

“Golden Rules”
Reverend Bill Gause
Overbrook Presbyterian Church
7th Sunday in Ordinary Time
February 24, 2019

First Scripture Reading: Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18

¹The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: ²Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them: You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy ...

⁹When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. ¹⁰You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the Lord your God. ¹¹You shall not steal; you shall not deal falsely; and you shall not lie to one another. ¹²And you shall not swear falsely by my name, profaning the name of your God: I am the Lord. ¹³You shall not defraud your neighbor; you shall not steal; and you shall not keep for yourself the wages of a laborer until morning. ¹⁴You shall not revile the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind; you shall fear your God: I am the Lord. ¹⁵You shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbor. ¹⁶You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not profit by the blood of your neighbor: I am the Lord. ¹⁷You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself. ¹⁸You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.

Second Scripture Reading: Luke 6:31-36

³¹Do to others as you would have them do to you. ³²“If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. ³³If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. ³⁴If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. ³⁵But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. ³⁶Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.



Sermon: “Golden Rules”

In this portion of Jesus’ Sermon on the Plain, Jesus gives the disciples three basic rules for how to love and be in relationship with other people:

First, do to others as you would have them do to you.

Second, love your enemies and do good for people even if they don’t do good to you.

Third, be merciful because God is merciful.

These are actually some of Jesus’ most basic lessons. This is low-hanging fruit; a piece of cake. It’s entering a trivia contest and being asked to name all the colors on a stop light. You can’t get more basic than these three teachings of Jesus.

The first is the easiest; it’s The Golden Rule: *“Do to others as you would have them do to you.”* You’ve probably been taught that since you were tiny. Even though it’s part of Jesus’ Sermon on the Plain here, the saying is not unique to Jesus. The notion of treating others as you want to be treated is actually pretty universal.

We teach our children early on that you wouldn’t like it if someone hit you, so don’t hit someone else. And, even as adults, the circumstances might change, but the basic truth does not. You know that being the subject of rumors doesn’t feel good, so don’t spread rumors about other people. You know that you like being treated fairly, so treat others fairly. You know it doesn’t feel good when people are mean, when people assume the worst, so always be kind to people and be generous in giving the benefit of the doubt. It’s such a simple concept, really.

But what happens if others don't reciprocate? What if others don't treat you in the kind, loving, and generous way that you are treating them? Do you have the right to withdraw your loving-kindness towards them? Are you allowed to answer anger with anger, to meet callous disregard with the same?

And here we get Jesus' second lesson which builds on the first.

If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them.³³ If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same.³⁴ If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again.³⁵ But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return.

Expecting nothing in return?!? Well, that is simply un-American. In our society, we've come to expect quid pro quo. Merriam-Webster defines a quid pro quo as "something given or received for something else."¹ In other words, if you'll be nice to me, then I'll be nice to you; you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours. One hand washes the other. We see this in politics ad nauseum.

The problem is that a quid pro quo arrangement is dependent on both parties keeping up their end of the deal. If one of you stops scratching, the other one is justified in stopping, too.

But that's not what Jesus teaches. We are taught to love, regardless of whether we are loved in return. And of course, that doesn't seem fair, but then it's also the nature of God's covenant with us. God holds up God's end, even when we fail to hold up ours. So what Jesus is talking about is not so much "quid pro quo," giving something for something, but rather "quid pro nihilo," or giving something for nothing.

Here Jesus says that we have to go beyond what will benefit us; we have to do good to those who owe us nothing in return. We have to be loving even when we have no reasonable expectation of that love being returned. We have to give without the expectation of being repaid. We have to help without expectation of any reward.

Jesus is here encouraging good behavior *for its own sake*. Not just being kind only in response to kindness, and not just doing good because we might get something for it.

Now to be honest, that's probably not that hard to do for people you know and people you like, and maybe even for people you've never met, but for whom you can sympathize.

I wrote in this month's Overbrook World about an online message board called Humans Being Bros.² It's a collection of stories of real-life people embodying Jesus teachings, even though many would never be able to express it in those terms. They are stories of people going above and beyond to do good things for people, sometimes for people they've never met. And they can be examples for our own lives of discipleship.

John Chan is the owner of a donut shop in Seal Beach, California. He and his wife Stella have been making and selling donuts from their shop for over 30 years. Stella had a brain aneurism in October and after a stint in the hospital, was confined to a nursing facility for rehab. But John had to run the shop and couldn't be with her except after closing. So, the neighbors banded together and started buying up his donuts, by the dozen, every day, so he could maintain his income, but then be able to go to be with his wife as early as possible each day. He is normally open until 3:00 PM. On the day the story was written, he was sold out and closing-up at 10:30 AM³

There was the story of Jake, the young Texas grocery store cashier who, when he saw that an elderly customer didn't have enough money to pay for her groceries, turned the credit card machine around to face him, took out his own credit card and swiped it. I don't know what grocery store cashiers make in Texas, but it can't be that much. Go Jake!⁴

Those are great stories and there are plenty more like them. But what about situations that may not be as sympathetic or as easy? What about someone who has hurt you deeply? Can you go above and beyond to love and be good to someone you would consider an enemy?

Could you reach out to Patrick? Patrick, a native of San Antonio, Texas, is a professed Atheist who raised an objection to the manger scene that is installed in front of the county courthouse every year. He was so incensed that he threatened to

sue the county if it wasn't taken down. But then he suffered a detached retina and couldn't afford the surgery to repair it. He had to give up his job driving a taxi and his family faced a perilous situation. But then a member of one of the local churches got wind of his story and that congregation got together to provide financially for he and his family during the period when he could not work, helping him pay rent and buy groceries and necessities.⁵

In Iraq, after the fall of Fallujah, a group of Sunni and Shia Muslims visited a compound where hundreds of people who had fled the city were being held.

