

“Love’s Initiative”

Matthew 7:12, 22:37-40

Dr. Randy Working
Christ Presbyterian Church
May 10, 2009

Forty years ago last month, the greatest rock band of all time, the Beatles, recorded the album “Abbey Road,” and it included the line, “Oh! Darling, please believe me, I’ll never do you no harm.” Ancient teachers taught the same idea, what you might call the “Do no harm” principle. Do you know it? Most religions teach it:

For example, Hinduism says, “One should not behave towards others in a way which is disagreeable to oneself. (*Mahabharata, Anusasana Parva* 113.8)

Buddhism says, “Hurt not others with that which hurts yourself.” (*Udana Varga* 5:18)

Zoroastrianism says, “Do not do to others whatever is injurious to yourself.” (*Shayast-na-Shayast* 13:29)

Judaism says, “What is hateful to you, do not to others.” (*The Talmud, Shabbat* 31a)

That’s not bad. There’s value in those sayings, because there is truth in other religions. We should expect that. In fact, those sayings are what some people have called “The Silver Rule.” It tries to tell us how to live together in the world, and it helps restrain evil impulses. But Jesus gave something better, the Golden Rule. It doesn’t simply tell us not to hurt others. It tells us to actively seek their good.

Not just preventing harm, but promoting love.

At its heart, the Golden Rule in Matthew 7:12 is about love, and we see that in Matthew 22, a passage that passage amplifies the Golden Rule that Jesus teaches. In chapter 22, Jesus’ opponents are trying to test him, so they ask his opinion on the greatest commandment. For his answer, Jesus reaches to the Old Testament, and quotes two commandments.

The first is from Deuteronomy 6. It comes one verse after the great affirmation that is the center of Jewish faith that is called the *Shema*, from the word “listen,” or “hear.” It’s the phrase that is read at the beginning of all Jewish worship, even in the synagogue today. It goes,

“Listen, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD alone.” (Deuteronomy 6:4)

The *Shema* tells us that everything flows out of worship of the Living God. It is the core of faith of Israel, and before God tells his people to do anything, he reminds them that he is God. In answer to the question from his opponents, Jesus quotes the next verse,

'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. (Matthew 22:37; see Deuteronomy 6:5)

Then he continues,

“A second is equally important: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ The entire law and all the demands of the prophets are based on these two commandments.” (Matthew 22:39-40; see Leviticus 18:19)

The word “love” links the two commands.

We're called to love God and love neighbor. In fact, caring for others is one of the ways we show love for God. Right worship of God means showing justice to others, caring for them, being authentic in our love.

The two directions of our love are expressed in the Ten Commandments. The Commandments were delivered in the form of two tablets. The first tablet contains the first four laws, and each of them has to do with our relationship with God:

1. No other gods but the Lord.
2. No idols.
3. Do not misuse God's name.
4. Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy.

The next six commands have to do with our relationship with other people:

1. Honor your father and mother
2. Do not murder
3. Do not commit adultery
4. Do not steal
5. Do not bear false witness
6. Do not covet.

Do you see how those boil down to love God, and love others? Of course, love is a central message of the Bible, because it's the story of how God would pay any price to save us, like John tells us:

“God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, so that whoever believes in him will not perish, but will have eternal life.” (John 3:16)

Paul describes that love in the Book of Romans:

God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners. (Romans 5:8)

Since the days of the ancient church, Christians have used catechisms to teach the faith to new believers. When Martin Luther wrote a catechism, he put the commandments first so people would understand how much they failed to live up to them. When you see the commandments, you're convicted of sin, and you turn to God for forgiveness.

But when Calvin wrote a catechism to teach the church, he put the Ten Commandments last, because they are how followers of Jesus can show their gratitude for what God has done for us. The commandments don't just play a negative role by showing us our sin, they play a *positive* role by showing us how to live for God.

So Calvin's catechism opens not with the Ten Commandments to show our need for God, but with the Great Commandment: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind." Calvin wants us to be aware of our sins and our need for God's help, but he doesn't do it by focusing on the commandments. See, our sin problem isn't just a matter of failing to live up to a set of commands. It's that we don't have the right heart, and we don't love God with everything we've got. When we come to see that, that's when we fall on our knees before God.

Love in deed, not just with words.

The apostle John wrote to the church, "Dear children, let's not merely say that we love each other; let us show the truth by our actions." (1 John 3:18) We'll all be familiar with the Gold Rule because it's a common saying of our culture. But familiarity is one thing, and practice another. Society can only insist on the Silver Rule, "Don't hurt others." That's usually the best we can hope for. But Jesus says, "That's not enough. I want you to show kindness and grace to others." How do we *do* that?

