

## **Making the Golden Rule Central to Our Lives**

Matthew 7:12  
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For many years of his life, John Newton was the captain of a British slave ship. During these years he kept detailed notes of his voyages, which later became published, in his 1788 book, "Thoughts Upon the African Slave Trade."

Newton wrote that the environment of the slave trading "gradually brings a numbness upon the heart and renders those who are engaged in it too indifferent to the sufferings of their fellow creatures."

As an example, he told the story of a slave woman on the ship who had a child about a year old that would not stop crying. As the child cried in the night, she was warned by a sailor as he rose in anger that if the child did not cease making a noise, he would silence it. When the child continued to cry, he rose for a second time, tore the child from the mother's arms, and threw the child into the sea. For the rest of the voyage, the sailor had to contend with a lamenting mother, who was too valuable to throw into the sea.

Newton describes the passage over the ocean as a hellacious experience where slaves were stacked below deck in two rows of five-foot sections, like books on a shelf, each shackled by a hand and a foot, where they stayed sometimes for an entire week before being brought up on deck, where they were then chained to an eyebolt for some exercise. A passage across the ocean could take up to ten months. (p. 185-186)

Imagine the stench. Imagine the pain. Imagine the hopelessness.

Out of one hundred slaves shipped from Africa, only half survived to become effective laborers in the colonies. (p. 195)

Not only did Newton witness and perpetuate the inhumanity and treatment of the slaves; he also witnessed and documented how indispensable the sailors that worked for the boat captains were. They were more expendable than the slaves once the slaves were delivered, often being left behind to keep from having to pay and feed them. As many as 20% died from disease, drunkenness, sexual violence, and slave insurrections.

As a slave ship owner, Newton was in a dog-eat-dog world. Human beings were expendable commodities.

Ironically, Newton was religious, having had a conversion experience after he prayed to be spared from a sinking ship. When the ship's load shifted and plugged a hole in the ship, Newton became a believer and converted to the Christian faith. He stopped cursing, gambling and drinking, but not running slave ships. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John\\_Newton](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Newton)

He kept a journal of his voyages, beginning his long entries with a standard prayer. His journal contains confessions, but no awareness of the sin of the slave business he was running. (p. 273)

Stephen Vincent Benet may have had Newton in mind when he composed a poem that begins with a description of a slave-ship captain who spent much of his time studying the Bible and avoiding the stench below the deck. (p. 274)

When I read this, it made me wonder what areas of my life might have the smells of indecency, while I go about my religious rituals.

Eventually, John Newton admitted that for all those years he ran a slave ship he was blind. He admitted that he was a wretch, a sinner, which we sing about when we sing the words he wrote to his most famous hymn, "Amazing Grace." "I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see."

What was it that caused him to see his sinful life and repent of his terrible things he did to humanity?

It was something Jesus said: "So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets." (Matthew 7:12 NIV)

I have little doubt that his mother taught him this verse of scripture as Newton writes that he was reciting many valuable pieces, chapters, portions of Scripture, catechisms, hymns and poems by the age of four. By the age of six he was learning Latin. (p. 2)

Newton began to think about these words again as the captain of the slave ship. He asked himself how he would like to be treated if he were in involuntary servitude. He responded by making sure that the slaves were not half-starved, not neglected when sick, or punished without mercy. (p. 183)

So I guess if you had to be on a slave ship, the best you could do was to sail with John Newton.

Years later, Newton began to interpret the Golden Rule more as Jesus intended. He asked the better question, "If I were an African, how would I want to be treated?" (p. 184)

What Newton realized is that he would be infuriated if he were chained like a lion or held without freedom for the rest of his life, having done nothing to deserve it. (Ibid)

Jesus' words served as an awakening for John Newton. He realized, like the prophets of long ago, that acting justly is an essential standard for true religion. (p. 184)

While he might have had a religious awakening, he later acknowledged that he had not truly converted to Christianity in the true sense of the word as the captain of a slave ship.

It takes a while for us to come to an understanding of what true religion is and then to have the desire and willingness to live it out.

Here's a bit more of John Newton's story:

Before John Newton became the captain of a slave ship, he was kicked off a slave ship in West Africa and treated like a slave for three years until he was rescued by a captain of another slave ship. So, of all people, he should have been able to empathize with those whose freedoms were lost.

Of all people, the Hebrews who were enslaved in Egypt by Pharaoh should have known what it was to be in bondage. Yet they enslaved people themselves as they went through the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land.

Many times, knowing what is right and doing what is right are two different things. Perhaps driven by the desire to be wealthy, Newton turned a blind eye to the suffering of others.

It took a long time for Newton to come to terms with his slave-trading past. After leaving the sea, he became an Anglican priest, a writer, and a hymnist.

It took 34 years after he left slave trade before he became an active force in the fight for abolition with his pamphlet "Thoughts Upon the Slave Trade."  
([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John\\_Newton](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Newton) )

John Newton's description of the slave trade in this pamphlet was one of the most powerful testimonies against the slave trade that helped William Wilberforce eventually lead the parliamentary campaign to abolish the slave trade in Britain.

It started with Matthew 7:12. "So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets." (Matthew 7:12 NIV)

The end of Psalm 23 says "Goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

The Psalmist can say this because of his relationship with the Lord, the Good Shepherd.

The Law and the Prophets taught us how to find the Good Shepherd and how to discover God's grace and his mercy.

Jesus had just finished teaching that if we ask, seek, and knock, the doors to God's mercy and grace will be opened to us.

