



The Sermon on the Mount Study
Bible Study Session 25
Matthew 7:12 : Topic 24.0

Study By
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Greek NT

Πάντα οὖν ὅσα ἐὰν θέ-
 λητε ἵνα ποιῶσιν ὑμῖν οἱ
 ἄνθρωποι, οὕτως καὶ ὑμεῖς
 ποιεῖτε αὐτοῖς· οὗτος
 γάρ ἐστιν ὁ νόμος καὶ οἱ
 προφῆται.

Gute Nachricht Bibel

Behandelt die Men-
 schen so, wie ihr selbst
 von ihnen behandelt
 werden wollt – das ist es,
 was das Gesetz und die
 Propheten fordern.

NRSV

In everything do to oth-
 ers as you would have
 them do to you; for this
 is the law and the proph-
 ets.

NLT

Do for others what you
 would like them to do for
 you. This is a summary
 of all that is taught in the
 law and the prophets.

The Study of the Text:¹

1. What did the text mean to the first readers?

The Golden Rule. That is what it is called, and has been so named in the English language since the middle 1700s. The title originally pointed to the New Testament texts of Matt. 7:12 and Luke. 6:31,² which are the two places in the Bible where this principle is stated directly. The wording is slightly different between these two passages, but the essential concept is the same. This will be examined in our study to help understand more precisely the teaching of Jesus at this point.



But in the last few centuries, especially with the studies in comparative religions, the title has been applied to similar expressions found in most of the major religions around the world. Consequently, in modern western oriented marketing dynamics the label 'golden rule' has come to be applied to a wide variety of products and principles that have no religious orientation at all.³ The Golden Rule has even had its critics in modern times.⁴

Consequently, it merits careful study in order to correctly understand the concept as taught by Jesus. The broader historical background of its existence both in the ancient world and in the modern world will provide a good background against which we can see the distinctive emphasis of Jesus. For believers in Jesus, this understanding becomes the standard by which conduct and treatment of other people must be measured.

Historical Context:

Understanding the concept of the Golden Rule both in our world and in the ancient world is important to correct understanding of Jesus' teaching in Matt. 7:12 and Luke 6:31. Because these two very different worlds had very different ways of looking at other people, some clarity of emphasis here is also helpful. Without such understanding one can easily import false understandings of the Golden Rule from either of these worlds into the assumed teaching of Jesus. This is 'eisegesis,' reading meaning into a text from the outside,

¹Serious study of the biblical text must look at the 'then' meaning, i.e., the historical meaning, and the 'now' meaning, i.e., the contemporary application, of the scripture text. In considering the historical meaning, both elements of literary design and historical aspects must be considered. In each study we will attempt a summary overview of these procedures in the interpretation of the scripture text.

²Luke. 6:31 (NRSV): "Do to others as you would have them do to you." (καὶ καθὼς θέλετε ἵνα ποιῶσιν ὑμῖν οἱ ἄνθρωποι ποιεῖτε αὐτοῖς ὁμοίως)

³A wide variety of uses of this label can be found. The Golden Rule Store was the original name of the J.C. Penney chain of department stores. A small airline company in Kyrgyzstan is named the Golden Rule Airlines, as well as the Golden Rule Insurance Company in Indianapolis, Indiana (USA). Fermi's golden rule is a label for a formula in quantum mechanics.

⁴"Many people have criticized the golden rule; George Bernard Shaw once said that "The golden rule is that there are no golden rules". Shaw also criticized the golden rule, "Do not do unto others as you would expect they should do unto you. Their tastes may not be the same." (Maxims for Revolutionists). "The golden rule is a good standard which is further improved by doing unto others, wherever reasonable, as they want to be done by." Karl Popper (The Open Society and Its Enemies, Vol. 2) This concept has recently been called "The Platinum Rule"[42] Philosophers, such as Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Bertrand Russell have objected to the rule on a variety of grounds.[43] The most serious among these is its application. How does one know how others want to be treated? The obvious way is to ask them, but this cannot be done if one assumes they have not reached a particular and relevant understanding." ["The Golden Rule: Criticisms," Wikipedia Encyclopedia online]

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rather than 'exegesis,' reading meaning from within the text to apply to the outside. True Bible study is about exegesis, and abhors 'eisegesis.'



The Golden Rule in the Modern World. Perhaps one of the major aspects of the Golden Rule in the modern world has been its 'secularization.' That is, the religious significance of the concept has been largely discarded in favor of a commercial interpretation and application of the idea.

This modern usage of the Golden Rule is a classic example of the falseness of proof-texting whereby the words spoken by someone are lifted out of their original context and given entirely new meanings, almost all of which have no connection to the meaning originally intended by the speaker or writer. Such awareness is critical to understanding Matthew 7:12.

