

I'd like to start out this week with a very serious topic. Bumper stickers. Who doesn't love a good bumper sticker? Let's look at a few bumper stickers here:

[Show Power Point Here. Move when I say next slide. Hold off on the last one until after the next paragraph.]

Today's Jesus Question of the Day is, "Whom Will You Love?" If our passage from Luke seems very familiar, it should. With a few differences, Matthew has Jesus saying the exact same things in the Sermon on the Mount. Both Matthew and Luke include Jesus' iconic sound bite. The Golden Rule. "Do Unto Others, As you Would have them Do unto you." Sounds like something you'd find on a bumper sticker.

[Show Do Unto Other's Bumper Sticker.]

This statement is short. It's quaint. It's pithy. It's a tidy reminder of how we should treat each other. It's a statement that can evoke nostalgia in church people as they remember that bygone era where a person's word was their bond. People could be trusted. Dignity and decency were the order of the day.

This passage is associated with respecting others, treating others fairly, honoring your word, and keeping your promises. Be trustworthy. Be kind. Be compassionate. Exactly what you hope to receive from others.

The Golden Rule has been expressed throughout history in different ways and even in different religions. Every major religion has a version of the Golden Rule. Confucius said, "Do no do to others what you do not want them to do to you." The Taoist thinker Lao-Tse said. "To those who are good (to me), I am good; and to those who are not good (to me), I am also good...and thus (all) get to be good."

The Golden Rule is not named as such in the Bible, but whatever its origins, wouldn't you agree that the Golden Rule is central phrase for all time. We might even say it is the ethical subsoil of our culture. Marriott Hotels used this phrase in a commercial called "The Golden Rule." The commercial featured people being neighborly, sharing generously, and setting aside greed and selfishness. It ended with these words:

"It would be spectacular if the golden rule was golden to every man and the good things that we ever did was everything we can."

On thing this commercial reminds us of...The Golden Rule is simple, but it ain't easy. If it were, then would we live in a world so full of pain? Would we experience brokenness? Would we watch in sorrow all of the heartbreaking news headlines about violence and atrocities that humans are willing to commit against each other? Why do we still have brokenness in relationships with loved ones, friends, co-workers, and even fellow Christians?

I think it's more than just the fact that the Golden rule is simple to understand but not easy to apply. It's also easy to forget what this rule requires of us.

Some see this rule as a transactional one. I scratch your back, you scratch mine. And if you don't, I'll forever hold a grudge against you.

Jesus asks questions in our passage today that address transactionalism.

"If you do good to those who do good to you, why should you be commended? Even sinners do that." The Golden Rule is difficult because it calls us to seek the betterment of others, even if they don't do the same in return.

Some see this rule egotistically. If I only treat you the way I wanted to be treated, then my primary filter for evaluating what's best for you is based on what I think is best for me. The

Golden Rule is not about using our own personal wishes as a filter to decide what is good and best for other people.

There is a key ingredient to help us better apply the Golden Rule. An ingredient that seems to be lacking when we look at the interactions between people today. That ingredient is Empathy.

Empathy is our capacity to see the world and the situation through the eyes and perspective of another person. It means the removal of our own personal filters in order to put on the filter of the other person.

That is hard! That is crazy hard. It sounds difficult and risky. It requires vulnerability. View someone else as a fellow child of God? View them as someone with wounds and vulnerabilities. View them as a person you might actually have something in common with?

Empathy is also hard because it means listening. It requires courage. Maya Angelou said, “We all have empathy. We may not have enough courage to display it.” Ok Maya, maybe that’s true. But how do we get the courage to be empathetic?

By seeking the guidance, the grace, and the power of God. It is only by God that we can do unto others what we would want them to do to us and do for them what they would want for us to do.

If all of this wasn’t enough, Jesus is asking us to go even further. Jesus is asking for more than kindness, respect, and decency. All we need to do is look at the context of each example Jesus gives to see that his words are even more troubling, more challenging, and more complicated.

The Golden Rule isn’t just about being nice and respecting others. It’s about how we deal with people in our lives who hurt us. Who caused harm. Who inflicted pain. This Golden Rule is for those who we have trouble forgiving. To forgive people who’ve hurt you so badly that all you want to do is lash out in vengeance.

If someone strikes you, turn the other cheek.

If someone takes your cloak, give that person your shirt.

If someone forces you to walk a mile, go a second mile

In the culture of Jesus day, he is being downright cryptic. These are odd, these are perplexing statements!

These are unmistakably difficult to apply. So, can't we just ignore them? Can't we just move away from this to a more positive passage. Turning the other cheek, giving the shirt off my back, walking a mile further. That sounds like helplessness. That sounds like weakness. Heck it sounds like being asked to just give up. What are we to do with this passage?

Walter Wink is a teacher and writer on nonviolence and spiritual warfare. Let's see if he can lend a hand.

First turning the other cheek. Jesus says, "If someone slaps you on the cheek, offer the other one as well." In Matthew, Jesus specifies the right cheek, which is significant. Here's why. First striking someone in general. It mattered whether you used an open hand or a closed fist. Using a fist was a sign of fighting with an equal adversary.

