

“Summing Up the Sermon”
March 17, 2024

Proverbs 3:27-32
Matthew 7:7-12

“In everything, do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and prophets.”

This Lent we are listening to the Sermon on the Mount because in it we find good markers of the way of Jesus Christ that has been made known to us. We are listening closely to what some regard as familiar words and what others are hearing for the first time—and all of us are finding in them more truth and light, making known to us the new ways of Jesus Christ for today.

And I’ve come to a new place this morning as well. I’ve been at this for many decades now, but until this morning, I’ve never preached a sermon those words: “Do to others as you would have them do to you—for this is the law and the prophets.”

Remember that the “law and the prophets” is where this sermon of Jesus begins.

After Jesus tells his disciples: “Blessed are you...”

After telling them: “You are the salt of the earth, you are the light of the world.”

Jesus is clear: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets: I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.”

We need to listen carefully here, because over the centuries—and into our own time—Christians have missed the point of these words. When Jesus speaks of fulfilling the Torah and the prophets, he is not talking about doing away with them or making them irrelevant for his followers. It is not that we are done with the ways of God made known through Moses and through the Hebrew prophets. Their call to righteousness—to right relationships with one another—still guides and challenges us. Jesus is saying that he will draw out their full implications, showing us how the Scriptures of Israel will continue to inform the life of faith for those who follow in Christ’s way.

What are those implications?

During the weeks of Lent, we’ve read and listened to and reflected on many of them:

Let your righteousness exceed that of the scribes and the Pharisees.

Go the second mile.

Love your enemies.

You cannot serve God and wealth.

Consider the birds of the air and the lilies of the field

Don't worry about tomorrow.

This morning, as this sermon nears its conclusion, Jesus tells us that all of this can be summed up as “In everything, do unto others as you have them do to you.”

This is the Law and the Prophets.

In case you weren't paying attention; in case you missed some of what Jesus was saying, in case you didn't understand—Jesus now tells us that everything he has been teaching us can be found in the Law and the Prophets—in our Old Testament—and, in brief, it means: “Do to others as you would have them do to you.”

It's that simple—and it's that complex.

It's that easy—and it's that difficult.

We've called this the Golden Rule since at least the 18th century. Maybe that title goes back to the third century Roman emperor, Alexander Severus, who worshipped both Christ and Alexander the Great (and that must have been some balancing act), and who had those words inscribed in golden letters on the wall of his assembly room.ⁱ

Both Jewish and Gentile authors said something similar before Jesus. Those five proverbs that we heard this morning were one attempt at describing this way of relating to others.

Most famously, perhaps, is the story about a Gentile who came to the great rabbi, Hillel, a contemporary of Jesus, and said: “I will convert to Judaism if you can teach me the whole Torah while I stand on one foot.”

Unphased, Hillel replied: “What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor; that is the whole Torah, while the rest is commentary thereon; go and learn it.”

That's the challenge, isn't it? Go and learn.

Go and learn how to act toward another as you would have that person act toward you.

Go and learn how to do this *in everything*.

On their own, the words of the Golden Rule leave us on *our* own—and that's usually a dangerous place. We can begin to imagine all sort of possibilities in this Rule:

“I want to be left alone, so I'm not going to help you.”

“Don't report illegal behavior if you don't want anyone to report your illegal behavior.”

“If you like to attend wild parties, you must give wild parties.”

One New Testament scholar concludes: “As an ethical principle, the Golden Rule is remarkably susceptible to unethical appropriations!”ⁱⁱ

Left on our own, I'm sure that you and I could come up with any number of ways to misinterpret and misuse this Rule.

We might expect as much if we take seriously Jesus' evaluation of human beings—and perhaps his followers especially—in his words immediately before this, when he says, “If then, *you who are evil...*”

Well, that's rather blunt, isn't it?

And it certainly doesn't line up well with the prevailing sentiment about our innate goodness—that it will shine brightly if we *are* just left to ourselves. Jesus was well aware of the separation from God, from others, and from the best in ourselves that is sin—and how that separation pervades all of existence.

Of course, just as we start to get all bent out of shape about this, Jesus concludes: “You who are evil know how to give good gifts to your children.”

We *are* a mixed lot, aren't we—each of us and all of us. We *who are evil* are at the same time those who *can* do good. And often we do.