Two major issues regarding the modern use of the Golden Rule: the twisted use of it in western society, and the criticism of it as inadequate.

Twisted Use. This principle is understood as an ethical code without any particular religious foundation that imposes boundaries of meaning.⁵ This 'slogan,' "Do unto others..." exists independently of any particular context in modern society. Consequently when some particular context is applied more specific meaning takes place through the influence of the context. A variety of contexts exists where the principle has been applied. They tend to fall into either a religious or a non-religious setting.

In the religious setting, a variety of forms of the Golden Rule have been tracked down in modern studies of religious traditions. In 1993, a conference on world religions drafted a document called "Towards a Global Ethic: An Initial Declaration," which identified four supposed affirmations of shared principles essential to a global ethic.⁶ The golden rule as a contextless principle was used as a foundation for these concepts. The social radicalism of the details of the proposal have severely limited the influence of this proposal on a large scale.⁷ Most world religions contain some kind of a 'golden rule' statement, although most are formulated from the negative, i.e., the 'Silver Rule,' perspective.⁸ For example, "That which you hate to be done to you, do not do to another," coming from ancient Egyptian texts about 1080 BCE. The religious oriented expressions can be found in the ancient world among the Indians, Greeks, Jews, and Chinese, mostly in the negative formation (Silver Rule) rather than in the positive formation (Golden Rule).⁹ In general the various formulations



⁵Note the description in "The Golden Rule (ethics)," Wikipedia online: "The Golden Rule is an ethical code that states one has a right to just treatment, and a responsibility to ensure justice for others. It is also called the ethic of reciprocity. It is arguably the most essential basis for the modern concept of human rights, though it has its critics.[2] A key element of the golden rule is that a person attempting to live by this rule treats all people, not just members of his or her in-group, with consideration. The Golden rule appears to have an evolutionary basis, see Reciprocity (evolution)."

⁶These are:

1. Commitment to a culture of non-violence and respect for life
2. Commitment to a culture of solidarity and a just economic order
3. Commitment to a culture of tolerance and a life of truthfulness
4. Commitment to a culture of equal rights and partnership between men and women

For details see "Towards a Global Ethic: An Initial Declaration," Wikipedia online. Religious leaders from over 40 different faith traditions initially signed the declaration. Since then a growing number of political and religious leaders have pledged support of the concepts. The detached golden rule played a formative role in shaping of these concepts, since at least the idea of a golden rule is common across a broad spectrum of religious traditions.

⁷Both communism and material capitalism are condemned as inherently unjust and unworkable as political and social philosophies. A rather naive 'feel good, think good thoughts' philosophy of living is set forth with external controls of government and religion being minimized if not eliminated completely. For details see "Solutions" in "A New Plan of Action," globalpublic.org. However noble sounding such language appears, it is doomed to failure and to become highly destructive to human society because of its ignoring the human predicament of sinfulness.

⁸See "Religion and Philosophy" in "The Golden Rule," Wikipedia for specific examples of eleven different modern faith expressions.

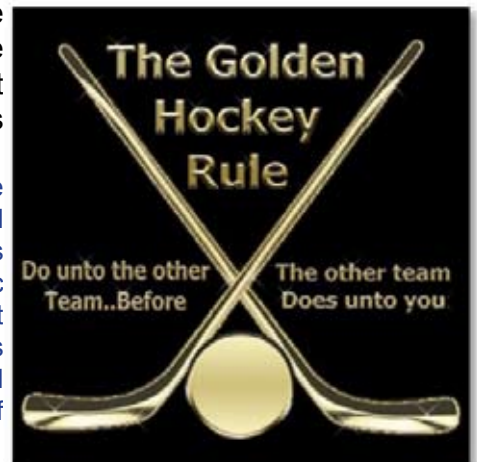
⁹As an example, note the following formations in ancient Greek philosophy among the different Greek philosophers:

1. "Do not to your neighbor what you would take ill from him." – Pittacus
2. "Avoid doing what you would blame others for doing." – Thales

attempt to capsule perceived proper treatment of other individuals under a summary 'slogan' of principle statement. But one would express the height of dumbness to assume a common meaning across these various religious traditions. The cultural and social assumptions underneath each of the traditions provide specific meaning and application. And this can -- and does -- differ from tradition to tradition.

