and if we just keep at it, eventually we'll get what we ask for." This has been the basis for a lot of what we call "name it and claim it" teaching. But that's not what he's saying here. Jesus is talking specifically about prayer as it relates to the issues he just got done talking about. Jesus is saying that when it comes to relating to others, especially in this whole area of exercising discernment, you need to keep asking the Father for help. You can't do it by yourself.

I can't tell you how critical this is to keep in mind! In order to walk wisely in relation to other people, in order to walk with compassion, in order to exercise discernment, we need to be in constant touch with our Father in heaven. We can't do it on our own. No amount of social skills, or natural savvy, or management training can replace our need to be constantly dependent on the Father.

For the last ten years I've had about a half-hour drive to work in the mornings. I know as I go to work that I'm going to meet with a variety of people that day, whether it's in person or on the phone. Some of those people will be scheduled while others

won't be. But one thing I know is that they are not all the same. And so, often I find myself talking to the Lord about this. And I ask the Lord to tell me how to be with each one. To give me wisdom and discernment. To know when to console and when to confront. There are people who really need my help, but there are others who come with a hidden agenda, or even to cause harm. I've learned the hard way. I can't tell you how often I've been fooled. And so, I just know I need to ask the Lord for help, or I'm going to get eaten up. Do you do that? When you meet someone new, do you ask the Lord to help you know how to treat them? That's what Jesus says we are to do.

There are three things to see here about this. First, persistence is needed. Literally, he says, "keep asking, keep seeking, keep knocking..." It's not something you can just ask for once. A relationship with God requires an ongoing dependence.

I think of the guy who tells his wife that he loves her and needs her on his wedding day. Ten years later she says to him, "You don't love me. You don't need me in your life." He says, "What are you talking about? I told you that ten years ago."

Jesus says to keep telling the Father that you need him. Kids are good at this. Have you ever noticed how persistent kids are in asking when they get something in their heads that they want? Jesus says, "Be like them. Keep asking."

The second thing Jesus says is we should be persistent because our Father is a generous giver. We are not to keep at prayer because God is reluctant to give and needs to be nagged into a response. We are to keep at prayer because God has committed himself to answer us. I think of a bride-to-be who is late to her wedding. The groomsmen are a bit impatient so they tease the groom, "She's not coming. Let's all go home. You should call the whole thing off." But the groom waits. She had made a commitment to him, and he knew she would arrive. He persisted because of his confidence she was coming. That's the emphasis here. We are to persist because God has promised us, "Everyone who asks receives." By the way, the word "everyone" is limited to the context. He's talking about his disciples who are seeking to do his will as seen in the Sermon on the Mount. To those who follow Christ, this is a promise.

It would seem that prayer is dangerous business. I mean, have you ever caught yourself praying for things you later came to find out you didn't want at all? Some thing even that might have ended up very harmful for you? This leads to the third thing Jesus says about prayer in this context. He says our Father in heaven knows what we really need. Would a father give a hungry child a stone to eat instead of bread? Or a snake instead of fish? Jesus is saying that our Father, who is far more wise and gracious than any of us, will give us only what is good for us. So we should learn to ask for good things. It's a good thing to ask for wisdom in how to deal with this or that particular person. It's a good thing to ask for a heart that is not quick to judge. It's a good thing to ask for God to soften that person's heart. And God our Father, who is the ultimate judge of what is good and right, will answer our prayer for good things.

That's why sometimes God doesn't answer our prayers the way we think he should. Someone wrote, "I asked God for

strength that I might achieve; he made me weak that I might obey. I asked for health that I might do great things; he gave me grace that I might do better things. I asked for riches that I might be happy; he did not give them so that I might be wise. I asked for power that I might have the praise of men; I was given weakness that I might feel the need of God. I asked for all things that I might enjoy life; I was given life that I might enjoy all things. I received very few of the things that I asked for; but I received the things that I had hoped for."

How do we deal with the variety of people in our lives? How do we know where to draw the line? How do we deal those who are resistant? We persist in prayer, because our Father is committed to giving us what we need. But there is something else about this that can help us deal with others.

