

Adam Smith : The Golden Rule

Matthew chapter seven, verse 12. So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the law and the prophets. Father, we thank you for your word.

God, we thank you that through your word, by your spirit, you speak to your people. And today, God, as we come to this word, we would ask not only that you would teach us, Lord, but that you would reveal to us the way you have loved us, Lord, that the love that you have called us to live toward others would be overflowing from the love that you have poured into our hearts. Lord, you have done for us far more than we could ever desire, far more than we are ever comfortable asking, but Lord, you have done it.

And so we give you praise. And would you lead our time, glorify your son, Jesus. It's in his name we pray, amen.

Amen, you may be seated. Well, in a world that is divided over almost everything from politics to the economy to morality to which diet were human beings made to eat, right? If you followed fad diet, no, this is the way humans were made. No, animal products, no, I still don't even know, are eggs bad for us? Like my whole life, right? We're told eggs are bad for us and then all of a sudden eggs are good for us.

And then anyway, we're divided, okay, over all of these things. And though we are so divided, there is still one thing that we can all agree on. The one thing that we can agree on is that love matters.

Love matters. We may disagree on how to run a country. We might disagree over what is right and wrong, disagree about religion, truth, or the meaning and purpose in life.

We can disagree about which way to hang the toilet paper roll. Always over the top, every single time. Okay, 100%.

But if you ask people the kind of world that they want to live in, most people will agree that the world is better with love in it. We know that a just society requires that we love the most vulnerable. We believe that a flourishing community requires that there be love between the members of that community.

Even a healthy life, psychologically, emotionally, physically requires love from the first breath until the last. Love matters. So then in a world where we agree that love matters, that love is significant, that love is important, then why do we still see so much division and so much hostility, so much selfishness, and so much hurt and pain? Why is it so common to hear about people talking about love, but struggling to actually live it? See, the problem is not that some people think that love is good and some people don't.

It's not that some people want love and some people have rejected love. The problem is that nobody agrees on what love is. We use the same word to describe entirely different realities.

We use the same word to talk about our marriages and our children and tacos. And then culture says, we know what love is. Love is love, which is stupid.

We just acknowledge that that is stupid. Blue is blue, up is up, lamp is lamp. It means nothing because we don't agree on what love is.

And so we end up in a world where everyone agrees that love is essential, but it's difficult to find two people and extremely difficult to find two communities who actually agree on what it looks like. And so this is where, in this dilemma, this is where we need the word of God to speak. This is where we need Jesus to teach us what love is.

This passage is famously known as the golden rule, and it defines what love actually is. Jesus says, so whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the law and the prophets. And if you remember way back to January when we launched this series in the Sermon on the Mount, we talked about this phrase, law and prophets.

We talked about how it was a way of referring to all of the Hebrew scriptures. It would be like referring to all of the US government as the executive, judicial, and legislative branches. It's the totality of the whole thing.

And so Jesus says that what scripture is pointing us to, the way that all of the scriptures are calling us to live, is that whatever we wish others would do to us, that we would actually go and do that to them. And this makes sense when we take into consideration the rest of Jesus' teaching, specifically Matthew 22 verses 37 through 40 is when someone comes to him and says, teacher, what is the greatest commandment? And Jesus replies, you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment.

And the second is like it. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets.

All of the scriptures are teaching to love God and love others. To love God and to love others is not only the way of the scriptures, it is the way of Jesus. And so this golden rule is the gold standard for what it looks like to love others as you love yourself.

This is, Jesus says, what love looks like. Now this golden rule, which I'm sure you've heard a number of times and maybe even heard in different ways, which we may get into, but it's really quite simple. Whatever you wish that someone would do to you, you go and do that for them.

It's simple, but it is far from simplistic and it's definitely not easy. See, it would be much simpler if

Jesus said, in any situation, in any relationship, whatever you're doing, here are five things, five boxes to check so that you can know that you are doing that thing in the most loving way possible. That would actually be easier.

Because in any situation, it's like, okay, first step, second step, third step. Now I'm a loving person. But it's not that simple.

It requires a great deal of thought and discernment. So Jesus is doing something and he's teaching something significantly more demanding because he's putting the responsibility back on us, right? All of this begins with what we wish or that same word is what we desire. It all starts right there.

