

“The Golden Rule – Or Else”

The Rev. Drew Willard  
UCC at The Villages, FL  
September 7<sup>th</sup>, 2014 ©  
13<sup>th</sup> Sun. after Pentecost

Exodus 12:1-14

Matthew 18:15-20

[Jesus said,]

*“I assure you that whatever you fasten on earth will be fastened in heaven.  
And whatever you loosen on earth will be loosened in heaven.”*

*Matthew 18:18*

Let us pray... O God,

Help us to hang onto what is good and build on it for the benefit of all;

And help us to let go of what is hurtful and give others a second chance  
just like we hope they would do for us.

Amen

As I prepared my paraphrase of Jesus’ Sermon on The Mount –

which I told this summer at six UCC churches, including our own,

I realized it falls into the classic formula of the ‘3-point sermon’.

There’s a beginning, a middle, and an end.

The first part is Jesus’ commentary on various commandments

using the phrase: ‘You have heard that it was said..., but I say to you...’

He challenges us to go past a literal compliance with ‘the Law’,

to follow the Spirit of the Law – which is to do the most ‘loving’ thing.

The second part emphasizes that we shouldn’t go through the motions

of prayer, donations, or service just for the attention and approval of others;

We must remember that God is really present

and seeks our honest interaction through faith.

The third part puts it all together:

If God is still speaking & we’re living like God makes a difference in our lives,  
then we should act that way towards others.

We should do unto others as we would have them do unto us – or else!

It is rare for mainline, progressive Christians to talk about

the ‘or else’ consequences of ‘sin’ – except as an issue of justice & peace.

Our hope and belief is that God is a God of mercy, that Jesus is the Prince of Peace,  
and the Holy Spirit is a Spirit of love.

However, we don’t have to go too far into the opening books of the Bible,

to see that God played hardball and didn’t cut much slack

when it came to obedience, starting with Adam & Eve!

Though it might seem that God was going through a learning curve –

like a new parent with kids, perhaps humanity was evolving instead;

It is through the Bible that we see how humanity

had to grow to learn about God and what God expects of us,

and that we break the Golden Rule at our peril...

Willard, p.2

We cannot take for granted that the next generation – let alone the wider world, even understands what the ‘Golden Rule’ is.

A friend recently shared a story with me, how he had worked as a teacher for a business class about customer service.

He mentioned the importance of using the Golden Rule, but only got stunned looks in response.

When he asked them about it, they said, “He who has the most gold, rules!”

That is how the world thinks – but in the case of the ancient Egyptians and the Hebrews, a higher law prevailed...

Our first scripture lesson describes how the Passover meal became a tradition by sacrificing a lamb and preparing it for a meal in a prescribed way.

Then, the Hebrews were to mark their doorposts with the lamb’s blood so God’s angel of death would literally “pass over” them on its mission to kill all the first-born children of the Egyptian people.

This meal became a ritual that has been observed to this day and meant to be carried on into the future to remind the generations ever since to remember how God saved the children of Israel from captivity in Egypt and punished the Egyptians for the hardheartedness of their Pharaoh. It is the signature story of the Jewish people, defining their relationship with God.

Now, the context of this story is that it precedes the 10<sup>th</sup> plague which was meant to change the attitude of the Egyptian pharaoh.

Moses and his brother Aaron had come to talk to him nine times before to let the Hebrew people go, warning of natural disasters.

Each time, he agreed, but then hardened his heart to go back on his promise until the disaster came to pass – and this happened 9 times!

The most troubling part of the story is how God told Moses that Pharaoh’s heart would be hardened and God would even help that happen.

Exodus 7:13 says that even after Moses’ brother, Aaron, performed a miracle to demonstrate God’s power:  
*Still Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he would not listen to them; as the LORD had said.*

This suggests, though, that Pharaoh had already made up his mind at the outset; He was prejudiced and miracles weren’t going to prove anything to him – instead, the disasters made him more determined to have his way.