In the *modern secular perception* of the Golden Rule, the commercial and marketing context is one common place where the idea of a golden rule surfaces.¹⁰ In the American economic world it is closely related to the marketing slogan "The customer is always right." As an economic principle in the UK,

"the Golden Rule is a guideline for the operation of fiscal policy. The Golden Rule states that over the economic cycle, the Government will borrow only to invest and not to fund current spending. In layman's terms this means that on average over the ups and downs of an economic cycle the government should only borrow to pay for investment that benefits future generations. Day-to-day spending that benefits today's taxpayers should be paid for with today's taxes, not with leveraged investment. Therefore, over the cycle the current budget (ie, net of investment) must balance or be brought into surplus."¹¹



As the above example illustrates the precise meaning of the golden rule takes on very different meanings depending on the setting that it is placed into. Thus, the contextual setting is what gives the maxim its meaning; apart from a setting the maxim has no real meaning.

Criticism. In the negative views toward the Golden Rule, one comes across the so-called "Silver Rule"¹² and also the "Platinum Rule."¹³

Silver Rule. This label applies to the reverse perspective of the Golden Rule. Instead of "Do to others as you would have them do to you," the Silver Rule states the idea, "Don't do to others what you don't want them to do to you." Outside the two statements of Jesus in Matthew and Luke, most of the other ancient expressions follow the negative formulation, rather than the positive formulation. The ancient Jewish scribal expression primarily goes back to the Jewish scribe Hillel who expressed it in the following

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3. "What you wish your neighbors to be to you, such be also to them." – Sextus the Pythagorean
 4. "Do not do to others what would anger you if done to you by others." – Isocrates
 5. "What thou avoidest suffering thyself seek not to impose on others." – Epictetus
 6. "It is impossible to live a pleasant life without living wisely and well and justly (agreeing 'neither to harm nor be harmed'), and it is impossible to live wisely and well and justly without living a pleasant life." – Epicurus
 7. "One should never do wrong in return, nor mistreat any man, no matter how one has been mistreated by him." - Plato's Socrates (Crito, 49c). See "Ancient Greek Philosophy" in "The Golden Rule," Wikipedia online.

¹⁰"Golden Rule may refer to:

1. The Golden Rule in ethics, morality, history and religion, also known as the ethic of reciprocity
2. Golden Rule savings rate, in economics, the savings rate which maximizes consumption in the Solow growth model
3. Golden Rule (fiscal policy), in economics, a rule adopted in the UK by HM Treasury to provide guidelines for fiscal policy
4. Golden rule (law), or the British Rule
5. Golden Rule (album), the seventh studio album by Australian rock band Powderfinger
6. Golden Rule, a boat skippered by Albert Bigelow used in a nuclear-weapons protest
7. Fermi's golden rule, a formula of quantum mechanics
8. Ronen's golden rule for cluster radioactivity
9. Golden Rule Store, the original name of JCPenney
10. Golden Rule Airlines, a small aviation company located in Kyrgyzstan
11. Golden Rule Insurance Company, a health insurance company based in Indianapolis, Indiana, U.S.A.
12. Samuel M. Jones, a.k.a. "Golden Rule" Jones, mayor of Toledo, Ohio, 1897
13. an alternate name for the Rule of Three, a particular form of Cross-multiplication in elementary mathematics
14. he who possesses the gold makes the rules" ["Golden Rule (disambiguation)," Wikipedia online]

¹¹Cf. "Golden Rule (fiscal policy)," Wikipedia online.

¹²The "Silver Rule" is the negative formation of the Golden Rule that is positive in its orientation. Thus, "Do not do to others as you would not have them do to you." ["Silver Rule," Wikipedia online]

¹³The "Platinum Rule" is a rejection of the Golden Rule in favor of an alternative expression: "Do unto others as they would want done to them." ["The Platinum Rule," lorenrosson.blogspot.com]

way, as Jesus was growing up in Nazareth:¹⁴

“That which is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow. That is the whole Torah; the rest is the explanation; go and learn.”

Sometimes Jesus is assumed to have taken Hillel’s formula and reversed it to the positive formulation in Matthew 7:12.¹⁵ But such an assumption is quite unlikely and without any basis of support.

Platinum Rule. This label reflects a basic rejection of the idea of the Golden Rule in favor of an alternative approach to dealing with other people.¹⁶ A variety of alternatives will surface, but the objections to the Golden Rule, especially as understood from Jesus will follow one or more of the following lines of reasoning:

- * People dispute the meaning of the golden rule,
- * Ego involvement,
- * treating jerks as they deserve to be treated,
- * self defense,
- * punishing enemies,
- * needing to win and defeat rivals,
- * oppression makes compassion difficult[45]
- * People may become disappointed or resentful if they are not treated as well in return as they perceive they have treated others,
- * People may expect to be treated as “well” as they treat others¹⁷

The playwright George Bernard Shaw was one of the more outspoken critics of Jesus’ teaching:

“The golden rule is that there are no golden rules”. Shaw also criticized the golden rule, “Do not do unto others as you would expect they should do unto you. Their tastes may not be the same.”

