

Chapter 6.04 Golden Rule, What to Do, and Other Topics

Golden Rule.

People think the Golden Rule means we should always return kind words for bad, go out of our way to help, be a Good Samaritan even at the cost of our own family, be a Good Samaritan even to stupid people, be sweet, never put our interests above the group, and let bad people ride roughshod over life. In less kind words, people interpret the Golden Rule as, "Be a Doormat". In some cases, maybe that is so, but not usually. The Golden Rule says to do for other people what we would like them to do for us. I want other people to do what is best for me. For another person to lie down as my doormat is not best for me. It is not best for them if I lie down to be their doormat either. It can be hard to figure out what is best, but, if we can, that is what we should do.

Once when I was about fourteen years old, I was hitting balls on the city golf course driving range. Every time I hit a bad shot, I swore, which was often. The man standing next to me was much better. I asked him for advice. He said, before I could cure any problems with my swing, I had to cure a bad habit with my mouth. I did, and to this day I still do not swear too much. Sometimes the best thing for us is not sweetness but the truth. If it is good for other people to tell me the truth then I it is also good for other people if I tell them the truth.

We want God to do what is best for us, not what is easiest.

Often to do what is best for a person is hard both for the doer and the recipient. Yet that is the real Golden Rule, and I think that is what Jesus had in mind. It is hard to tell a friend that he-she is selfish or has a drinking problem but sometimes that is what we have to do.

We should not use this version of the Golden Rule as an excuse to be cruel or to hurt other people. This version is not a blank check to be the evil schoolmistress as in the movie "Matilda". "You have to be kind" is not an excuse to torture. Be the other person, and then think about what would really help you. Then try to do that and only that. If you hit people with the naked truth because you think you are doing them a favor then someday somebody will hit you with the naked truth that you are abusing the Golden Rule to be a self-indulgent bully.

Sometimes it is hard to help other people because even mildly intrusive behavior is still intrusive and often potentially obnoxious; it might not work; the recipients might resent it; or they might retaliate. It is hard to tell somebody he-she is a moocher and he-she needs to start carrying his-her own weight. The saintly action is to do it anyway. If you are really uncomfortable doing something intrusive, even if it might help, probably you should not do it. Do what you can do.

The Golden Rule can tolerate some white lies. Sometimes we all need to hear, "Oh, yeah, that really looks good on you" or "Wow, what a good recovery". Being honest in these cases is not what the Golden Rule is all about. If you abuse it this way, it will carry no force when you really need it. Use your good judgment.

Forgiveness and Enabling.

I am bad at forgiving. This section is not a pep talk to get readers to forgive everything from everybody. It recognizes that some things or some people cannot be forgiven, and then seeks the implications. Forgiveness comes in flavors. Sometimes we forgive to let go, so that primarily we heal ourselves. Sometimes forgiveness aims to heal the group and so get on with life. The New Testament has many passages on that kind. Both these kinds of forgiving are important but this section is not about them. Mostly this section is about what to do when the person does not deserve forgiveness. Jesus talked about all kinds of forgiving and it is hard to tease out the various flavors, especially since we have to think about whether the teaching comes primarily from him or from the Church, so I will not try.

It is easy to forgive some things: accidental mistakes for which the doer is really sorry and tries to make up; acts for which we do not expect the doer to have control, as when a four-year-old child takes the last ice cream bar out of the freezer; and acts done out of emotion for which the doer recognizes fault and tries to make up. It helps if there is little damage.

It is harder to forgive some things but we can still see that forgiving is a good idea, and we can try: somebody accidentally runs over our bicycle or our cat; a friend votes really badly in an election; a friend supports a bad policy due to passing patriotism or anger, such as the invasion of Iraq to the neglect of Afghanistan; a friend supports a rival at work because the rival is more powerful although our project is better; or a rival steals our idea.

