



Testing the Golden Rule

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The new atheists have persistently down-played the uniqueness of Christ's teaching, focussing their attention on Christ's 'Golden Rule'. Between them they claim it is not impressive, not possible and not original.

Expressing it as a summary of his ethical teaching, Jesus taught the rule in the Sermon on the Mount: *"In everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets"* (Matthew 7:12).

Certainly, he found the central idea in a key chapter on holiness in the Old Testament Scriptures, *"You shall love your neighbour as yourself"* (Leviticus 19:18). This command, given in the context of caring for your own kinsfolk, was then applied also to the foreigner who lived among them: *"The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt"* (Leviticus 19:33).

Jesus put this commandment after the command to love God with all your heart and soul and mind (Deuteronomy 6:5), saying, *"This is the first and greatest commandment and the second is like it; Love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets"* (Matthew 22:36-40. See also Matthew 19:19, Mark 12:28-33, Luke 10:25-28, Romans 13:8-10, Galatians 5:14, James 2:8, 1 John 4:11,12).

Not impressive

Richard Dawkins, in a section entitled 'Love Thy Neighbour' writes, *"Jesus limited his in-group of the saved strictly to Jews... All those commandments that make reference to 'thy neighbour' are equally exclusive. 'Neighbour' means fellow Jew."*[1] This school boy error exposes not just his ignorance of the Old Testament (see above) but, more acutely, his ignorance of the Parable of the Good Samaritan, which was the high point of Christ's ethical teaching and was told specifically to answer the question, *"Who is my neighbour?"* (Luke 10:25-37).

Christopher Hitchens says that the order to love your neighbour is *"mild yet stern: a reminder of one's duty to others"*. He goes on, *"The so-called Golden Rule simply enjoins us to treat others as one would wish to be treated by them. This sober and rational precept, which one can teach to any child with its innate sense of fairness is well within the compass of any atheist... It is gradually learned as part of the painfully slow evolution of the species, and once grasped is never forgotten. Ordinary conscience will do, without any heavenly wrath behind it."*[2]

Not possible

Yet, he goes on to say that *"to love your neighbour as yourself is too extreme and too strenuous to be obeyed. Humans are not so constituted as to care for others as much as themselves: the thing simply cannot be done."*

In so doing, he supposes that to love your neighbour as yourself means something different from treating others as you would want to be treated. David Field quotes four possible meanings put forward by 'situation ethicist' Joseph Fletcher:[3]

- 1) Love your neighbour just as much as yourself
- 2) Love your neighbour in addition to yourself
- 3) Love your neighbour in the way you ought to love yourself
- 4) Love your neighbour instead of yourself

The first is evidently what Hitchens thinks it means, and that clearly is impossible. The second is mundane, merely stating the ethically obvious. The third is narcissistic, encouraging self-love. The fourth speaks of heroic self-sacrifice but does

not serve as a general rule of life. It seems clear to me that the biblical injunction is about none of the above.

Jesus put the rule that we should treat others as we would want to be treated on the same level as the command to love your neighbour as yourself, saying in different ways of each formula that they are the epitome of Old Testament teaching (see Matthew 7:21, 22:40, Mark 12:31). The apostles James and Paul clearly agree (Romans 13:9, Galatians 5:14, James 2:8). These are consequently two ways of saying the same thing.

The Levitical text about the foreigner (Leviticus 19:33) makes this clear:

"When an alien lives with you in your land, do not mistreat him. (He) must be treated as one of your native born. Love him as yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt."

Not original

Radical ethicist Peter Singer is Professor of Bioethics at Princeton University in the States. He writes, *"The major ethical traditions all accept, in some form or other, a version of the Golden Rule that encourages equal consideration of interests."*[4]

Christopher Hitchens says that the Golden Rule predates all Jesus's Beatitudes and Parables.[5] Sam Harris believes that the Golden rule is *"great, wise and compassionate"* but is not unique to any one religion and was taught by such figures as Confucius and the Buddha centuries before the New Testament was written.[6] Indeed, the rule is often attributed to Confucius.

Evaluation

How then does Christ's version of the Golden Rule stand up in the market place of ethical ideas? Are they right? Does it predate Jesus and do all religions teach it? As we consider different "Rules of Reciprocity" as they are called, I invite you ask seven questions of each of them:

- 1) Is this rule central to the teaching or peripheral?
- 2) Is it expressed in positive terms or negative? In other words, is it an ethic of obligation (something good followers must do) or an ethic of prohibition

(something harmful to be avoided)?

3) Is its nature about practical caring or mere well-wishing?

4) What does it concern? Is it concerned with all aspects of human relationships, or is it restricted merely to anger or discomfort?