So, there were consequences to being stubborn – in this case, innocent Egyptians suffered for their leader’s prejudice.

Willard, p.3

However, what *if* Pharaoh had changed his heart and mind?

What *if* Pharaoh had relented and kept his promise,  
instead of renegeing on it?

Couldn't this have led to a more inspired society of mutuality and respect  
for the Hebrew people and for the Egyptian people in return?

It would have been a different story certainly.

That didn't happen – and as Egyptian society fell into chaos  
over plagues brought on by prejudice – or hard-heartedness,  
the relationship between God and the children of Israel,  
was formalized by a ritual meal so they would always remember.

The Golden Rule was right there – even though it was ignored:

Do unto others as you would have them do unto you – or else...

The consequences of breaking the Golden Rule in this instance  
applied to those outside of the community of faith in God;

However, those on the inside that beloved community  
also need to be reminded from time to time,  
to treat each other with kindness.

The Golden Rule is really the 10 Commandments condensed into  
2 Great Commandments: love God and love others as yourself.

That is true for the Jewish community and for Christians as heirs of that tradition:

We are to treat one another with mutuality and respect – or else!

Jesus outlines a very practical way for resolving disputes  
that can arise within a faith community,

by using appropriate stages of confrontation

First, it means both parties in a disagreement, meeting one on one,  
in private.

If things are not resolved, the next step is to take an impartial witness  
and discuss the problem again between the two.

The last recourse is to bring the issue before a council of leaders  
and if it is determined that one or the other is the offending party –  
and that person is unwilling to change the offending behavior,  
that person is excluded from the congregation.

That's a tough one,

especially for congregations of the United Church of Christ where we say,  
'Whoever you are and wherever you are on life's journey,  
your are welcome here.'

Where the ethical line is drawn is not about who someone is,  
but about what someone does – how someone behaves.

Our 'Safe Church' policy reflects this as our own internal enforcement  
of the Golden Rule.

Willard, p.4

As we look at human history – and despite terrible setbacks,  
there is a movement towards an ethic based on love  
and not simply tradition;  
And that ethic has been with us all along.

One of our former members, Jean McClure,  
introduced our congregation to the ‘Behavioral Covenant’  
of her church up north, Danville Congregational UCC in Vermont,  
for ‘governing members’ behavior based on scriptural guidelines’.  
Let me read a summary of it to you...

*God has called us together  
as a living congregation.*

*We follow the teachings of Jesus Christ,  
who commands us to “love your neighbor as yourself.”*

*We desire to be a vibrantly healthy and compassionate  
Christian community.*

*To this end, we covenant together to make every effort  
to relate to each other in the following ways:*

*We will be respectful of each other*

*We will be accepting of each other*

*We will be honest with each other*

*We will be considerate of each other*

The alternative is to be  
disrespectful, unaccepting, dishonest, and inconsiderate of each other.

Is that in any way, a viable option?

Would anyone choose to live in such a situation?

Doesn’t that sound like hell?

So, is there any real alternative to the Golden Rule  
without having terrible consequences?

As members of the United Church of Christ,  
we don’t take oaths and we are not bound to believe in a certain way,  
we are not creedal;  
but the ancient creeds – and even modern ones like the Danville Covenant,  
can still be instructive to us.

They are reliable inasmuch as they help us to align our hearts and minds,  
our words and deeds with that great teaching, that great law:  
Do unto others as you would have them do unto you – or else.