And so he puts the responsibility back on us to have to think, to be creative, to be proactive, to be sacrificial. See, according to Jesus' golden rule, love is creative. Effectively, Jesus is saying, use your imagination.

You wanna love that person? Use your imagination. Think about it. Consider who they are and the season of life that they're in.

You know what it feels like to be a human being in a broken world. You know, you know what it means to be ignored. You know what it means to be misunderstood or to be wounded or slandered or judged or rejected.

You know what that feels like. And you also know what it feels like in a variety of situations to feel, to know that you're seen, to know that you have a voice to not just be heard, but to be understood, to be forgiven, to be treated with patience and kindness and dignity. You know what it looks like, what it feels like to experience an incredible time of need and then have someone show up for you in that season at just the right moment and give you the benefit of the doubt, to be honest with you or generous towards you, to just be present with you in your wounds and in the chaos of your world.

You know what it looks like. And so Jesus says, use your imagination, consider what it's like to be them for a moment, so to walk a mile in their shoes, so to speak. Be imaginative, be creative, be thoughtful, use that awareness and now turn it outward.

Take what you know and believe about the world and about humanity and now turn it outward. Go and do for others what you would desire others to do for you if you were in their situation. That's love.

That means love is not robotic. Love is not one size fits all. Different people experience it and desire things in different ways.

It requires you to think. It requires you to put energy, not only into some loving action, but energy discerning what is the most loving action in any given situation. That means the golden rule is an

invitation for our love to be as unique as we are.

You ever meet someone who is a really phenomenal gift giver, right? They're not the person who just spends money or they have the one thing that they do for everyone's birthday, right? Not that that's bad, right? But someone actually thought about you and thought about your desires and thought about your interests and thought about what season of life you were in and actually considered what it would be like to show up for you on that special day in a special way that would not mean the same thing for anyone else in your household or anyone else in your life, but for you in that moment, you just knew that somebody loved you. That's the kind of love that we are called to serve and be present with people in that kind of love, that kind of thoughtful, creative, unique love. And when the people of God actually live this way together, the world doesn't just see loving people or loving moments, it sees the diversity and creativity of love expressed through a whole community.

When the whole Christian community is living that way among one another and in the world, the world sees the full spectrum of love and knows that Christ is where they can go when they are in need of it. Love is creative and love is also incredibly proactive. Notice Jesus puts the impetus on us.

He doesn't say that we should do what others have done for us. Like, hey, do you remember that moment when someone really showed love for you? Now you go take that thing and do it for everybody else. That's that one size fits all unimaginative love.

And it's not retaliatory. It's not because this person has loved me, I will love them. It's because God has called us to love.

We are to take action. We're to look for opportunities to show love first. And it's not just for the people who are easy to love.

It's not just for your spouse or your kids or your close friends or people who attend your church. According to Jesus, love is indiscriminate. Jesus says that it is what we should do for others.

Others is a very broad term. He doesn't say to love members of the household of faith. He doesn't say to love your brother or sister in Christ.

He doesn't even say love your neighbor, which even during the time of Jesus, Jesus' disciples didn't understand. Who's my neighbor, Lord? He says, others. And so who are the others? Listen, I'm gonna make it really clear.

And another person is anyone who's not you. Okay, if it's not you, it is another, it's simple. There's no loopholes, there's no categories, there's no exceptions or exclusions.

And this means that we are not to discriminate in who we love. We need to be careful that that

does not mean that we are to be uncritical about what we affirm in that person's life. But as a person, if they are not us, they're not you, we are called to love them, regardless of what their behavior may indicate about their feelings toward you.

That means that we are called to love the person who cut us off in traffic. We're to love the server who got our order wrong. Okay, we're to love the person who disagrees with us politically.

We're called to love the person that frustrates us, the person who hurt you, the person who may be sitting next to you right now. You are called to love the person who is taking you to court. That is the other person, whether what they're doing is right or wrong.

If they're not you, they qualify. There are places when Jesus draws distinctions between people, the faithful, the unfaithful, the righteous, the wicked, the sheep and the goats. But when it comes to those his disciples are called to love, Jesus makes no such distinction.