As most instances of criticism reflect, the critics have an axe to grind with Jesus over an anti-religious stance. Additionally, the saying of Jesus is ‘de-contextualized’ from its foundation in scripture and then ascribed different meanings that suit the critic and thus make it ‘easier’ for him to criticize Jesus.

The Golden Rule in the Ancient World. As has already been pointed out, the majority of formulations of the Golden Rule take the form of the Silver Rule and reflect a negative perspective of not treating other people certain ways. Luz and Koester summarize this material well:¹⁸

The golden rule is universal.¹⁹ There are examples of it in Confucianism and in India as well as in Greece since Herodotus, especially in nonphilosophical works, among rhetoricians, in collections of maxims, but also in almost all other literary genres. In Judaism the golden rule was originally less widespread. The first examples appear in Hellenistic Jewish writings, for example, the *Letter of Aristeas*, Sirach (LXX²⁰), Tobit, *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, and Philo.²¹ The non-Christian sources largely show the golden rule

¹⁴Talmud, Shabbat 31a, the “Great Principle” Hillel worked from 30 BCE to 10 CE.

¹⁵Mt. 7:12 (NRSV): “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.”

¹⁶A comic approach is found in a dialogue between Ralph and Norton in the TV comedy series *The Honeymooners*:

Ralph: When she put two potatoes on the table, one big one and one small one, you immediately took the big one without asking me what I wanted.

Norton: What would you have done?

Ralph: I would have taken the small one, of course.

Norton: You would?

Ralph: Yes, I would.

Norton: So, what are you complaining about? You got the small one!
[The Golden Rule: The Honeymooners,” Wikiquotes online]

¹⁷Cf. “Obstacles” in “The Golden Rule,” Wikipedia online.

¹⁸Ulrich Luz and Helmut Koester, *Matthew 1-7: A Commentary on Matthew 1-7*, Rev. ed., Hermeneia--a critical and historical commentary on the Bible (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007), 362–368.

¹⁹Philippidis (“Regel”) assembles the material on the appearance of the golden rule; more briefly Dihle, *Regel*, 8–13, 82–85, 95–102; idem, *RAC* 11.933–37; and Borgen, “Rule,” 100–105. Augustine (*De ordine* 2.25 = *PL* 32.1006) refers to it as a “vulgare proverbium.”

²⁰LXX Septuagint

²¹Tob 4:15*; *Ep. Arist.* 207; Sir 31:15* LXX; *T. Naph.* Hebrew 1.6; Ahiqar Aramaic B 53; Philo *Hypothetica* = Eusebius *Praep. Ev.* 8.7.6; *Lib. ant. bib.* 11.10 (related to adultery); *Tg. Yer. I* Lev 19:18 (as an interpretation of the love of neighbor,



in its negative wording: “What you do not want others to do to you, do not inflict on them.” However, there are also positive formulations.²² Connecting the golden rule with the command to love one’s neighbor (Lev 19:18²³) is already Jewish.²⁴ This is important, because it is initially merely a formal parallel that must be filled with content and indeed can be filled with quite different content. An anecdote is already told about Hillel that understands the golden rule as the sum of the Torah.²⁵

Although not completely unique in its wording from other expressions in the ancient world, the saying of Jesus does move a different direction than most of the ancient expressions. But it is not so much the wording of the maxim that makes the saying distinctly Christian. Far more significant is the setting that the saying placed in which gives the maxim its distinctive Christian perspective. This setting is similar but still different between Matthew 7:12 and Luke 6:31, along with the precise wording of the two forms of the sayings.

Literary Aspects:

As always the literary aspects play an important role in the interpretive process. But here they take on an even greater significance. Thus careful consideration needs to be given.

Literary Form: As has been true for most the material in the Sermon, this passage takes on the form of a Saying of Jesus, i.e., a *Logion Jesu*. This is true for both expressions in Matthew 7:12 and Luke 6:31:

Matthew 7:12. “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.”

Πάντα οὖν ὅσα ἐὰν θέλητε ἵνα ποιῶσιν ὑμῖν οἱ ἄνθρωποι, οὕτως καὶ ὑμεῖς ποιεῖτε αὐτοῖς· οὗτος γάρ ἐστιν ὁ νόμος καὶ οἱ προφῆται.

Luke 6:31. “Do to others as you would have them do to you.”

καὶ καθὼς θέλετε ἵνα ποιῶσιν ὑμῖν οἱ ἄνθρωποι ποιεῖτε αὐτοῖς ὁμοίως.