Other things are hard to forgive even when the other person is genuinely sorry, such as adultery, hurting a child, or stealing an idea from us that might have made a big difference in our lives.

Some things I find hard to forgive not because the act is so big or the damage is so big but because the act shows the person's bad character, and the person is likely to stay in character and to keep on doing it. The clear examples are alcoholics, addicts to other drugs such as nicotine or meth, gamblers, emotional users, and sexual users; but life is full of lesser sins that are just as bad because they spoil the world. People that push "boomp whoomp" out of their cars do not just want to hear bad music played loudly, they want to force it on other people. It is assault. Forgiving them does no good, for them or anybody. People that stole my ideas would have done it again if I let them. People that do not pull their weight at work now likely never will. People that jump lines likely will always jump lines. People that smoke are likely to do it until they die of cancer. The compulsive chronic liar who hit my wife's car will keep on lying, even when someone catches her boldfaced as we did. Even worse, she will teach lying to her children, and they will probably become liars as well. Thieves keep on stealing. It does not matter if people were born with the bad trait or if they learned it.

We act badly toward normal decent people when we put up with assholes. It is not a laudable act of forgiveness on our part. It is not acting on the Golden Rule. We owe it to the good people, to ourselves, and to society, not to forgive assholes. We only make the situation worse, for ourselves and others, when we forgive out of a sense of duty yet we know that the other person will do more harm. We only make the situation worse when we feel guilty about not being forgiving enough when we know that forgiving is not

the best thing in this case. I am not sure what Jesus would do about bad people and the safety of society.

To be a follower of Jesus means not to be a tightly strung miserable moralist who holds a grudge against the world. This is where forgiveness is as much about us and society as it is about the person forgiven. Jesus said to give people the benefit of the doubt. See what happens first before giving up on a particular person or giving up on the world as a whole. Forgiveness can go a long way to getting people to get along. It can go a long way toward lessening our own tension.

I have no idea how long to keep on forgiving, or exactly what to do when we stop forgiving. I do not know if we should stop forgiving when forgiving no longer makes us feel better and begins to make us feel worse. I do not know if we should stop forgiving just at the point when forgiving begins to undermine social relations, or if we have an obligation to go further, and how much further. I wish honest Christian ministers would take up this topic and give us some real advice.

Sometimes an act of forgiveness can make a real difference in somebody's life. An act of forgiveness can turn a life around. I have never had to forgive anybody on this scale, and I do not want to offer examples for which I have no personal experience.

Sometimes when people are forgiven, they do not have to face themselves, do not become better people, and continue to hurt other people. Sometimes we have to be forced to face ourselves before we can change. If other people continually forgive us, then we never have to see ourselves and never have to change. If we always forgive the person who takes over the meeting and bullies everybody else, then he/she will never understand and never get better; and other people will never have a chance to speak. If we continue to forgive a chronic thief, then he/she will never understand what he/she is, and never understand the damage done.

I have been treated badly in academia several times, the details of which I had better leave out. When I was young, I did not forgive being treated badly so much as overlook it. I was stupid and naïve then; and horrible behavior usually freezes me in my tracks like a deer in headlights. Later on, I did not forgive the people involved because they never took responsibility. I did not confront them then because it would have been too stressful for me. I probably would have hurt them physically. Maybe I should have told them how bad they had been just so that they might have seen themselves and had a chance to get better. Maybe I should have told them how bad they had been because I might have been able to forgive them. Once one of my best friends murdered another of my best friends. The two were also best friends at the time. The murderer felt he had to do something drastic to protect himself and his family from financial ruin at the hands of his friend, but likely he did not have to murder. The son of the murderer warned me, with guns in hand, not to seek revenge. The murderer was miserable. He had to live in a little shack behind the main family house because his wife kicked him out and because he did not want revenge aimed at him to fall on his family. I felt sorry for him. He never really repented but he would have appreciated knowing that somebody forgave him. He died before I could tell him I forgave him, and that is too bad.