Starting to feel the burn a little bit. It's a heavy weight. Gets more difficult.

Because according to Jesus, love is sacrificial. Wouldn't it be nice if Jesus said, whatever you wish others would do for you, just like wish that for them. It would be so nice, right? Because then you could be sitting there and you'd be thinking about all the things in life that you need or in life that you desire.

And then you remember the golden rule and you're like, no, Lord, I want this for the whole world. I am such a loving person. Be so nice.

If we just had to, you know, like send good vibes to everyone, right? And Jesus is like, you know, the good vibes that you wanna receive, like just send good vibes. It'd be so easy. That's not what he says.

It's not what he says. He says, do it. Whatever you wish others would do for you, now you go and do it.

Swallow your pride, absorb the cost, give your time, your energy, your attention, your money, your prayers, your tears, your blood. You give when it's not convenient. You give when it's not noticed.

You give when it's not returned. True love will always require something of you. It costs.

Love costs. See, this love that Jesus is calling us to is not sentimental love. It's not heart-shaped love.

This is cross-shaped love. And that's why the golden rule is so compelling in theory and yet so difficult in practice. The church is not called to be nice people.

Rather, we're called to be intentional, sacrificial in our love and service for others. This isn't just

difficult. This is completely beyond our ability.

To love in this way and to love everyone that God puts in our way in this way is impossible. And I think one of the reasons it is so difficult is because we get stuck at the beginning. Right, whatever you wish, whatever you desire others to do for you, and then we never get past that part.

We get carried away thinking about the things that we desire, the things that we want, the things that we wish people would do for us, the things that we feel like we deserve, the things that we feel like we're not receiving and if we're honest, that list starts to grow pretty quickly and it can kind of be consuming. And we think about the things that we want that we don't have, the things that we should have that have been taken from us and we start to, instead of going outward, we turn inward and we start fanning this flame of scarcity and lack and fear and just this radical individualism. And we get so focused on what we want.

We evaluate our lives based on what we're receiving and not receiving or we start measuring people based on how they treat us. But listen, if we are, if our awareness of the quantity of love in the world is, is lacking, right, then our love is going to be lacking. If we believe that love is scarce, we will scarcely love, we'll ration it, we'll protect it, we'll limit it, we'll hold it back.

And so what do we do in this situation when we're faced with Jesus' command to love God and to love others and yet find ourselves incapable of this kind of love, what do we do? We've got to do something to cope with Jesus' command and our inability to obey it. We have, we cope and we don't abandon love as a virtue altogether, but we redefine it, we distort it and instead of love, according to the golden rule, we settle for what I'll call fool's gold. Okay, these versions of love that shine, that feel good and they have the appearance of wisdom, but there's no real value, it's non-love.

And I think, walk through three of them and we may disagree with one or all of these three distortions, but throughout life, we will find ourselves living according to some version of them. And the first distortion of the golden rule we'll call passive non-love, it says, do not do to others what you would not want done to you. You've heard that, right? And it sounds wise and it sounds good and it sounds like something Jesus said, sounds moral, but it reduces love to avoidance.

As long as you're not hurting anyone, as long as you are not being mean, as long as you're nice, then you are loving. But Jesus didn't just call us to avoid evil, he called us to actively pursue good. The next one is transactional non-love, which says, do to others what you desire to get in return.

This is the way of the world, okay? Scratch my back, I scratch your back. Sometimes it's subtle, right? We treat people well because this is the way life works best and if we treat people well, then it will go well for us. Sometimes it's much more calculated.

I'm gonna do this so that I will get what I want in return. At the very least, it's mere utilitarianism,

but at worst, it's manipulation. That we only love in order to receive what we desire.

And so underneath it all, love just becomes a transaction. We give, but we're watching for reciprocity. We serve, but we're calculating all of the hours.

We show up, we expect something back. And when we don't get it, we pull back because what we thought was love is actually just leverage. That's not love, that's just strategy.

The third is affirming non-love. This is our culture's favorite. Do to others as they would have you do to them, right? Let people define for themselves what love is.