Quickly, and especially from the original Greek text, one notices the differences in the wording between the two forms of the saying. Whether this distinctive wording traces itself back to Jesus’ original expression in Aramaic, or -- much more likely -- to the writing habits and intentions of the two gospel writers Matthew and Luke cannot be determined with high levels of certainty.²⁶ The core saying follows the essentially same Greek sentence structure of a dependent clause (whatever...; just as ...) followed by the main clause (do to them...). Thus the foundational expression is essentially the same thought construct. Matthew chose to use a substantival relative clause (whatever...) to express the same basic idea as Luke’s comparative clause (just as...). The particularly distinctive Matthean aspect is the addition of the causal statement (for...). But this is to play an important literary function in Matthew’s structuring of the entire Sermon, as we will see below in the exegesis section. Additionally, it reflects his Jewish orientation in telling the story of Jesus.

As a generalized maxim, the Saying is capable of multiple meanings, depending upon specific contexts that it is placed into. The modern distortion of this saying of Jesus clearly illustrates how significant the context is to the meaning of the Saying. Additionally, the two contexts in Matthew and Luke, even though

worded negatively); Syriac Menander 246–47 (related to adultery), 250–51 (general); 2 *Enoch* 61.1; *b. Šabb.* 31a; *m. ‘Abot* 2.10 and *‘Abot R. Nat.* 15 (at the beginning, refers to the neighbor’s honor), 16 (at the beginning, refers to the neighbor’s house and wife); Death of Moses = August Wünsche, *Aus Israels Lehrhallen* (5 vols.; 1907–10; reprinted Hildesheim: Olms, 1967) 1.151 (spoken by Moses); most of the texts are in Str-B 1.460 and 357.

²²Passive formulations are found, e.g., in Dio Cassius 52.34, 39; Isocrates *Ad Nicoclem* (*The Cyprians*) 49; 2 *Enoch* 61.1; Ahiqar Aramaic B 53; cf. also *Ep. Arist.* 207. According to Dihle (*Regel*, 103), the positive version is “just as popular” as the negative one.

²³You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord. Le 19:18 (NRSV)

²⁴The expression “as yourself” suggests a certain closeness between Lev 19:18* and the golden rule. In its Hebrew version Sir 31:15* is close to Lev 19:18* and, according to Dihle (*Regel*, 83–84), in the Greek version is influenced by the golden rule. *Tg. Yer. I* Lev 19:18 adds the golden rule to the command to love one’s neighbor. In the *Death of Moses* (above, n. 5) there is also a connection to the command to love one’s neighbor; cf. Berger, *Gesetzesauslegung* 1.134.

²⁵*B. Šabb.* 31a: A Gentile comes to Hillel and demands that he be taught the whole Torah while standing on one foot. Earlier the man had been chased away by Shammai. Hillel makes him a proselyte, recites the golden rule to him, and ends with “Go, learn.” There is a similar story about Akiba in *‘Abot R. Nat.* B 26; cf. Nissen, *Gott*, 397.

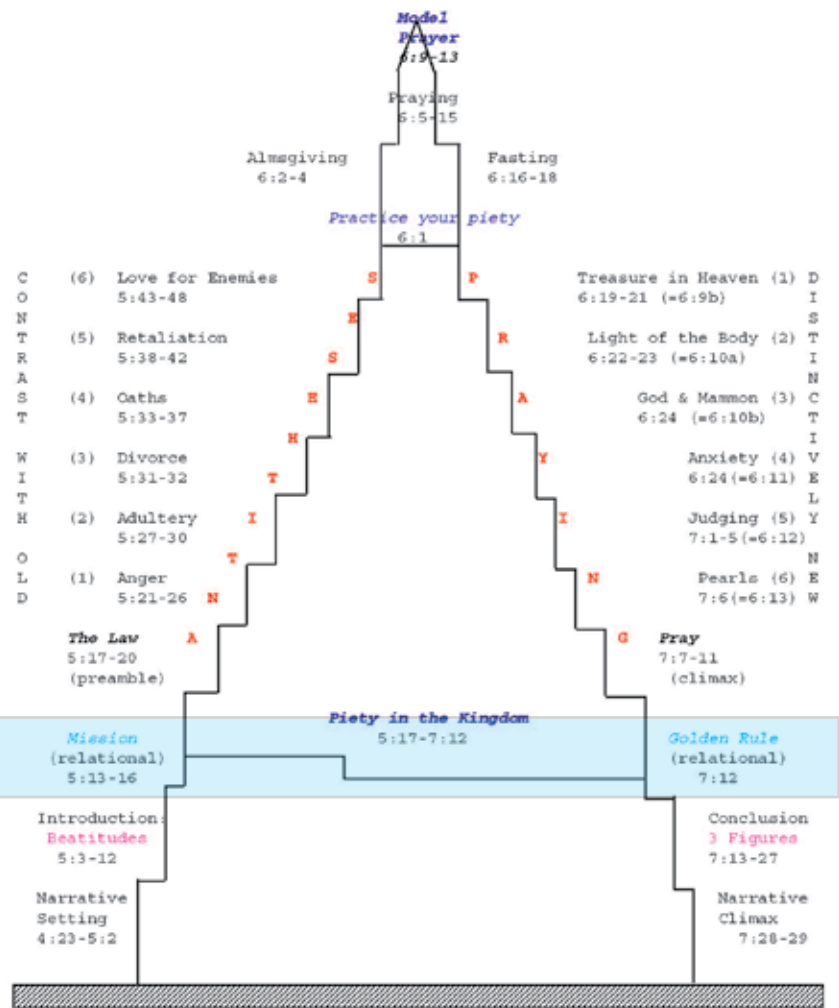
²⁶Source Critical efforts will tend to see the core expression coming from the Q source in both Matthew and Luke, while the causal expression is clearly Matthean in origin. The Lukan contextual setting of 6:27–36 is generally assumed to be the Q contextual setting for the maxim, rather than Matthew.