III. We are to serve others (7:12)

"Therefore whatever you want others to do for you, do so for them, for this is the Law and the Prophets."

Once again, it's so important that we understand this in context. People say the Golden Rule is, "Treat people the same way you want them to treat you." That's really not the Golden Rule. The real Golden Rule has a "therefore" attached to it. "THEREFORE, treat people the same way you want them to treat you." The "therefore" connects the Golden Rule to what precedes it. The reason we are to treat people in this way, is found in the previous verses. The reason is that this is how our Heavenly Father deals with us. Treating others the way we would want them to treat us is consistent with how the Father treats his children, and his children should carry on that family likeness!

People talk about the Golden Rule today. It's kind of a universal ethic that people live by. People say, "I don't need God. I just live by the Golden Rule." But the Golden Rule is not the Golden Rule without God. It's empty! We can't live out the Golden Rule without God. We can't treat others the way we would want to be treated without being in relationship with God; without knowing Him as our Father; without knowing Him as the God who gives good gifts to his children. You don't start with the Golden Rule. You start with God. If I want to learn a musical instrument, I don't start with just picking up the instrument and trying to play. I start with finding a teacher. I start with listening and learning from her. Jesus says, "Don't go out and try to live the Golden Rule. Start with God. Listen to Him. Learn from Him. Depend on Him."

This is the most famous statement Jesus ever made. But in a way, it wasn't entirely original with Jesus. The Greek philosopher, Socrates, wrote, "What people do to make you angry, don't do that to others." The great Hebrew Rabbi, Hillel, wrote, "Do not do to your neighbor what is hateful to yourself." Confucius said, "What you don't want done to yourself, do not do to others." All these teachers came before Christ. But notice what Jesus does with this. He turns it into a

positive, active thing. Everybody else basically said, "Don't do anything that would hurt others." That's a negative. You can do that and remain a passive spectator of others. But Jesus comes along and says, "This is an active thing, not a passive thing. I want you to act in positive ways in the lives of others, not just avoid the negative." The good Samaritan could have passed right by the bloodied victim on the Jericho road and still obeyed Confucius. But Jesus praised him because he went out of his way to help him. He did for that man what he would want someone else to do for him.

So we are to start with ourselves. What do we want? How do we like to be treated? If we offended someone, what would we want them to do for us? How would we want them to handle that? That's the way we should treat those who have offended us. You want to be given the benefit of the doubt? Give it to others. You want to be treated with respect? Respect others. You want a fair wage? As much as you can, help others get a fair wage. You like it when people take time to listen to you and show genuine interest. You take time and listen and show interest. You like it when someone pats you on the back and says you're doing a great job, do it for them. You like it when someone greets you with open arms and warm welcome, do that for them.

Hear me well. We don't do these things so that others will do them for us. We have no guarantee that by doing these things, anybody will do anything for us. We do it because Jesus told us to and because in the end our reward is with him.

But when you think about it, if you're dealing with resistant people, if you're dealing with dogs and pigs, this isn't a bad rule. Don't be stupid and throw them your pearls, but don't throw rocks at them either. Be kind. Be gracious. Be gentle. Chances are you may diffuse their anger. You might see a dog or a pig suddenly transformed into a sheep or even just a hurting person.

Peter Miller was a Baptist pastor during the American Revolution and a friend of George Washington. Michael Wittman lived in Miller's town and did everything he could to oppose and humiliate the pastor. One day Michael Wittman was arrested for treason and sentenced to die. Peter traveled seventy miles on foot to Philadelphia to plead for the life of the traitor.

When he arrived, General Washington looked at him and said, "No, Peter. I can't grant you the life of your friend."

Peter replied, "My friend! He's the bitterest enemy I have!"

Washington said, "You've walked seventy miles to save the life of an enemy? That puts the matter in a different light. I'll grant the pardon." And he did. Peter Miller took Michael Wittman home, not as an enemy, but as a friend.

How do you deal with the Michael Wittmans or the Lucys in your life? You operate with discernment. Don't give them holy things. You persist in prayer. Pray for the wisdom to know how to deal with them, and pray for them. Finally, you serve them with the same generosity that your Heavenly Father has shown you.