

February 9, 2020

Matthew 7:12

### “Not Just a Rule of Thumb”

Pastor Wayne Puls, Senior Pastor at Hope Lutheran Church

When I was a kid growing up, my parents had the distinct privilege to raise four sons. We were not angels. We fought a lot. Not often like this (fists), but very often with words, name-calling, insults. My parents got really tired of our squabbling. My father used to tell me and my brothers, over and over, “If you can’t say something nice, say nothing at all.” I must have heard him say that a thousand times ... a year. “If you can’t say something nice, say nothing at all.” And I would say, “Yeah, yeah, that’s just my dad talking,” and all too often I’d tune him out.

Then, when I was a teenager, I worked part-time in my father’s business. I made a delivery one day at an Air National Guard base near our home. I pulled up to the gate, and checked in with the officer. He wore an impressive uniform. He had an impressive authoritative air about him. And he had an impressive sign taped onto the gate window, reading, “If you can’t say something nice, say nothing at all.” And it shocked me to realize that my dad’s familiar words weren’t just his little rule of thumb. The Air National Guard preached it, too. From that day on, I took my father’s words a bit more seriously. Or, maybe, I was just finally starting to grow up.

In his famous Sermon on the Mount, Jesus includes a little saying that might seem to be one of those overly-familiar adages, words we could easily tune out. “Whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 7:12). We call this the Golden Rule. And this rule is good, basic advice for our relationships with others. “Treat others how you’d like them

to treat you.” Several other religions and many cultures have similar sayings. Is Jesus just giving us a common, ordinary little rule of thumb? Or should we be taking the Golden Rule, from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, much more seriously?

Well, last week we talked about how the Sermon on the Mount is a description of Christian living for those who are experiencing God’s grace. Remember, Jesus was preaching to people who had been impacted by his teaching and his miracles. The kingdom of heaven was right there in their midst, because where Christ is, there is God’s kingdom. God’s will was being done in their sight and hearing, because when Christ speaks and acts, God’s sovereign will is accomplished. Jesus Christ, their God in human flesh, was at work changing their hearts, minds, and lives. And Jesus, in his sermon, is describing what their Christian living should now be like.

In chapter 7, verse 12, he offers this simple, but powerful nugget, what we call the Golden Rule: “Whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.” In other words, if you’re living by this one simple rule, you’re in sync with everything God commands in the whole Bible.

This is getting pretty serious. This Golden Rule clearly isn’t just a rule of thumb, or an arbitrary guideline. Jesus is giving us this rule to help get our Christian lives completely, totally in sync with the entire Word of God: the Law, the Prophets, all of it. The Golden Rule is Jesus’ way of setting the standard – God’s standard -- for our Christian living. He sets the bar really high.

In all honesty, maybe that bar is impossibly high for us. I told you earlier, my three brothers and I were not angels. None of us are. As humans, we all struggle with our imperfect, sinful

human nature. Every single human is born with a natural inclination to rebel against and disobey our God. We think way more about ourselves than we do others, right? We'd much rather give others what we think they deserve than follow the Golden Rule, wouldn't we? Treat others the way you want them to treat you? Put others first before me? Treat others – all others -- kindly, respectfully, considerately? That's hard stuff, isn't it? That's setting the bar higher than I think I get reach on my own, Lord.

Well, the Lord reminds me today, in his Sermon on the Mount, and he reminds you, that followers of Jesus are called to live not just according to our sinful human nature. We all struggle and battle with sin; but we're not alone in that battle. We're not just reaching and straining on our own. Our Lord promises to be with us. The same God-man Jesus Christ that walked on the water, and healed the lepers, and preached those powerful parables is with you, right now. "Lo, I am with you always," he promises, "to the end of the age. I will never leave you or forsake you," Jesus promises. The Holy Spirit of God dwells within you; and he is constantly at work in your life, helping you do things you could never do on your own. Things like keeping the faith when life gets tough. Things like trusting Christ alone for your salvation. Things like sharing your faith with others, and getting active in Christ's mission. Things like obeying the commandments, and even following the Golden Rule.

Because it's not just a rule of thumb. It's God's standard, for you and me. It's God's will for us. It's how God's people live in God's kingdom.

In the Lord's Prayer, we pray every Sunday, "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." What do those prayer requests mean? Luther reminds us in his Small Catechism, "The kingdom of God certainly comes by itself

without our prayer, but we pray in this petition that it may come to us also.” And “The good and gracious will of God is done even without our prayer, but we pray in this petition that it may be done among us also.” So we pray for God’s kingdom to come among us, for his will to be done even by us.

And we remember, we’re not alone in this. Where Christ is, there is God’s kingdom. Where Christ is at work, there is God’s will done. So God’s kingdom is alive and present in you and me, because Christ is alive and present in us. And God’s will can be done by you and me, because Christ is with us. We can joyfully live by the Golden Rule, not because we’re good enough or strong enough, but because Christ Jesus is our help, our strength, our inspiration.

“Whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.” Words for Christ’s people to live by, with Christ’s help. Amen.