“They brought supplies – food and water – to those cramped into the tiny space, as would be expected by humanitarian organizations working in the region. But the recipients of this aid weren't the families who had been traumatized by militants; who had spent years living in fear and then weeks trapped, starving, as Fallujah became a battleground between government and ISIS forces. These were ISIS fighters who had been captured when the city fell. ISIS fighters who had been responsible for the suffering of the innocents. And the people providing them food and water had been among those who suffered at their hands.”⁶

Even though they had reason to hate, they instead acted to serve and love, even an enemy who had tried to destroy them.

Many of you remember the story from 2007 of the man who walked into an Amish school house in Pennsylvania and murdered five innocent children before taking his own life. But you may not know that same Amish community made a generous donation to the widow of the killer. They understood that she, a mother of three, had also experienced a devastating loss and even in the midst of their own grief, they were able to understand her situation and their desire was to help her begin to heal, too.⁷

Now most of us will probably never be in those sorts of situations, where the well-being of someone who hates you hangs on your ability to set aside your differences. But you will probably have many chances to set aside differences and old hurts and grudges to be kind, to love, to serve and care.

It's easy to curse and mutter at the TV when talking heads espouse political views you find abhorrent. But can you pray for that person and try to understand their point of view and work toward reconciliation in our divided community. It's challenging. And yet that's what Jesus teaches us to do.

Which raises the question of why? Why do we have to go above and beyond for strangers and people who may not actually like us? Even to the point of making fools of ourselves!?!

Is it just because Jesus said to? Or is there a deeper reason? Well, the answer is found in the third lesson; the last line of this text: *Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.*

Why love? Why do good? Why treat everyone fairly, with equity, even when they have done nothing to deserve it? Because God is merciful; and as children of God, we are to be merciful, too.

I can remember my parents telling me when I would act the fool, and I'm quoting here, “We didn't raise you that way. That's not how we act in this family.” It was expected that I would emulate my parents' values and actions. If they did it, I was supposed to do it. If they didn't do it, I had better not either.

That's how it is to be the children of God. We seek to emulate God in our thoughts, words, and deeds. And when we hate, when we hurt, when we hold grudges and refuse to let them go; when we judge, when we take glee in the suffering of an enemy, I believe God says to us “I didn't raise you that way. That's not how we act in this family.”

Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

You see, we often take Jesus' words as teachings and that is not a bad thing. But Jesus came to do more than deliver a raft of moral lessons; he came to do more than teach us how to act like Christians. Jesus came to *show us* what God is like.

When Jesus says love your neighbor and love your enemy, that's because God does. When Jesus says to share with others and care for the least of these, that's because God does. When Jesus says to forgive those who have sinned against you, that's because God does.

What we're seeing here is not *just* a series of lessons on how to be a good disciple. We are seeing revealed for us who God is. And if God is that good to us; if God's love for us is unconditional; if God's goodness to us is not predicated on how good we are or how likely we are to return the favor; if God is *that* gracious to us, then if we love God and really see ourselves as a part of God's family, we have to live and be the same way.

The only proper response to God's generous gifts of grace and mercy and steadfast love is sharing those gifts with others of God's children, even those ... especially those, who are strangers, who are different from us, with whom we disagree, and who are maybe even a little bit scary.

It turns out that the most basic and easy to understand of Jesus' instructions is perhaps the most difficult to actually do. But then God doesn't ask us to change the world. God only asks us to do our best. And sometimes we will try and fail, but we can't fail to try. We do our best trusting in the Holy Spirit to help us and we try our best with the firm knowledge that we are not alone. Because - if I do my best, and you do your best, and we all do our best, God can take all our best and make something amazing come from it.

To God be all glory, honor, power, and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.

End Notes

¹ "Quid Pro Quo." *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, Edited by Frederick C. Mish, Tenth ed., Merriam-Webster, 1993, p. 959.

² *r/HumansBeingBros/*, Reddit, www.reddit.com/r/HumansBeingBros/.

³ Lee, Greg. "Seal Beach Community Rallies behind Doughnut Shop Owner." ABC7 Los Angeles, KABC-TV, 2 Nov. 2018, abc7.com/society/oc-community-rallies-behind-doughnut-shop-owner/4598282/.

⁴ eljefebubba. "r/HumansBeingBros - Jake From...HEB (Found on r/Texas)." *Reddit*, 2019, www.reddit.com/r/HumansBeingBros/comments/a9gn30/jake_fromheb_found_on_rtexas/.

⁵ Flowers, Rich. "Atheist 'Flabbergasted' at Christians' Assistance." *Athens Daily Review*, The Athens (TX) Daily Review, 20 Mar. 2012, www.athensreview.com/news/local_news/atheist-flabbergasted-at-christians-assistance/article_fc4dcee1-e459-5b0f-b2dd-a23b5d2385a8.html.

⁶ "Meet the Christians Who Love Their Enemies, Even When It's ISIS." *OrthoChristian.Com*, Orthodox Christianity, 15 Sept. 2015, orthochristian.com/97079.html.

⁷ Hurdle, Jon. "Amish Donate Money to Widow of Schoolhouse Gunman." *Reuters*, Thomson Reuters, 13 Sept. 2007, www.reuters.com/article/us-amish-school/amish-donate-money-to-widow-of-schoolhouse-gunman-idUSN1229970820070913.