First, notice Jesus' teaching sets us free. He doesn't lay on us some complicated set of regulations, like when the United States Congress passes a bill, and it comes with 1000 pages of instructions and fine print. He simply says, "Use your imagination. Think about how you want to be treated."

How's that? Well, I want to be challenged to be my best. I want my friends to believe in me, and yes, I even want them to hold me accountable. But I also want to be forgiven when I make mistakes. I want the chance to contribute what I can. I want people to show care and compassion.

I'm grateful that I had people in my life like that.

I had a middle school teacher who brought out the best in me. Everybody in the class made fun of him because he had a funny voice, but we knew he cared about us, and he made me believe I had talent.

I had an artist friend of my dad who took a chance on me, agreed to supervise me in an internship, and took me into his home. The first time he looked at my portfolio of drawings, he leafed through them without comment. Then he went to a shelf and pulled off a package of \$150-dollar Arches drawing paper, and dropped it on the table with a loud crash. Then he said, "From now on, kid, you're drawing on this paper." He made me believe I had promise as an artist.

I had a supervisor in campus ministries in Switzerland who saw promise, and helped me understand I had a call to ministry. He was willing to correct me and affirm me, and see a future I couldn't yet make out myself.

Look for ways to do that for others.

Luke's gospel tells the story of another time Jesus was tested by a lawyer. The man asked what he must do to inherit eternal life, and Jesus responded with the same commands to love God with our whole heart, and to love neighbor. You could say, we demonstrate our love for God by loving our neighbor. But the lawyer wanted to justify himself, Luke says, so he asked Jesus the question "Who is my neighbor?"

Jesus answered by telling the story of the Good Samaritan. The point is that your neighbor is whoever needs your help, whoever comes into your circle. It's not enough to simply refrain from doing harm; instead, Jesus tells us to reach out for the benefit of others, even when there's no return for us. It's to do the positive good for them that we might want if we were in their place. Take the time to teach someone else, to help them become better people. We do this by giving to meet another person's needs, not our own.

Something I need to confess is that I can't stand the work of the artist Thomas Kinkaid. Sorry if you're a fan! I think his paintings are sugarcoated and sentimental, and they don't rise to the level of great art because he doesn't come to terms with the world as it is. One time, was given a Thomas Kinkaid screensaver, and I thought of a friend of Evelyn's and mine Marcia who loved Thomas Kinkaid. I knew her birthday was coming up, and I'd been wondering what to give her, so I asked if she would you rather get a gift that meant a lot to me, but she might not appreciate, or something I hated, but she loved. You know what she said—"I want gift I love even if you hate it, of course!"

We develop an instinct for care for others by thinking about how good God has been to us. That's why God begins the Ten Commandments with the promise,

"I am the LORD your God, who rescued you from the land of Egypt, the place of your slavery." (Exodus 20:2)

That's before he actually gives any commandments, any rules, any instructions. In other words, God is saying he is Israel's god, *our* God, without condition. And the worship we owe him and the care we owe others flows out of our relationship with him. It's all a gift of grace from him.

He loves you so much, he died for you. He didn't have to do it, but he did. It didn't do anything for his status, his bank account, his reputation, his resume, but he went to the cross and bled to death for you. What do we owe for so great a salvation?

Jesus told his disciples,

So now I am giving you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, you should love each other. Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples." (John 13:34-35)

That's why John writes,

"How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!" and "Anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of

God; nor is anyone who does not love his brother. This is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another.." (1 John 3:1, 10-11).

It's like the hymn by Isaac Watts,

Were the whole realm of nature mine, that were an offering far too small;

love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.

The Golden Rule is easy to learn, but tough to put into practice. And in the end, we can only really give what we have already received.

There was a family in our old church who was out of work and had to move out of their house. Another family came and said, "You can move in with us for as long as it takes to find a job. We'll see you through this transition. We'll give you two bedrooms for you and your kids, and can have the big bathroom. You can use one of our refrigerators, and we'll give you half our garage to store your stuff. You can bring your pets, and you can use our cars. This is your home now." And when the family tried to pay them something, or even to say thanks, the hosts just said, "It's what we do."

You know what? The happiest people are the ones who help others. Here's a thing you can try. Make a list of ten people you know the best, and then mark each one as happy or not happy. Then go through the list again, and mark each one as selfish or unselfish. You'll see that all the people labeled happy are also marked unselfish. Funny how that works!

The Golden Rule sums up the Law and the Prophets, which means the Old Testament. It's what we're supposed to *do* to care for our neighbor. But the power to love doesn't come from Law, it comes from Gospel. Because the Gospel isn't even something we do. It's not a duty or an obligation. The good news about Jesus is pure, 100 per cent gift. The power for us to love flows out of the amazing love Jesus has already shown us.

When we have it, we want to share it with others, and that's not an obligation, it's a joy, and if you do, it will change our life.