both are the gospel writers' version of the Sermon, will reflect somewhat different meanings of the saying by the gospel writers.

Literary Setting: This has perplexed some commentators,²⁷ and caused others to draw some questionable conclusions.²⁸ The proposal to follow is reflected in the chart to the right, and represents -- in my estimation -- the better understanding of the literary context of this Saying of Jesus.

The context has several levels of connection that are important for understanding Matthew's placing of this pericope in his narration of Jesus' Sermon. *First*, clearly the addition of the causal statement with the phrase "the Law and the Prophets" (ὁ νόμος καὶ οἱ προφῆται) serves as an inclusio marker setting a boundary to the main section of the Sermon, whose beginning was marked by the same phrase in 5:17 (τὸν νόμον ἢ τοὺς προφῆτας). With these two markers we understand the main section of the Sermon to be 5:17-7:12, which is divided into a threefold unit of material: 5:21-48; 6:1-18; 6:19-7:12. The remaining material in 7:13-27 unquestionably moves to a Conclusion that calls the readers / listeners to respond to these words of Jesus.

The Literary Structure of the Sermon on the Mount
Matthew 4:23-7:29



Source: Lein L. Cranford, *Study Manual of the Sermon on the Mount: Greek Text* (Fort Worth: Scripta Publishing Inc., 1988), 320. Adapted from Gunter Bornkamm, "Der Aufbau der Bergpredigt," *New Testament Studies* 24 (1977-78): 419-432.

Second, this pericope standing next to 7:7-11 does have a connection to it, despite the failure of some to notice it. On three separate occasions previously in the Sermon,²⁹ we have noted Jesus' use of the foundational definition of religious experience in the Old Testament, the so-called vertical / horizontal orientation. As Matthew brings the Sermon toward a conclusion, he climaxes this emphasis on the vertical / horizontal once more by following the emphasis on prayer in 7:7-11 with the Golden Rule in 7:12.

Third, as is illustrated in the chart above, conceptually 7:12 with its horizontal relationship emphasis parallels the same emphasis in 5:13-16 at the beginning of the Sermon. This sets an additional boundary conceptually on the importance of proper relationships with others as critical to proper relationship with God which stands as the dominant emphasis of the material between these two passages (5:17-7:11).

²⁷“This verse seems to be out of place, for Luke has it in a context which deals with duty to others (Luke 6:31). Possibly vss. 7–11 have been at some stage interpolated, and vs. 12 originally followed vs. 6.” [W. F. Albright and C. S. Mann, *Matthew: Introduction, Translation, and Notes in The Anchor Bible* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2008), 84]

²⁸For example, see Eugene Boring, “The Gospel of Matthew,” in volume 9 of the *New Interpreter's Bible* (iPreach online): “This terse conclusion of the instruction is not a part of the preceding paragraph, to which it is unrelated, but a separate unit, making two pairs of three units in this section. The Golden Rule (as it has been popularly known since the eighteenth century) is a part of the Great Sermon in Q (cf. [Luke 6:31](#)), where it is integrated into the command to love one's enemies. Matthew has relocated the saying to make it the climax and conclusion of the Instruction, at the same time making redactional modifications that are minor in extent but major in significance.”