I have also seen forgiveness as enabling bad behavior, and I have seen enabling as a hidden form of passive aggression. I have had friends with drug problems, attitude problems, or ideology problems, and

forgiving them does not help. It enables them to carry on with bad behavior. Really, it hurts them. If you want to hurt them tacitly without overtly hurting them, then keep on forgiving them.

I do not know what to do if you try forgiving, people do not respond, and you have to keep on putting up with assholes. I do not know what to do when you forgive the person who never cleans up the microwave at work, and the person doesn't change. You find yourself becoming a grudge-laden semi-bitter moralist. This is when we need to forgive and to let go not because the other person deserves it but to preserve our own integrity. Grudges really do hurt us more than the wrong-doer more often than not. Poor people get forced into this situation of having to put up with crap. It is one of the biggest prices of poverty. Poor people have to forgive the selfish boss, landlord, loud drunk, noisy neighbor, or neighbor who makes passes. We need divine guidance for dilemmas like this.

Sometimes people do not understand what they have done and do not take responsibility but they really do not have a bad will or bad character either. They just do not get it now. Sometimes the dink at work who never does his-her share does not see that he-she is not getting away with something but is really hurting the other people that have to make up for him-her. Sometimes they get it after somebody tells them what is really going on. Sometimes they don't. Hopefully they will get it when they die and face God. Sometimes they are just too stupid to get it and sometimes they are so caught up in their own troubles that they just cannot see straight. This is what happened with my friend who murdered my other friend. We forgive them in the same way that we forgive a child.

Really Help People.

This section is more upbeat. This section does not aim to get Americans to quit giving to any charities. When I re-wrote this in the holiday season of 2011-2012, all charities desperately needed contributions. This section is primarily for people who can afford to give a lot sometimes.

For good reasons, people of different wealth and social rank do not meet in ways that allow them to understand each other. Instead even Christians of different class avoid each other, even though cross-class meetings seem to have been part of Jesus' program and part of the early Church. In the modern world, the people that have money do not know who the poor people are or what the poor really need. So the people that have money give to charities. The charities regive the donation the best way they can given that they are an institution: in little amounts to a lot of people so that a lot of people can get by. There is nothing wrong with that, and a lot right with it, but I want to suggest an addition.

If you can possibly afford it, give a large gift to somebody. Give enough so that it makes a permanent difference in their lives. Do it anonymously if you can, but do it anyhow. Also as I wrote in 2011, some saintly person was dropping gold coins into the Salvation Army buckets, and many saintly people were paying off the lay-away for people they had never met. For a while, forget that people have to "learn life's lessons the hard way". Give enough to a college so that the college can fund a student through an entire four-year education. Better yet, give enough directly to a student, or several students, for four years of college and four years of graduate school. Buy a young couple a house, a real house, not just a box - all at once, free and clear. For a young couple not to use up a big chunk of their income on a house but instead use it for more education, living, their kids' college, or a vacation, can mean everything in the long run. Maybe they will do the same for somebody else someday. Buy somebody a car and pay the

insurance on it for a year too. Pay the rent for somebody for an entire year or for five years. Pay the heating bill for somebody for an entire year or for five years. Pay off somebody's student loans – they do not even have to sleep with you as in "The Shop Girl". Help somebody start a business and do not ask for interest on the loan, or do not ask for a return at all. If the business succeeds, you will help not just one person but possibly dozens of employees too.

I do not know how to advise you how to find somebody to help. Co-workers and employees are a good hunting ground. The recipient does not even have to be the poorest person you will ever meet, it just has to be somebody who can make good use of the help. Of course, sometimes you will pay the rent for somebody for a year, and they will just use their leftover extra money on cocaine, but don't worry about it, all you can do is try.