Love becomes affirmation and acceptance and support no matter what, and it feels compassionate. It feels kind, but look what happens. We remove truth.

When we remove truth or avoid discernment, when we prioritize somebody's comfort over somebody's wellbeing, somebody's feelings over their holiness, someone's current moment of satisfaction over their eternity, and we call it love, to anyone who spent two minutes pondering their own desires, thinking about the things that what your own heart desires, you know that desire is not the standard for righteousness. And the minute we start thinking about what we want others to do for us and then realize that other people also would want us to do things that are not good, the whole thing falls apart. Not all desires are good.

There are things that we want from others that aren't right. And if love simply affirms everything, then love has lost its ability to do any good in the world. Love without truth is not love.

It's permissive indulgence. And so all of these may look like love. They might feel like love, but they're not love.

They are fool's gold to the golden rule. They protect us from the real cost while convincing us that we're still being loving. It costs nothing.

It changes nothing. It is worth nothing. And there's a deeper problem.

Here, we don't just practice these distortions of love. We project them onto God. This is what's really dangerous.

We begin to believe if these distortions are what love truly is, then we begin to believe when we hear the words that God loves us, we begin to believe that this is the way God loves us. Though we might not say it out loud, at some level, we believe that God relates to us according to the distortions of love that we're living in. And so many believe that they are not uniquely loved by God.

Maybe you're here today and you hear that God loves you and you're like, listen, not only is God's love for me not unique to me, but I am uniquely disqualified from God's love. You don't know the

things that I've done. You don't know the things that I have been involved in.

And so preacher man, you're up there talking to me about God's love, but you don't know me. You are living as though God's love is not as indiscriminate as Jesus says that love is. Listen, if someone other than us is the other that we are called to love, the very fact that you are not God, and yet this is God's rule, indicates that God loves you in a way that you can't possibly comprehend.

There's many who believe that God's love is transactional. It's something that you have to learn. And so you feel differently about God's love based on the obedience or lack of obedience in your life.

There are times you're like, man, God's real proud of me because I've been doing all the right things. I've been checking the boxes. I haven't been doing the sin.

So I'm good. And then one thing happens, you slip up, and then all of a sudden, you feel like God's love has turned its back on you. You're living as though God's love is transactional.

Many believe that God's love is undiscerning, that he's just affirming and approving of everything you do because it makes you feel good and he doesn't want to get in the way. But as we've identified, there's no power in that. There's no transformation in that.

These are not love. And if this is the way that we believe God loves us, then we do not know how loved we are. We're believing a lie.

But what if you believed that God loved you in the way that Jesus describes? What if his love for you is creative, as personal and intentional as you are unique? What if Christ's love for you is proactive, not waiting for you to earn it, but he moves toward you first, even when you don't realize it? What if his love for you is indiscriminate? He's not searching for reasons to take it back, and so you can't lose it. What if his love for you is not about affirming everything you desire, and yet he still desires you? See, if God loves you this way, then you wouldn't have to ration your love for others. You wouldn't have to measure or keep score.

You wouldn't have to wait for somebody else to make the first move because Jesus already did make the first move. And so you would be free to overflow with the love that has already been poured out for you. You'd be free to give yourself, and you'd be free to serve those in need.

You'd be free to move toward difficult people without expecting something in return. But most of us don't live that way. There's a disconnect.

We say that God loves us, and that he's called us to love, and yet there's something broken in the system, and it's not because we don't know what to do. Jesus has told us what to do. It's because we don't actually know how loved we are, which means if the golden rule is the gold standard for love, then what we need is not a pep talk to be more loving.

What we need is to look to Jesus. See, the golden rule is not just something that you are called to do. It is something that has already been done for you.

Jesus has already done for you what you could never do for yourself, and he's done far more for you than you would ever dare to ask of another person. Think about it. Every longing you've ever felt to be seen, to be known, to be understood, to be forgiven or pursued or loved without condition, Jesus has already done that for you.

And not when you were at your best, not when you had your life together, not when you were worthy of it, but when you were at your worst, when you were running from him, when you were resisting him, when you were rebelling against him, when you were indifferent toward him, when there was nothing in you that made you deserving of it. Jesus loved you, and he loved you by laying his life down for you. John 15, 13 says, greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.