²⁹First in the eight Beatitudes which are divided out between the vertical (5:3-6) and the horizontal (5:7-12). Second, built throughout the core section of 5:17-7:12 is the presumption of the vertical / horizontal nature of authentic religious experience. Third, the six petitions of the Model Prayer (6:9-13) also divide out evenly between the vertical / horizontal experience.

This in several subtle, but not obscure ways Matthew highlights that Jesus stood clearly in line with the religion of the Old Testament, particular as set forth in the same twofold division of the Decalogue in the Law of God in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5.

In light of these contextual considerations, Jesus' expression of the Golden Rule is focused on the disciple's proper treatment of other people as an essential part of his commitment to God. The broad principle of the Golden Rule must be understood to summarize in generalized statement the particulars of horizontal relationships as set forth and defined by the material in the Sermon itself. Viewed in the opposite direction, the broad statement of the Golden Rule can only mean specifically what Jesus has defined in detail in the Sermon from a horizontal religious perspective. Meanings beyond this have no legitimacy contextually and become seriously objectionable as eisegesis. A 'contextless'³⁰ Golden Rule may have such meaning as a linguistic possibility, but it becomes utterly false to assert that this is what Jesus meant.

Literary Structure: The block diagram of the original Greek text will highlight how the ideas in the maxim are put together. The diagram below reflects this understanding as reflected in English translation.

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7:12      Therefore
          all things whatsoever you wish men to do to you
          thus
149      do to them;
          for
150      this is the Law and the Prophets.
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Several aspects come to light easier with this visual representation of the thought structure. The connector 'therefore' (οὖν) suddenly comes to the forefront as being important, in spite of many English translations completely ignoring it in the translation process. Thus 7:12 grows out of what precedes it as an explicit statement of implication in the preceding text. The maxim contains two core expressions; first comes the Golden Rule expression (statement 149) and then the reason / basis for it (# 150). The two statements are linked by causal connector 'for' (γάρ). The Law and the Prophets provide the justification for the Golden Rule. The things desired from others is expressed emphatically in the Greek with the substantival apposition relative clause introduced by ὅσα. The quantitative nature of this Greek pronoun is qualified by Πάντα which broadens the scope to include desired thing. This substantival relative clause then stands in apposition to the Greek adverb of manner οὕτως (thusly). This pattern is more complex than the parallel in Luke 6:31, which uses a simpler Greek adverbial comparative clause for this idea: καθὼς θέλετε ἵνα ποιῶσιν ὑμῖν οἱ ἄνθρωποι. The present imperative form of the Greek verb ποιεῖτε highlights an ongoing duty, rather than a spotty or random act of kindness.

The causal connector 'for' (γάρ) links the reference to the Law and the Prophets as the foundation for the admonition to do good to others. The nature of the second statement is to indicate that the entire Old Testament (i.e., the Law and the Prophets) could be reduced to the single principle expressed in the admonition. This raises the question of how a very complex set of rules and regulations could be summarized by such a simple statement as the Golden Rule. With Paul's use of 'summarizing' language in Rom. 13:8-9 and Gal. 5:14, does this point more to Luke's coupling of the Golden Rule with brotherly love, rather than Matthew's contextualizing of the maxim? Also, does this hint at the slightly earlier summarizing statement of Hillel that the Law of God can be summarized in one word: [That which is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow.](#)"

Many intriguing question emerge from a careful examination of the structure of the ideas in this maxim.

Exegesis of the Text:

Not every question can be answered to everyone's satisfaction. But the task of exegesis is to attempt to grasp the most likely meaning of the text in its original historical setting. From that applications to today can be made with greater confidence in their accuracy and consistency with the scripture text.

The Golden Rule: "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you" (Πάντα οὖν ὅσα ἐὰν

³⁰Easier to say in German, "kontextlos," than in English.

θέλητε ἵνα ποιῶσιν ὑμῖν οἱ ἄνθρωποι, οὕτως καὶ ὑμεῖς ποιεῖτε αὐτοῖς).

The connector ‘therefore’ (οὖν) most naturally links this verse to 7:7-11.³¹ The vertical / horizontal perspective provides a clear rationale for why this is the best understanding. Flowing out of commitment to God comes commitment to proper relationship with others. This obligation to others is inherent to religious devotion to God as expressed in prayer. The Old Testament makes this abundantly clear; thus Matthew’s insertion of the second core statement on the Law and the Prophets.

The inclusiveness of “in everything” (Πάντα ὅσα ἐὰν) highlights the all encompassing scope of interpersonal actions. In 5:17-7:11, Jesus has already described a wide range of possibilities that comprise the content of ‘everything.’ These become ‘desired actions’ from others because of the realization of the spiritual blessing they can produce along with the highly healthy and productive relationships to be developed, and based on common commitment to God.