Amen

## *The Danville Behavioral Covenant*

*God has called us together*

*as a living congregation.*

*We follow the teachings of Jesus Christ,*

*who commands us to “love your neighbor as yourself.”*

*We desire to be a vibrantly healthy and compassionate*

*Christian community.*

*To this end, we covenant together to make every effort*

*to relate to each other in the following ways:*

*We will be respectful of each other*

*By listening well,*

*By going with any concern directly to the appropriate person,*

*By having a civil demeanor,*

*By having a kind heart, and*

*By honoring each other in appropriate ways.*

*We will be accepting of each other*

*By tolerating differences,*

*By showing concern for feelings, and*

*By seeking understanding each other’s position.*

*We will be honest with each other*

*By being open, and*

*By being direct*

*We will be considerate of each other*

*By showing humility,*

*By being gentle,*

*By protecting personal information, and*

*By protecting each other’s reputation*

*[among our] Congregation and in our encounters in the wider world (5/9/2009)*

*Our lesson from Exodus 12:1-14 describes how the tradition Passover began as the Hebrew people were preparing to escape Egypt. Gathering for this meal would be how the Jewish people have remembered their special relationship with God ever since...*

[12:1] The Lord said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt,

[2] “This month will be the first month;  
it will be the first month of the year for you.

[3] Tell the whole Israelite community:

On the tenth day of this month  
they must take a lamb for each household, a lamb per house.

[4] If a household is too small for a lamb,  
it should share one with a neighbor nearby.

You should divide the lamb in proportion  
to the number of people who will be eating it.

[5] Your lamb should be a flawless year-old male.  
You may take it from the sheep or from the goats.

[6] You should keep close watch over it  
until the fourteenth day of this month.

At twilight on that day, the whole assembled Israelite community  
should slaughter their lambs.

[7] They should take some of the blood  
and smear it on the two doorposts and on the beam over the door  
of the houses in which they are eating.

[8] That same night they should eat the meat roasted over the fire.  
They should eat it along with unleavened bread and bitter herbs.

[9] Don't eat any of it raw or boiled in water,  
but roasted over fire with its head, legs, and internal organs.

[10] Don't let any of it remain until morning,  
and burn any of it left over in the morning.

[11] This is how you should eat it.

You should be dressed, with your sandals on your feet  
and your walking stick in your hand.

You should eat the meal in a hurry. It is the Passover of the Lord.

[12] I'll pass through the land of Egypt that night,  
and I'll strike down every oldest child in the land of Egypt,  
both humans and animals.

I'll impose judgments on all the gods of Egypt. I am the Lord.

[13] The blood will be your sign on the houses where you live.  
Whenever I see the blood, I'll pass over you.

No plague will destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt.

[14] “This day will be a day of remembering for you.

You will observe it as a festival to the Lord.

You will observe it in every generation as a regulation for all time.

*Let us be guided and challenged by these words.*

Matthew 18:15-20 [CEB]

[Jesus said,]

[15] “If your brother or sister sins against you,

go and correct them when you are alone together.

If they listen to you, then you’ve won over your brother or sister.

[16] But if they won’t listen,

take with you one or two others so that every word may be established

by the mouth of two or three witnesses.

[17] But if they still won’t pay attention, report it to the church.

If they won’t pay attention even to the church,

treat them as you would a Gentile and tax collector.

[18] I assure you that whatever you fasten on earth will be fastened in heaven.

And whatever you loosen on earth will be loosened in heaven.

[19] Again I assure you that if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask,

then my Father who is in heaven will do it for you.

[20] For where two or three are gathered in my name, I’m there with them.”

## THEY'LL KNOW WE ARE CHRISTIANS

1. We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord,  
we are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord,  
and we pray that all unity may one day be restored:  
And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love,  
yes, they'll know we are Christians by our love.
  2. We will walk with each other, we will walk hand in hand,  
we will walk with each other, we will walk hand in hand,  
and together we'll spread the news that God is in our land:  
And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love,  
yes, they'll know we are Christians by our love.
  3. We will work with each other, we will work side by side,  
we will work with each other, we will work side by side,  
and we'll guard each one's dignity and save each one's pride:  
And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love,  
yes, they'll know we are Christians by our love.
  4. All praise to the Father, from who all things come,  
and all praise to Christ Jesus, God's only Son,  
and all praise to the Spirit who makes us one:  
And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love,  
yes, they'll know we are Christians by our love.
- Amen.

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