Charities are not set up to handle this kind of giving, so you might have to meet the recipient face-to-face, or the recipient might find out who you are; and that can be awkward. It might tempt the recipient to try to forge a relation with you, or it might tempt him-her to ask for more later on. You might have to push them away, and that might seem as if it undoes the good that you did. That is a chance you have to take. Mostly these bad scenarios never come to pass. I have seen how much good a big gift can do, and it is worth the risk.

When people get a gift large enough to change their lives, often it does not just change their lives in the obvious way but it changes their hearts too. They see what giving has done for them and they want to pay it forward. Now they have the means to pay it forward. At the right time, they pass along the gift. They probably can't give as much as they got, but they can make a larger gift than otherwise, and their gift too can make a big difference to somebody else.

Once I knew a Frenchman from Brittany, who had served in the French Navy and had seen North Africa. He became an executive in a large drug company, and worked mostly in the Far East. As far as I can tell, he was not religious at all. But he had seen hardship and he knew how to help particular people in ways that they needed. When he helped, he helped a lot, such as by getting people out of war-torn areas to safety. Sadly, he died fairly young of brain cancer. I hope God treated him quite well.

Force.

People of the American South are trying to do two incompatible things. On the one hand, they want to be orthodox Christians. They want to emulate the early Church in all its supposed purity. On the other hand, they romanticize the military and violence. They think the military is among the highest callings for a Christian. They join in large numbers, and are the backbone of the military in the United States. Jesus was not a soldier. The fact that he tolerated soldiers, felt for them, helped them, and treated them like people, does not mean he approved of the military or that he wanted his followers to be soldiers. Jesus did the same for tax collectors and prostitutes, and he did not want his people to live that way. The Roman military killed Jesus. Christian propagandists paint the Roman military in horrible terms as the precursor of all fascist death squads, but really Roman soldiers were professionals who carried out their jobs efficiently and usually only with necessary cruelty. Often they were a boon to local law-abiding people. The American military wants to see itself the same way. No military is really much better at heart than the Roman military. In those days, the military were the police, so we can say the same about the

police. Early Christians were pacifists or near pacifists. They did not join the military. They left the military after their term of conscription was over and did not re-enlist. If Jesus and the early Christians did not want to join the Roman military, they likely would not want Christians now to join any military. How the early Christian attitude changed to extolling the military is a long story that cannot be told here. In any case, you cannot romanticize violence, the military, or police, and be a fully faithful follower of Jesus. Why Southerners keep this contradiction is a long story that cannot be told here either.

Yet in the real world, we need the police and military. They are not the same as tax collectors and prostitutes in Jesus' time. Without them, Christians would have no safe shell within which to operate. Even the early Church needed the Roman military for protection. It needed for protection an occupation that it looked down on. I am not sure if the attitude of the early Church toward the military was hypocrisy. So what attitude should we now in the modern world take toward the use of force and toward the military and police? This question has a long history in the West, and I do not review the history here. How do we have an effective police-and-military without romanticizing them and without overusing them? America did a pretty good job until recently. Even recently, the overuse of military force has not been due to soldiers but because civilian political leaders did not understand the world well enough. Abuse of the police has not been due to the police so much as because of bad economic, social, and drug policies that led people outside the law. Maybe the best corrective is to learn about the real world, real Jesus, and real early Christians, and to actually think "What Would Jesus Do?" Maybe the best corrective is good, realistic, human policies. When you realize you cannot do as Jesus ideally might have done, then you can get on with what needs to be done without romanticizing it and without overdoing it. A lot of soldiers and police understand all this more than we give them credit for, more than people that call out for swift official violence, and more than unrealistic well-meaning pacifists.

Jesus as Historical Fulcrum.

I was amused in a good way when I first learned that some Christians think of "history" as "His story". Because of Jesus, Jewish ideas of God and of history fused with Western ideas of science and government, resulting eventually in democracy, free enterprise, and modern science. The world changed permanently as a result of Jesus. Jesus is a key turning point in the history of the world.