Yes, parents can and do give stones for bread. Some have experienced this is painfully damaging ways. But the very love of God is apparent in the love that mothers and fathers do show to their children—and if you have known this love, you can count yourself as blessed.

With a parental love, Jesus says, God gives good things to those who ask. This is the same God who feeds the birds of the air and clothes the flowers of the field and who knows we, too, need food and drink and clothing.

Once more, Jesus calls us beyond self-concern. He invites us to ask and seek and knock so that we might become those who make the love that God shows for all people the foundation of our right relationships with others—our *righteousness*.

So, as we think about how we will act toward others, we need to reflect briefly about prayer.

Asking, seeking, and knocking do not suggest increasing degrees of intensity for prayer—they are all simply ways of describing attitudes and actions that recognize that there is a power in the universe that is immeasurably superior to us. And well-off, self-sufficient Americans sometimes have trouble with that.

When we pray we put ourselves and our lives in God's hands. That's where we belong. But let's be honest—that's not necessarily where we *want* to be. Don't get me wrong: it's not that I want God to take care of everything—or think God *should* take care of everything. That is why we have brains and feelings and the ability to think and talk and act. But to pray is to confess that there is a limit to our ability—to know, to understand, to act, to love. To pray is to confess that God is greater.

To pray is to make ourselves vulnerable to the greatness of God. That's not always easy.

But then what? What if we do let our requests be made known? What if we do ask and seek and knock?

There are times when we ask only to be answered by great silence or an empty hand.

There are times when we seek in the shadows and no light shines.

There are times when we knock with scraped knuckles on unmoving doors.

You know those times.

You know the question: Why do some—all—of my prayers go unanswered?

Perhaps this is the wrong question—or at least the wrong *first* question. It assumes both that God has not answered and that we will know an answer when we see it. Human imagination is limited, and we should not presume that we know all of the ways in which God can respond to us.ⁱⁱⁱ

Or as it has been said elsewhere: “If God doesn’t seem to be giving you what you ask, maybe God’s giving you something else.”^{iv}

Jesus promises fulfillment to our asking, our seeking, and our knocking. But that seems to be secondary. The important thing is to continue in the way of Jesus Christ, letting our vulnerability be seen, letting our emptiness be known, letting our weariness be obvious to all who would look—even to God.

The important thing is to do as Jesus says: ask, seek, knock.

Karl Barth, one of the theological giants of the twentieth century, both inspires us and challenges us when he says that we should pray with the awareness “that God answers. God is not deaf, but listens; more than that, God acts. God does not act in the same way whether we pray or not. Prayer exerts and influence upon God’s action, even upon God’s existence.”

One way prayer is “answered” is by bringing us closer to one another and to God so that we might treat others as we would have them treat us. An ancient image is that of a circle, with God at the center and our many lives as lines drawn from the circumference toward the center. The closer the lines crowd in toward God, the closer they are toward one another; and the close they are to one another, the closer they become to God.^v

This, of course, is one reason why we come together for worship once a week. We learn to pray *together*. We pray here together. This morning you have become part of a community that has been doing just this week after week for over 160 years. We pray here together so that we might pray alone. That, more than anything else, is what we “get” from worship—an immeasurable gift. Then we pray alone so that when we come *together*, we might once again be closer not only to each other but also to God.

The challenge and the difficulty of prayer is that as we pray, we are changed. The first things to change are our hearts, our lives. When we accept the invitation to pray, we start to look at our lives, one another, and the world differently.

As changed people in a changing world, we can hear again to that simple yet profound summary of Jesus: “In everything, do to others as you would have them do to you.” This is not about getting what we want or somehow coercing others to behave toward us as we would want them to do. It is the way of love that is given to us by the crucified and risen One.

The rest is commentary. All that we heard, all that has puzzled us, all that we have wrestled with in these days of Lent—and all that we struggle with in all our days—are ways in which we might live out these impossibly simple words of Jesus: “Do to others as you would have them do to you.”

ⁱ Eduard Schweizer, *Matthew*, pg 175.

ⁱⁱ Douglas Hare, *Matthew*, Interpretation Commentary, pg. 80.

ⁱⁱⁱ Kamila Blessing, *It Was a Miracle*, pg. 22.

^{iv} Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking*, pg. 37.

^v Dorteus of Gaza quoted in K. Norris, *Amazing Grace*, pg. 59-60.