

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from Jesus Christ Our Lord, Amen.

The Golden Rule... Do to others as you would have them do to you. Jesus wasn't the first one to come up with this rule. According to Wikipedia versions of this maxim can be traced back the Egyptians more than 2000 years BC. The Golden rule is expressed in some form in every religion and in every ethical tradition. Despite the fact that others advocate treating others as we want to be treated, in the Gospel of Luke Jesus calls for a radical new interpretation of this rule. Jesus talks about loving our enemies and doing good to those who hate us, curse us, and even strike us on the cheek. In other words, our response to others is not predicated on their behavior. Our response, in fact, is diametrically opposed to the way others treat us. Jesus' response is to do good to those who do bad to us.

Here's the dilemma. How do we move from the natural instinct to match blow for blow and word for word? To put it another way, how do we live our lives responding with grace and kindness, instead of reacting with words or actions that seek to answer hurt with more hurt? In many ways I'm the last person who should be preaching to you about responding in love rather than reacting in sin. I'm still struggling with that myself and on many occasions I react out of the emotion I'm feeling at the time when I know I should back away from the situation, reflect on what just happened, pray for guidance and only then respond in love.

In this Sermon on the Plain, Jesus is laying out his expectations for those of us who are still listening to Him, especially after he turned the value systems of the world upside down last week. I mean come on Jesus, following you is really hard! Because following Him is so hard we make up ways to try to soften Jesus' words... When the Law says don't steal or Do not Kill we all agree those are commands we are to take literally. Things get a little tougher when Jesus stretches the demands of the Law. So, we find ourselves doing something like this: When commands sound reasonable and attainable—such as: Don't steal! Don't kill—we say: “Yes, this is God's commandment to us: We must obey.” But when we feel Jesus is too radical and too extreme, we turn things around and say: Here Jesus is describing himself—the perfect man, living the perfect life. We should be cautious to apply this to our own lives because it's not possible for mere humans to be perfect. Jesus knows how imperfect we are, He would never demand such things from us. After all, if we let ourselves be used and abused by others as a door mat to be walked over, that can't be right. That can't be Jesus' intention. Surely, we are called to be self-defensive and to stand up for our rights. When we've been wronged we demand our rights. We want retribution and even punishment to those who wronged us!

Our human nature screams out for revenge when we're wronged. Left unchecked we'll demand restitution far greater than the loss we actually incurred.

Just this week the news was filled with headlines about that high school boy who was initially accused of mocking a native American. The boy and his family are now suing the Washington Times and possibly many other media outlets and celebrities who falsely accused him and called him names in the public forum. The first of several law suits is for a whopping \$250 million! The Old Testament had a rule to constrain this kind of retribution from escalating. It was the “law of proportionate retaliation”: A tooth for a tooth, an eye for an eye, a cow for a cow, etc. In other words, you were not allowed to retaliate any more than you had suffered yourself. But Jesus goes far beyond that, when he calls us to repay evil with good. Suppose somebody forces you to give them your mobile phone. Well, give your charger and pin code as well! If you know somebody hates you or has a grudge against you, shower that person with good things. If somebody speaks bad about you behind your back, find something good to say about them, and say it so everyone can hear. If somebody curses you, bless them in return. If you receive unjust treatment from somebody in church, from a family member, or maybe from your boss at work, pray for them, wish them well, and treat them well. How on earth can Jesus say something like that? Surely, he can’t be serious! I can think of 3 reasons why Jesus is dead serious and wants you and me to take him seriously.

First, if you continue to harbor negative feelings of hurt, anger, hatred and revenge against someone else, you are the one who is going to suffer most. Strong

negative emotions can hurt your mental and physical health. In fact, they can make you very sick and even cause premature death. Many people have destroyed their lives hating and cursing others. So instead, don't let poisoned relationships and feelings ruin your life! Do whatever you can to heal the damaged relationship. But even if you can't, you can still change the way you feel about it and the way it affects you. If you harbor negative feelings about somebody else because of what they've done to you, and if that has damaged your relationship—for example, you don't talk to each other any longer—then take that first step to healing and reconciliation. First, pray to God for the other and ask God to bless them. Then go and express your forgiveness and do something nice for them.

The second reason I believe Jesus wants us to take these commands in His sermon seriously is that they actually work in real life. I remember a boy who was being bullied severely in school. He wasn't the smartest or most handsome in his class, he was slow and clumsy, and he was what the people who tried to be kind used to call "husky." Everyone who wasn't trying to be kind just called him fat. In other words: he was the perfect victim. The teachers didn't know what to do, so they left him on his own without any support. He couldn't retaliate, because he was no match for the other boys in class. His sadness and helplessness just made the others bully him even more. One day the pastor of his church found him crying after Sunday school. He asked him what was wrong. When the boy explained the

situation, the pastor suggested, that from now on, he should try to pay back evil with good. Whenever the boys teased him, he would do something nice to them that would take them by surprise. For one boy, he offered to ride him home on his bike when the boy's bike had been stolen. With another boy he shared a chocolate bar. A third one he helped with his home assignments. At first, things seemed to go from bad to worse, but he didn't give up and before long, the bullying stopped. The boys that made his life a hell, now accepted him as their friend.

The third reason why I believe Jesus is serious, is because Jesus practiced what he preached. Many of our relationships are governed by more or less selfish motives. Even in so-called love relationships the question is often: "What can I get out of this?" Many marriages, partnerships and friendships end because people feel there isn't enough in it for them any longer. Jesus taught and lived a radically different approach. We call it "love", but in the Bible—I mean the original Greek—there is a unique word for it: "agape". It stands for the unselfish, other-centered, self-sacrificing love God showed the world in the life and death of Jesus. What Jesus is saying here to those who are willing to listen and to accept the message is this: If you want to see the kingdom of God right here on earth all you have to do is love others just the way I love you. Love is God's gift that is meant to be multiplied in the community of believers, the body of Christ. What you have received from God because of his agape love, pass it on to others.

Paul wrote in Romans 5: “God demonstrates his own [agape] love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. – – When we were still God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son.”

While we were still sinners and enemies of God... God took the first step towards peace and reconciliation. What a huge step it was! It cost him dearly. That’s how God wants us to deal with our enemies, with those who hate and curse and persecute us, with those who bully us, who steal from us, or who cheat on us. As members of the body of Christ—as the physical and visible presence of God in this world—let us have the same mindset and “heart-set” and the same readiness to self-sacrifice that we see in Christ. Let us be serious about the Golden Rule: to do to others as we would have them do to us, to put ourselves in the shoes of the other, and think: “If I were him or her, how would I want that person to treat me? What would I want him or her to say or to do right now?”

Let agape love be more than just a biblical buzz word among us. Let it be a motivating power, a healing power, a reconciling power, and a transforming power—among us and in our relationships with others. As we live out the Golden Rule as described by Jesus Christ, may our agape love bring the Kingdom of Heaven a little closer to reality here on earth. Amen.