

**“Our Relationship with Others:
Seek God and Keep the Golden Rule” (Matt 7:7-12)**

By Pastor Jerry Truex

Nov 4, 2007

A. Introduction

Today we continue our series on the Sermon on the Mount found in Matthew 5-7. The SOM is about righteousness or having a right relationship with God, other people, and ourselves.

Matthew 5 gives instruction about having a *right relationship with oneself* by keeping the Torah.¹

Matthew 6 gives instruction about having a *right relationship with God* by practicing spiritual disciplines.²

Matthew 7 gives instruction about having a *right relationship with others*. We found that not condemning others, taking the log out of our own eye first before helping someone else, is foundational for having trusting relationships with others.

The *theme of trust* leads us to the next section about seeking God. There are few people in this world that we can trust, but we can always trust God.

B. Coming to God in Prayer (7:7-11)

1. Three Imperatives: Ask ... seek ... knock ... (7:7-8)

⁷ "Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. ⁸ For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. (NRSV)

All three imperatives—ask, seek, and knock—refer to prayer.³ However, the passage is not mainly about prayer, but it is about us and God.

a. Ask ... receive

The saying, “Ask, and it will be given you,” is in the present tense. It underscores our continuous need for help. We need God. In the grand scheme of cosmological evolution and human history we are infinitesimally small. We are not self-sufficient. Like children, we need to ask.

¹ Especially regarding making peace (not anger/murder), honoring boundaries (not adultery), keeping commitments (not divorce), speaking the truth (not oaths), resisting evil (nonviolence), and having compassion for all (love enemies).

² Especially regarding being generous, praying, fasting, forgiving, and living simply.

³ Most commentators agree. E.g., Dale Allison, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 1999: 156.

b. Seek ... find

The saying, “Seek, and you will find,” draws on a number of OT sayings about finding God. For example, Deut 4:29 says, “Seek the Lord your God, and you will find him if you search after him with all your heart and soul.”

Texts like this witness to the fact that human beings are “finite creatures in the midst of existential mystery, searching for meaning, for some ‘ground of Being’.”⁴ Jesus says we will find what we are looking for. We will find our home in God

c. Knock ... door opens

The saying, “Knock, and it will be opened to you,” presents us with the image of a door ... the entry to the Kingdom of God. For Matthew, “the door is a symbol of salvation, a narrow doorway that leads into the kingdom of God.”⁵

In John’s Gospel, the image of the door becomes the gate to the sheepfold, and Jesus declares, “I am the gate!” (John 10:7, 9). Jesus is the entry point to God. Later in John 18, when Peter denies knowing Jesus, the text declares, “Peter was outside the gate!”

In Revelation 3:8, Jesus says, “Look, I have put before you an open door, which no one can shut.”

In all the images—asking, seeking, knocking—leads to one conclusion. “God is eager to answer, to be found, to open the doorway.”⁶

Jesus offers two examples to support that conclusion.

2. Two examples (7:9-11)

⁹ Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? ¹⁰ Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? ¹¹ If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him! (NRSV)

Bread and fish are not only basic foods, but they are symbolic foods. Bread symbolized God’s miraculous care of Israel when they were in the desert, when God gave them manna from heaven. Similarly, at the end of Ezekiel, a river full of fish symbolized God’s new order (Ezek 47:9-10). And we have the story of Jesus feeding five thousand people with five loaves of bread and two fish (Matt 13:17).

Jesus argument is easy to follow. If we, who are “evil,” wouldn’t deceive and deny our children, how much more God, being good, will care for His children.

⁴ David Buttrick, *Speaking Jesus: Homiletic Theology and the Sermon on the Mount*, 2002: 179.

⁵ Buttrick, *Speaking Jesus*, 2002: 179.

⁶ Buttrick, *Speaking Jesus*, 2002: 179.

3. Is this naïve?

For some of us, we might get the impression that Matthew is naïve. These verses seem to promise we can get anything we want as long as we persist in asking God. But what about selfish prayer? What about unanswered prayer?

There are three responses:

First, the NT makes it clear that not all prayers are answered, even unselfish ones.

- For instance, Jesus prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup [arrest, torture, and death] pass from me,” but concluded, “Nevertheless, not my will, but your will be done” (Matt 26:39). God did not grant Jesus that request.
- Paul also asked three times for “his thorn in the flesh” to be removed, but it never was (2 Cor 12:9).

Second, verse 11 mentions God will give “good things.” God’s response is restricted to “good things.” We might ask for things that appear good to us, but from God’s perspective they might not be.

- We might ask for a million dollars, but from God’s vantage point it might not be good, because we would lead us away from God.
- God might give us the gift of diabetes, because God’s knows that will function as a catalyst to draw us to God.

Third, prayer gets us moving beyond our own little ego to see things from the divine perspective ... to perceiving our unity with God and all that is in God. Prayer helps us transcend our narcissistic ego so that we can commune with the Divine Self or Christ in us (Gal 2:20; Col 1:27).

If we ask, “Does prayer work?” and/or “Will it benefit me?” I think we need better questions. These are questions from the narcissistic ego, the selfish self that sees the universe revolving around us.

The person, who has experienced Christ Consciousness or the Divine Self, asks a different set of questions:

- What adventure awaits me in my next prayer-meditation?
- How will my relationship with God deepen when I open myself in prayer?
- How will I be transformed by my creative interchange with God?

4. Summary 7:7-11

To summarize: Jesus tells us God can be trusted. There are many things we cannot trust—the stock market, the justice system, politicians, advertisements; sadly, we cannot fully trust teachers, parents, and even ourselves—but we can trust God.