A slap with an open hand was typically done with the back of the hand. It was a demonstration of a power differential. It was a gesture of humiliation and dehumanization. Masters would backhand slaves, men would backhand women, parents would backhand children. You would NEVER backhand someone who was your equal. First of all, there would be a stiff penalty for this in Jesus' time. But it was legal to backhand someone who was inferior.

Right verse left. The right hand was the dominant hand. The left hand was used for unsavory tasks, like hygiene after using the bathroom. You never used the left hand for eating. Even gesturing with your left hand could get you 10 days of penance in the Qumran community.

The right hand was always used to backhand someone, so the only way to hit someone with the back of your right hand was to his the right cheek. Jesus is talking about a derogatory insult by a person in power. And rather than hit back, rather than resort to violence, Jesus tells us to turn our heads and offer our left cheek to our insulter.

Backhanding the left cheek would be virtually impossible for your assailants, because you would not be able to use your left hand. Your only option would be to make a fist with your right hand. Turning the other cheek then becomes a way to tell your attacker that you are both equals.

It would say, “I deny you the power to humiliate me. I am a human being. You cannot take away my self-respect.” This is what those witnessing this altercation would see.

Next, give them your shirt. Jesus says, “If someone takes your coat, don’t withhold your shirt either.” This is often equated with generosity, but we need to look again at the culture of Jesus’ time to understand the full meaning and how this was a nonviolent response to oppression.

In Jesus time, people lived in profound economic, judicial, and societal inequality. The Roman empire taxed people heavily to finance armies, wars, and expansions. They created an economic system where poor people had to borrow money at insane interest rates to pay taxes, feed their families and outright survive. This made them susceptible to lose the very clothes on their backs. Clothes could be collateral to borrow money. People truly were at risk of having to give up their outer garments to satisfy debts.

Would it be a shock to learn that public nudity was taboo in Jesus time too? When Jesus asks his disciples to give up their cloak AND their shirt, he’s asking them to risk nudity. When the system has brought you to the lowest point of humiliation and dehumanization. When your oppressor asks you to remove your coat. Give them your shirt. Get naked!

Why in the world would Jesus be suggesting this? Nakedness would expose the injustice of oppressors to a wider public. It would be an act of defiance. Laughter wouldn't be just on your account; it would also be directed to whoever put you in that position. Ridiculing systems is a step towards unjust change.

As Jesus does in multiple time in multiple ways throughout his ministry, Jesus is telling them to turn the tables. He is showing them that they can affirm dignity and direct public scrutiny towards oppressors in a nonviolent way.

Now Jesus isn't saying to roll up in a ball or give in to bullies. Forgiveness doesn't mean letting a perpetrator walk all over you and deny the pain it has caused you. Instead, Jesus is asking us to be courageous and creative in responding to harm someone has caused us. He is simply saying, "Don't respond to violence with violence."

Forgiveness also doesn't mean going back to the way things were. It means naming hurt. Not shying away from hurt. Addressing the perpetrator about what's been done to you. For your own sake, inviting repentance, healing, and reconciliation.

Finally we walk the extra mile. Jesus says, "When they force you to go one mile, go with them two."

In first century Rome, the army could force someone to carry their equipment for them. These innocent civilians would be required to drop whatever they were carrying and leave them to the mercy of theft or spoilage. That was the heartless state of things for the militarized states of Judea and Galilee.

But there was a cultural expectation that soldiers were not allowed to have someone to carry their equipment over a mile. Anything more would be inhumane. It could result in public scorn on the soldiers.

Again Jesus instruction here means exposing the oppressor to public view. To expose their injustices and highlight inequalities. Overcoming injustice by bringing it to light was much better than using violence.

It is not easy to love our enemies. It is hard to practice, I mean really practice the Golden Rule. But after all these questions and possibilities, Jesus adds a few final words. “If you love those who love you, what credit is it to you?” Oof...really Jesus? Why’d you have to go there. Why’d you have to ask that question? This forgiveness thing. How do we even?

In 2012 a gunman opened fire on a Sikh temple in Oak Creek, Wisconsin, killing 6 and injuring 4 humans. A candlelight vigil was held 2 days later. The response of the Sikh congregation was inconceivable! Instead of anger, revenge, or bitterness, they brought a unified message of forgiveness for the shooter.

The police chief recalled that in his 28 years of working in law enforcement, he was shocked that instead of anger, revenge, and hatred the Sikh community demonstrated compassion, concern, and support. A resident of Oak Creek said this, “It surprised everyone when they were victims of someone so full of hatred. Because of their reaction, saying they’d like to forgive and move on, I think that’s quite the attitude to hear after what just happened...I know nothing about them at all. I don’t think a lot of people did. When we don’t know about somebody’s religion we assume the worst.”

So Church Family, here’s where we are. When Jesus said do to others as you would have them do to you, he was talking about one long, hard and risky road of forgiveness. It won’t be easy, but it will be worth it.

We have the perfect role model to follow. Jesus. So what if we tried a little harder to love those we have a hard time loving. What if we learned to forgive?