That is Christ's love for you. His love is beyond creative. No one saw the cross coming.

Nobody anticipated that God's love for us would be demonstrated in crucifixion. Humanity expected a savior who would love by conquering his enemies and overthrowing the oppressors and establishing power, but instead God loved in a way that nobody anticipated. He became weak as you are weak.

The God of the universe, the maker of heaven and earth became vulnerable as we are vulnerable. And he entered into our brokenness and he experienced life as we know it. And he loved us by laying his life down, not by defeating his enemies, but by dying for his enemies.

And his love is proactive. You didn't go looking for him. Regardless of what your experience is, you did not make the first move toward God, but God moved toward you first.

He left heaven. He stepped into your mess. He pursued you.

Before you ever gave a thought about him, he was already walking your way. And his love is indiscriminate. It's not just for the worthy or the faithful or the religious.

He loved his enemies, people who rejected him, people who mocked him and betrayed him, the people who nailed him to a cross. And as they were doing it, prayed, Father, forgive them for they know not what they do. That's the kind of love we're talking about.

His love pursues everyone, even when it confronts what is not good. And his love is sacrificial. Cost him everything, not just comfort, not just convenience, not just money or time or whatever else stands in the way of our ability to love others.

It cost him everything. Cost him his life. It cost the father, his one and only son.

Not just for his friends, but for his enemies. People who had done nothing to deserve it and everything to reject it. Did it for you and for me.

So the golden rule isn't just a command. It's a picture of Jesus. On the cross, Jesus didn't just show you love.

He absorbed your failure to love in your place so that you can be forgiven, so that you could be made new, so that you can know today beyond a shadow of a doubt that you are loved. And so listen, this week as we go from this place and we think about all of the ways that we should love better, when we think about all of the people in our lives that we could love more, when we think about all of the situations, all of the opportunities that we know we are going to be faced with in this next week, one way to respond to the golden rule is to say, all right, I need to be more loving. I need to be ready for all of these moments and I need to be creative and I need to be proactive and I need to be indiscriminate and I need to be sacrificial.

All of these things. All right, I need to just do better. And if that's you right now, you're missing the point.

Like just completely missing the point. This week, don't start by asking how can I be more loving? Start by looking at the cross and receive in faith that the man on the cross is God's love poured out for you. Ask the Holy Spirit to pour the love of the Father into your heart.

And then go from this place and give that love away. As it overflows, as it comes into your life undeservingly, you can go pour out for others. Maybe that looks like forgiving someone who hasn't apologized.

Maybe it looks like initiating a conversation that you've been avoiding or serving someone who can't repay you. Maybe it looks like something else. I believe in the power of God's word.

I believe in the presence of his Holy Spirit. I believe that if there is something that he is specifically calling you to do right now, he is all ears. He's already laying that person on your heart.

He's laying that opportunity onto your heart. He is teaching you in this moment what it looks like to walk in step with the law and the prophets, to walk in step with the love of Christ. And so I'll leave you with this.

It is only when you know that love is not scarce. It's only when you know that you are fully and freely loved in Christ that you don't have to ration it anymore. You can pour it out.

A life that has been overwhelmed by the love of Christ becomes a life that generously gives that love away. May it be true of us. Father, your word says that you have poured your love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit whom you have given us.

And so Lord, we are believing that what your word says is true, that through faith in Christ, your love for us is overflowing. Lord, there may be people here who do not have the certainty of your love for them. I pray that in this moment, God, as they confess faith in Christ and what you have done in your death and resurrection and ascension, that you, Lord, would manifest your love to them, not because of what they've done, but because of what you have done to save them from their sins.

Lord, I guess ultimately all sin at some point is a failure to love you and a failure to love others. But forgive us our sins and empower us, Lord, to not just do loving things, but to know that we are a beloved people. So as we come to you in worship, as we come to you in communion, the Lord's Supper, Lord, would you remind us of what you have done in love for us, that we would look to the cross and see God's love poured out.

Use this time of response, stir up our hearts with faith for worship, for your glory, that the world would see our love for one another and our love for others and look directly beyond us and see the love of Christ for them. In Jesus' name, amen.