Trusting God is essential for having good relationships with other people. If we trust that God is looking out for us, infusing us with divine power and love, then we will have the confidence to put other people’s interests ahead of our own.

C. Summary Statement: The Golden Rule (7:12; cf 5:17).

Once we realize God is eager to answer us, eager to be found, and eager to open the door, we can let go (of ego) and treat others as we want to be treated. This is “the Golden Rule.”

¹² “[Therefore] In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets. (NRSV)

1. Universal maxim

The Golden Rule did not originate with Jesus. It is a universal maxim that shows up throughout the world in many different religions and philosophic traditions.⁷

- a. **Confucius (551-479 BCE):** “What you do not wish anyone to do to you, do to no other.”
- b. **Taoism:** “Regard your neighbor's gain as your own gain, and your neighbor's loss as your own loss” (T'ai Shang Kan Ying P'ien).
- c. **Hinduism:** “This is the sum of duty: do not do to others what would cause pain if done to you” (Mahabharata 5:1517).
- d. **Epictetus:** “What you would avoid suffering yourself, seek not to impose on others.”
- e. **Tobit 4:15:** “What you hate, do not do to anyone.”
- f. **Rabbi Hillel:** “What is displeasing to you do to no one else; that is the whole Torah, and the rest is commentary. Go and learn.” (*b. Shabbat* 31a).
- g. **Islam:** “Not one of you is a believer until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself (Forty Hadith of an-Nawawi 13).

Most of these examples are in the negative—don't do what you don't want others to do. Christians have tried to make something out of the fact that Matt 7:12 is in the positive, but the distinction is probably overdrawn.⁸

2. Criticized

That brings us to the second point. The Golden Rule has been criticized, because it can be used in less than helpful ways.

Consider the *narcissistic mother*, who loves to smoke weed. Because she likes weed, the Golden Rule would authorize her to give weed to her children too.

Or consider the *insensitive boob* who treats people from another cultures they way he likes to be treated. [Tell the story of having my Mennonite mother-in-law, who had never seen TV and thought it to be evil, watch a documentary on TV in 1989.]

Or consider *the criminal* who won't report illegal behavior because he doesn't want his illegal behavior to be reported.

So the problem with the Golden Rule is this: It is not so “golden” in the hands of narcissists, insensitive boobs, and criminals.

⁷ www.religioustolerance.org/reciproc.htm.

⁸ So Buttrick, *Speaking Jesus*, 2002: 183.

3. Golden Rule is “golden” only in context

That brings us to the third point. The Golden Rule is “golden” only in context.

What is the context of 7:12?

First we should note that verse 12 begins with the word “therefore” (οὖν)—it connects verse 12 with the previous verse about God giving good gifts.

Matt 7:12 says, “Therefore, in everything do to others as you would have them do to you.” The “therefore” points back to verse 11 regarding how God gives good gifts. Thus it is saying: “God gives you good gifts (v. 11), *therefore* give good deeds to others (v. 12).”⁹

Next we should note that Matt 7:12 parallels Matt 5:17, where Jesus said, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.” Both 5:17 and 7:12 mention the law and the prophets. This is deliberate.

In this way, Matt 7:12 points us back to 5:17 to form an *inclusio*—a rhetorical device meant to remind the reader of everything that has just been said. In this way, the Golden Rule functioning as a climax to everything Jesus said from Matt 5:17 to 7:12, concerning our relationship to the Torah, God, and other people.

Read in context, the Golden Rule is protected from being twisted by narcissists, insensitive boobs, and criminals.

4. Highlights our connection with others

The Rule highlights our interconnection with other people; our destinies are interlinked. The Rule calls us to empathize with others—to see with their eyes, feel with their feelings, to discern what they need and what we can do for them.

Again, in this way, we have an opportunity to transcend our self-centeredness to ascend to a higher awareness. Paul identifies this high awareness as Mind of Christ or Christ Consciousness (1 Cor 2:16).

5. “One Taste” (Perennialism)

Lastly, the Golden Rule links Christian faith with other world religions.

Just as the ocean has only one taste – that of salt – so the truth of God has one taste—we ought to love others as one self.¹⁰

The OT and the NT assume that—outside of evil—God is the Source of all things. There is one God and God unites all things within Himself (Col 1:15-18).

⁹ Following Glen Stassen, *Living the Sermon on the Mount*, 2006.

¹⁰ A modification of the Buddhist saying, “Just as the ocean has only one taste -- that of salt -- this Dhamma-Vinaya has only one taste - that of release.” <http://www.geocities.com/athens/academy/9280/>

Wherever we find truth and goodness—science, psychology, other religions—we will find God is the Source. God is not the God of Christians only.

Paul says as much in Rom 3:29-30: “Is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, since God is one.”

This affirms Perennialism. Perennial means that something recurs again and again. To call something perennial is to say that certain truths or experiences reappear in different places and times, not limited to any particular culture, religion, or people.

Perennialism holds that there is one Divine Reality behind the world of things and this Divine Reality has been experienced by people in all types of religions.

But how do we know if something is compatible with the faith of Jesus? Next week, when we conclude the SOM, we will look at three parables functioning as warnings by Jesus, regarding taking the narrow path, bearing fruit, and building on solid ground. The parables function as tests of religious authenticity and a way to evaluate religious claims.

D. Conclusion

To conclude, Jesus gives us instruction about how to have a harmonious and just relationship with other people.

First, we need to seek God and trust God to meet our needs.

Second, trusting God liberates us from our self centeredness and then we can fulfill the law and the prophets (5:17) by keeping Golden Rule of loving others as we love ourselves (7:12).