

The Golden Rule and Being Wisely Kind to Others

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Therefore, whatever you want people to do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets. (Matthew 7:12)

These words from Matthew, often called the Golden Rule, are a fundamental expression of the life of kindness that the Lord wants each of us to lead. The Lord wants each of us to receive as much of His love and wisdom as we can and use these to wisely love the people around us. When we love them in an image of how the Lord loves us we are achieving the goal the Lord wants for each of us. In all that the Lord does, He is trying to lead us to the happiest eternal life He can accomplish while respecting our freedom. Left to ourselves this is not the goal we would strive for. The teachings for the New Church state:

The Lord also foresaw that it would be impossible for any good to take root in each of us except in our freedom, for that which does not take root in freedom is dispelled at the first sign of evil and of temptation. This the Lord foresaw, as well as the fact that of ourselves, that is, from our own freedom, we would be inclined towards the deepest hell. That being so, the Lord provided that if each of us would not allow ourselves to be led in freedom towards heaven we could still be bent towards a milder hell; but if we would allow ourselves to be led in freedom towards good then we can be led towards heaven. (*Arcana Caelestia* 3854)

The Lord is infinitely aware that the process of guiding us from the natural life of our young adulthood to a life that is ready for a heavenly community is a path of many steps. We are taught that the Lord is doing millions of more things at every moment to not only help us forward from where we are now but also to prepare us for challenges and opportunities that are days, weeks, and many years in the future.

The Lord wants us to understand just how foundational the Golden Rule is. He stated: “Therefore, whatever you want people to do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 7:12). The Lord concluded this statement with the words “the Law and the Prophets.” This means the whole of Divine revelation. The Lord concluded the Two Great Commandments with the same phrase. The teachings for the New Church directly connect these two passages.

We read that we are to love the Lord God above all things, and our neighbor as ourselves (Luke 10:27). To love our neighbor as ourselves means not despising our neighbors in comparison with ourselves. It means treating them justly and not judging them wrongfully. The law of goodwill pronounced and given by the Lord himself is this:

Whatever you want people to do for you, do likewise for them. This is the Law and the Prophets. (Matthew 7:12; Luke 6:31, 32)

This is how people who love heaven love their neighbor. People who love the world, however, love their neighbor on a worldly basis for a worldly benefit. People who love

themselves love their neighbor in a selfish way for a selfish benefit. (*True Christian Religion* 411)

The Golden Rule can be misunderstood if viewed simplistically. Young children can sometimes assume that something they want must be what others want as well. Older people can also act from this faulty assumption. A slightly higher, but still flawed view of the Golden Rule is that if I get a sense you want something, but I try to help you get it, even if whatever this is, is actually not very good for a person in the long run. The true meaning of the Golden Rule is that just as my best self would want others to contribute to and develop that best self, similarly I would want to try to help others to develop toward their best selves.

Taking a simple example a person could have the habit of evening and weekend inactivity and low-level entertainment. While part of that person's mind finds this pattern of inactivity pleasurable, another part of that person's mind might recognize that not only is this a relatively poor use of time, but also is leading to poorer health and lethargy. Would you as a friend want to support the part of the person inclining to inactive low-level entertainment or would you want to see what you could do to encourage the part of that person that is contemplating a healthier pattern of life?

Wisely following the Golden Rule takes paying attention and insight into what is really going to be best for others.

The first lesson today was about the story of the men Joshua sent to spy out the city of Jericho. The teachings for the New Church say relatively little about what this story means on a deeper level. But consider what happens. The spies ended up in the house of a woman living by the outside wall of the city. Her name was Rahab. She could easily have recognized that these spies were in mortal danger. She could have told them that they need to immediately flee. Instead she hid them on the roof of her house and then gave a story that had pursuers head toward the fords of Jordan. At night she made an agreement with the men to spare her family and then sent them into the hills the other direction from the Jordan to wait until the soldiers from Jericho had given up the search. Then the spies could safely return to Joshua with their good news. Before they left Rahab she entreated them saying:

I pray you, promise to me by Jehovah, for I have done mercy with you, that you also will do mercy with the house of my father and give me a sign of truth, and that you will let my father and my mother live, and my brothers, and my sisters and all that they have, and will rescue our souls from death. (Joshua 2:12-13)

The men promised they would and as a sign and reminder of this promise Rahab hung a scarlet cord from the window of her home, hanging down the outer wall of the city. The teachings for the New Church state that the color of this cord "means the good of mutual love and its truth . . . for when the sphere of that good and truth is revealed visually in the lowest heaven it appears there as the color scarlet (*Arcana Caelestia* 9468:1).

Rahab wanted good things for the Israelites who came to spy out Jericho. She was wise in how she helped them. They in turn promised to care for her. A perfectly self-centered approach on the

part of the Israelites could have view her and her family as dispensable once the spies were safe. What further benefit could she supply the Israelites? Mutual love however feels an obligation to help others, and sometimes in gratitude for past help a person can be more motivated to help the other person in the future. This is like the help returned by the spies and other Israelites to Rahab. Sometimes the gratitude lead us to want to pay forward the benefit we received to someone else.