5) What is its motive? Is it selfish, for your own benefit or is it selfless, being sacrificial and costly?

6) To whom does it apply? Is it limited to a particular people group or does it apply to all human relationships?

7) Does it predate Christ?

Rules of Reciprocity

Ancient Egypt: *"Do for one who may do for you, that you may cause him thus to do."*[7] This positive ethic of wide application is motivated by self-interest.

Socrates: *"Do not do to others what angers you, if done to you by others."*[8] This is not a central teaching and is clearly a negative ethic. It is universal in its application but is limited in its concern to anger.

Aristotle: *"We should behave towards friends, as we would wish friends to behave towards us."*[9] This is a positive ethic and unrestricted in its concern but applying only to our friends.

Confucius: *"Do not do to others what you would not like yourself. Then there will be no resentment against you, either in your family or in the state."*[10] This is broad in concern and application but is a negative ethic motivated by personal benefit.

Taoism: *"Regard your neighbour's gain as your gain, and your neighbour's loss as your own loss."*[11] The nature of this rule seems to be about attitude not action, equivalent to weeping with those who weep and rejoicing with those who rejoice.

Zoroastrianism: *"That nature alone is good which refrains from doing another whatsoever is not good for itself."*[12] This is a negative ethic of behaviour to avoid, albeit of broad concern and application.

Buddhism: *"Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful."*[13] This is a negative ethic of wide application but limited in concern to

what is hurtful.

Hinduism: *"This is the sum of duty: do nothing to others which you would not have them do to you."*[14] This is clearly a central teaching – 'the sum of duty'. It has a universal concern and application, but is expressed in negative terms as an ethical prohibition. It is about what you shouldn't do, not what you should.

Rabbinic Judaism: *"What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbour: That is the whole Law; all the rest is commentary."*[15] This is clearly a central but negative ethic. It is narrow in its concern to what is hateful and was understood to apply only to Jewish kinsfolk. Hence the question about the meaning of 'neighbour', which the lawyer put to Jesus (Luke 10:29).

All these rules predate Christ. The rest were written subsequently:

Islam: There is no equivalent to the Golden Rule in the Koran. However, there are Rules of Reciprocity in the later Hadith writings: *"None of you truly believes until he wishes for his brother what he wishes for himself."*[16] This version is positive and wide in its concerns but it is not a central teaching. Its nature is about well-wishing, not practical care. It is restricted in application, applying only to a Muslim brother, and is motivated by the desire for salvation. Another version is: *"Whoever wishes to be delivered from the fire ... should treat the people as he wishes to be treated by them."*[17] The context here implies that 'the people' are Muslims. The selfish motive is clear.

Sikhism: *"As thou deemest thyself, so deem others."* The nature of this universal rule seems to be about mutual regard or esteem. It does not necessarily imply any practical or sacrificial outworking.

Humanism: *"Do not do to others what you would not want them to do to you."*[18] This turns Christ's positive ethic of obligation into a negative prohibition. It changes the whole ethos of the rule, with very different implications.

Conclusion

By asking then if it is central, if it is positive, and

what is its nature, concern, motive, application and date, we can distinguish between these very different maxims.

Jesus taught that his Golden Rule sums up the Old Testament scriptures. It is a positive obligation about practical compassion, concerning everything we do for others. It involves risky self-sacrifice and applies universally, not just to kinsmen and friends, but across religious, racial and cultural divides. It extends even to our enemies. In this costly, comprehensive and positive form, the Golden Rule was original to Christ and is unprecedented and unparalleled in the history of ethics.

References:

- [1] Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p.254.
- [2] Christopher Hitchens, *God is not Great*, p.213.
- [3] David H Field, article on 'Love', Part One, *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology* (IVP 1995).
- [4] Peter Singer, *How are we to live?* (Oxford Opus) p.273.
- [5] Christopher Hitchens, *God is not Great*, p.213.
- [6] Sam Harris, *The End of Faith* (2004). As quoted in Wikipedia.
- [7] *The Tale of the Eloquent Peasant*, 109-110. Translated by R.B. Parkinson. The original dates to circa 1800 BC and may be the earliest version of the Rule of Reciprocity ever written.
- [8] Attributed to Socrates who lived 469-399 BC.
- [9] Aristotle 384-322 BC.
- [10] Confucius *Analects* 12:2.
- [11] Tai Shang Kan Yin P'ien.
- [12] Dadisten-I-dinik, 94,5.
- [13] Udana-Varga 5,1.
- [14] Mahabharata 5,1517.
- [15] Talmud, Shabbat 31d.
- [16] Number 13 of Al-Nawawi's 40 Hadith Qudsi.
- [17] Sahih Muslim Book 020, number 4546.
- [18] Richard Dawkins *The God Delusion*, p.263.

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