If we asked a loving earthly father for good gifts like bread, he would not give us a stone or a snake. Our heavenly Father is not like that. God desires to give us good gifts.

Therefore, Jesus says that in our treatment of others, we should treat them with the same goodness that we would want for ourselves.

A Chinese girl named Li-li got married but had to live with her mother-in-law. Since the mother-in-law was not nice to her, Li-li decided to kill her.

Li-li went to her doctor to get a slow-acting poison. The doctor said, "Just so that people don't suspect you, treat your mother-in-law very nice, as you'd like to be treated."

So Li-li was nice to her mother-in-law as she slipped a little poison into her food each day.

Now an unexpected thing happened: the two started getting along much better and became best friends.

So Li-li went back to the doctor and said, "I now love my mother-in-law and don't want to kill her; please give me something to counteract the poison."

The doctor replied, "I gave you ordinary vitamins; the only poison was in your attitude."  
(<http://www.harryhiker.com/stories.htm> )

If we live by the Golden Rule, it helps us to get outside of ourselves. It keeps us from having a selfish, "me-first," the-heck-with-you, I-don't-care –about-anyone-else-but-me attitude.

The Beatles became famous for singing a song called "Imagine." They sang,

Imagine there's no heaven/ It's easy if you try/ No hell below us/ Above us only sky/ Imagine all the people living for today.

But I want you to imagine this:

Imagine if we do to others/  
What we wanted done to us/  
If we were in their situation/  
It would change our entire focus/  
Imagine all the people living for the Lord.

It would be a different world, wouldn't it?

It would be a different world if people would just live by the Golden Rule, whether they were Christian or not.

The concept of the Golden Rule is not unique to Christianity. It is not even original to Jesus. Jesus likely learned this principal from the writings of Rabbi Hillel, who taught it fifty years before Jesus was born.

He wrote: "What is hateful to you, do not to your fellow men. That is the entire Law; all the rest is commentary."

(<http://www.thinkhumanism.com/the-golden-rule.html> )

But the concept goes can be found as far back as the writings of Pittacus, who lived in 650 BCE. (Ibid)

It is difficult to find any religion, major or minor, that does not have some form of this rule, which may have first been called Golden when the ruler Severtus wrote it on his wall in gold in the fourth century.

(<http://www.harryhiker.com/chronology.htm>)

What is important is whether we have written it on our hearts and whether we live by it.

If we would dare, it would change us and the world around us.

How so?

1. We would have more empathy for others. We would place ourselves in their shoes and try to imagine what they feel. This would have an effect on how we treat others and how others respond to us.
2. We would have more compassion for others. The sufferings and misfortunes of others would matter more to us and we would become involved in their pain and help carry their burdens as Jesus commands us to do for one another.
3. It would help us overcome our prejudices. We all have them. John Newton finally asked the right question, "How would I feel if I were African?" If we were to place ourselves in the shoes of a minority, the poor, an immigrant, the handicapped, someone of another faith or culture or economic bracket, how might we see the world? How might we respond?
4. It could make you into a better employee or a better employer. If you treated your employees the way you wanted to be treated what kind of work place would you have? If you treated your co-workers or your supervisor the way you wanted to be treated, what kind of work place environment would you have?
5. It could make you into a better parent, son, daughter, husband, wife, neighbor, or friend. You see, our tendency is to twist the verse like I heard happened once when a sister struck her brother and when she was questioned on why she hit her sobbing brother she said, "'Cause the Bible says, "Do unto others as they do unto you."

That is typically how we live. However, Jesus has taken revenge off the table for Christians. He has taught us a much more gracious, merciful, and generous ethic. This ethic is not based on the merit of others. It is not based on another's goodness. It is not based on whether others have earned our gift.

Our response to others is based on

- 1) God's response to us. God has given us good things, which are unmerited, based on his grace, mercy and love for us. Therefore, our response to others should reflect the mercy and grace God

has shown to us. Additionally, how we respond to others should not always be based on merit. It can be graceful and merciful.

2) If we base our response by placing ourselves in the situation of the other, the chances are good that we will choose to treat them kind and lovingly.

There once was a grandpa who lived with his family. As Grandpa grew older, he began to slobber and spill his food. So the family had him eat alone. When he dropped his bowl and broke it, they scolded him and got him a cheap wooden bowl.

Grandpa was so unhappy. Now one day the young grandson was working with wood.

"What are you doing?" Mom and Dad asked.

"I'm making a wooden bowl," he said, "for the day when you two get old and must eat alone."

Mom and Dad then looked sad and realized how they were mistreating Grandpa. So they decided to keep quiet when he spilled his food and to let him eat with the family.

<http://www.harryhiker.com/stories.htm>

Jesus said, "So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets." (Matthew 7:12 NIV)

## Sermon Notes

What if John Newton's mother had not taught him to memorize scripture as a child?

Place a check by the statements you think are true.

He might have never been convicted of his sin of slave trading.

He would have failed first grade.

He might have never written the hymn, "Amazing Grace."

He might have never become a force in helping William Wilberforce lead Parliament to abolish the slave trade in Britain.

True or False? It would be a different world if people lived by the Golden Rule, whether they are Christian or not.

Was the Golden Rule original with Jesus?

Matthew 7:12 may be referred to as the Golden Rule because the ruler Severus wrote it on his wall in \_\_\_\_\_ in the fourth century.

If people lived by the Golden Rule, name some ways that this rule would change people's lives.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

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