The opposite of the Golden Rule is the idea of getting revenge for something another person has done. The rule of revenge tends toward “an eye for eye, tooth for tooth” approach to life. Given that this apparent law of revenge is taught in the Old Testament (Lev. 24:17-21) it might seem strange that it is condemned as hellish. It is hellish in people who seek revenge. This quality inevitably brings its own punishment. People want bad things for others and inevitably in this life or the next have bad things brought to them. But its opposite is also true. People who want good things for others will have good things brought to them.

The Lord wants to bring heavenly usefulness, happiness and inner peace for each of us. He encourages us to work on being wisely kind to others. In the broader world sometimes it seems that people tend to externalize this idea of charity to mean such things as helping the poor and needy – including the possibility of giving money to a person who will directly use it for destructive purposes. In the teachings for the New Church we are encouraged to think of our daily opportunities of service as being the fundamental expression of charity or our desire to be wisely kind. The second lesson today spoke of the difference between this central expression of charity and helpful acts that are done outside of our work. “We are free to do them as we please, and when we do them, the recipients see them as kindnesses and nothing else” (*True Christian Religion* 425). The Lord encourages us to do these kind things. It is part of practicing for heaven. The Lord also wants us to recognize that these kind acts, like the proverbial scout helping an old lady across the street, are not the central expression of charity or wise kindness in our lives. The central expression relates to the fundamental pattern of useful things that fills much of our waking lives for most of our adult lives. For some this central expression of charity is expressed in looking after and raising children and all that helps create a healthy, happy home. For others it is their paid employment.

The Lord wants each of us to live by the Golden Rule. He wants us to be wisely kind to the people in our lives. May we cooperate with the Lord in His efforts to bring His love and His wisdom to each of us. AMEN.

Lessons: Joshua 2:1-15; *True Christian Religion* 425

Joshua 2:1-15, parts

And Joshua the son of Nun sent two men . . . to spy silently, saying, “Go, see the land and Jericho.” And they went and came into the house of a woman, a harlot, and her name was Rahab, and they lay there. And it was said to the king of Jericho, saying, “Behold, men came in here this night from the sons of Israel to spy out the land. And the king of Jericho sent to Rahab, saying, “Bring forth the men who came to you, who have come into your house, for they have come to spy out all the land.”

And the woman took the two men and she kept it secret, and said, "It is so, the men came to me, but I did not know where where they were from. And it was, when the gate was to be closed in the darkness, that the men went out; I do know not where the men went; pursue after them in haste, for you shall overtake them." But she had brought them up on the roof, and had concealed them with stalks of flax arranged by her upon the roof.

And the men pursued after them the way of the Jordan over the fords; and they shut the gates when those who pursued after them had gone out. And they were scarcely laid down, and she went up to them on the roof; and she said to the men, "I know that Jehovah has given you the land, and that the terror of you has fallen upon us, and that all those who dwell in the land are dissolved before you. For we have heard how Jehovah dried up the waters of the Red Sea from before you, when you came out from Egypt; and what you did to the two kings of the Amorites who were across the Jordan, to Sihon and to Og whom you doomed. And we heard, and our hearts did melt and the spirit arose no more in any man before you; for Jehovah your God, He is God in the heavens above and on the earth beneath. And now, I pray you, promise to me by Jehovah, for I have done mercy with you, that you also will do mercy with the house of my father and give me a sign of truth, and that you will let my father and my mother live, and my brothers, and my sisters and all that they have, and will rescue our souls from death.

And the men said to her, "My we die instead of you, if you do not tell this matter; and it shall be, when Jehovah gives us the land, that we will show mercy and truth to you." And she let them down by a cord through the window; for her house was on the side of the city wall, and she dwelt on the city wall.

True Christian Religion 425

It is important to distinguish between work-related acts of charity or wise kindness and incidental acts of kindness. "Work-related acts of charity or wise kindness" means those practices of charity that come straight from charity itself, since charity itself is a function of the work that we do. "Acts of kindness," however, refers to helpful acts that are done outside of our work.

They are called acts of kindness because we are free to do them as we please, and when we do them, the recipients see them as kindnesses and nothing else. We do them according to the reasons and intentions we have in mind as benefactors.

It is a common belief that goodwill consists solely of giving to the poor, helping the needy, caring for widows and orphans, and making contributions to build, enhance, and endow hospices, hospitals, hostels, orphanages, and especially church buildings. Many of these actions, however, are not integral to the exercise of goodwill; they are extraneous to it.

People who consider goodwill to be good deeds of these kinds cannot help taking credit for them. Although people may claim aloud that they do not want any credit for their good deeds, nevertheless inside them lies the belief that they deserve credit. This is perfectly obvious after death when people like this list the things they have done and demand salvation as their reward. They are then investigated to find out what origin their actions had and what quality their actions possessed as a result. Whatever origin the actions had - whether they came from arrogance, or from a hunger for fame, or from a wish to be seen as generous, or from a desire to win friends, or from some merely earthly tendency, or from hypocrisy - they are judged on the basis of that origin, because the quality of the origin lies within the actions. Genuine goodwill, however, emanates from people who have become steeped in it through doing work based on justice and judgment without the goal of being repaid, in accordance with the Lord's words (Luke 14:12, 13,

14). People of genuine goodwill refer to the donations listed just above [not as goodwill itself but] as acts of kindness and also duties, although they are related to goodwill.