Not all other religions agree fully with this assessment but they do accord Jesus much respect – a fact Christians tend to ignore. Mohammad thought Jesus was one of the greatest prophets, on a par with Moses, and would judge all souls. Hindus see him as a great avatar of love and truth. This is more than Christians usually accord to great figures in other religions.

I do not care who is most correct. I only want to think about the fact that Jesus changed history, and what it might imply.

Even if Jesus did change history, and God sent Jesus to change history, that fact does not overturn the attitude toward Jesus that I have developed here. Following Jesus is not like waiting for the inevitable proletarian revolution. You cannot sit back and wait for God and The Rapture. History will be made by people who do things every day for the good reasons of that day to make a better world. If you can, you are obligated to work hard to make a better world. You cannot rest in the comfort that Jesus already has

done it for you. If your work results in historical changes, so much the better for you. If not, do not worry about it.

People want their names in the historical record. People strive harder when they have ideals and they think they will be recognized. People built democracy, worked in science, and fought Hitler, from a combination of personal and public reasons. This is all great. I have no problem with this, and encourage it. We almost have heaven on Earth when personal striving leads to public benefit. God must have known that Jesus would change the world. I doubt Jesus knew that he would change the world as he did. So again we have to face the idea that God used Jesus, and Christians, to bring about changes that neither foresaw. Again I do not know what this says about God or about stupid stubborn people.

God used Jesus to change the world for the better. God interfered in the world to change it for the better. Then why not interfere more often? Why not make sure that the world gets on a good track and stays there, rather than allow the world to run on a track where we might fail? Why not interfere to prevent horrible individual tragedies such as cancer and burned children? Why not make sure that nobody reaches old age poor and alone? It makes little sense to accept the idea that God would send Jesus to change the world and yet to accept also that God will not intervene in other ways to make the world a better place. If God wishes us to use free will alone to manage this world then God should not have sent Jesus. Jesus was not the only prophet. If God wishes us to use our free will then why does God send, or need to send, any prophets? I do not know any answers to these questions.

It might be that the world is bad enough that humans cannot take care of it alone but good enough so that it is manageable with a little help. We are like children about thirteen years old who are venturing into their first jobs and social life. We can handle most of it but we cannot handle all of it without a little help. With only a little help we can learn to handle it all. We should not get too much help, or too much help will spoil us and defeat the purpose of growing up. So God sends prophets and Jesus. This sounds good but it does not explain cancer, parasites, wars, and burned children. Unfortunately, it is the best I can do.

Living and Dying for Jesus.

The Church did not spread primarily because people were willing to die for Jesus but because people found a meaningful and successful way of life within the Church as an institution. People lived for Jesus, or lived for the Church. Even so, some people have been willing to die for Jesus, and their sacrifice has helped to sustain the Church and to spread Jesus' message. In our time about as much as any time, around the world, people suffer persecution for the sake of Jesus and the Church. When Christian soldiers die, they die not just for their buddies, families, and country as do all soldiers but also for Jesus and for his truth and freedom. We should not overlook their sacrifice.

The Jesus that most people die for is not the Jesus-of-a-message that I have portrayed in this book but the Jesus-as-God-who-died-for-us, the God that sacrificed himself for others. In their way, the people that die for Jesus repay in the same coin what Jesus already paid. They are the few who give up much so the many others might have decent lives. Would the Jesus of this book inspire such faith, willingness to endure hardship, and willingness to sacrifice self? Would people die for the message of Jesus as

much as for his identity as God? Would people work to build a better world at much personal risk if they did not think Jesus was God? I do not know. I am not brave so I do not think I could endure for the message of Jesus what many standard Christians have endured for their God. I am not sure what that says for the truth except that I doubt we should judge truth by the willingness of people to die for it alone or to kill for it alone. Too many people have been willing to die, and to kill, for idols and lies. I hope the view of Jesus given in this book inspires people to live for him.