The heart of the admonition is for the disciple in the same way (οὕτως καὶ) to perform these actions toward others. Sometimes this is viewed as advocating reciprocity. That is, I do certain things because I expect others to respond in kind to me. In the context of the Sermon this kind of self-centered motive for actions to others is clearly out of bounds. This is closer to the condemned attitudes and actions of the scribes and Pharisees. Jesus isn’t talking about reciprocity in the Golden Rule. Rather, He is defining the boundaries of appropriate actions that a disciple committed to God would like to have happen to him. This then defines the boundaries of his actions to others, while not expecting nor demanding anything in return. Additionally the present imperative form of the Greek verb ποιεῖτε demands ongoing actions as a fundamental pattern of relationship with others. This is not an isolated action, nor is it a conditional action. Out of our experience of God in Christ we come to understand proper relationships with others. We understand that such relationships, especially inside the community of faith, produce a wonderfully productive and spiritually healthy community. Thus these kinds of actions we would wish from others become the defining boundaries of our actions to others. In the context of brotherly love, as structured in Luke 6:31, such actions motivate others to function in similar ways. But the disciple’s commitment is to take these actions, irrespective of whether the other person reciprocates in kind.

The Law and the Prophets: “for this is the law and the prophets” (οὗτος γὰρ ἐστὶν ὁ νόμος καὶ οἱ προφῆται).

The phrase “Law and Prophets” stands as one of the ways of referring to what we have come to call the Old Testament. From ancient Judaism to the present the Hebrew Bible is divided into three sections:³²

The Tanakh (Hebrew: תנ"ך pronounced [ta'nax] or [tə'nax]; also Tenakh or Tenak) is a name used in Judaism for the canon of the Hebrew Bible (“Old Testament”). The Tanakh is also known as the Masoretic Text or the Miqra. The name “Tanakh” is a Hebrew acronym formed from the initial Hebrew letters of the Masoretic Text’s three traditional subdivisions: The Torah (“Teaching”, also known as the Five Books of Moses), Nevi’im (“Prophets”) and Ketuvim (“Writings”)—hence TaNaKh.

In ancient Judaism, as well as today, one tends to refer to the Old Testament by naming the first two of these three divisions, thus “the Law and the Prophets.” This was the pattern by Jesus and the apostles in

³¹Davies and Allison’s discussion of six different ways it has been understood reflects a general failure to grasp the implications of the immediate context:

“The ‘therefore’ of 7:12a has been understood in several different ways. (1) It can simply be omitted on textual grounds (so Zahn, p. 310). (2) The connexion could be with 7:11 or with 7:7–11: because God treats you well, you must treat others well (cf. Schlatter, p. 246; Gundry, Commentary, p. 125). Or, as Chrysostom has it (Hom. on Mt. 23:6), if you desire God to hear your prayers (7:7–8), do this, namely, what 7:12 enjoins. (3) ‘Therefore’ sums up all from 7:1 (so Bengel, Gnomon, ad loc.). (4) According to Albright and Mann (p. 84), 7:12 may originally have followed 7:6; the οὖν would then, at least at one time, have connected these two verses (cf. Allen, p. 67). (But there is not a shred of evidence for considering 7:7–11 a secondary insertion.) (5) The conjunction looks back to 7:1–2 (so Plummer, p. 114, tentatively). (6) According to McNeile (p. 93), οὖν is not in logical sequence with v. 11, but sums up the Sermon to this point c f (cf. Barth, in TIM, p. 73; Guelich, pp. 361–2). This must be the correct solution. 7:12b harks back to 5:17 and, on our structural analysis of the sermon on the mount (see pp. 62–4), thereby fashions an inclusio. The verse must accordingly round off 5:17–7:12 and give summary expression to the sermon’s most salient or characteristic imperative.” [W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (London; New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), 685.]

³²Cf. “Tanakh,” Wikipedia online.

the beginning of Christianity.³³ Thus the phrase refers to the Old Testament as sacred scriptures among the Jews of Jesus' day.

A casual study of the Law in Exodus through Deuteronomy will expose a very complex system of laws put in place to govern the Israelites as the covenant community of God's people. Is it possible to reduce that down to a simple depiction, much less to a single phrase? Many would conclude that such cannot be done without severe distortion of the meaning of the Law of God. But many Jews and early Christians felt this could be done:

Hillel, the Jewish scribe at the beginning of the Christian era:

"That which is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow. That is the whole Torah; the rest is the explanation; go and learn."

Jesus:

Mt. 7:12: "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets."

Mt. 22:34-40: "34 When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, 35 and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. 36 'Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?' 37 He said to him, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' 38 This is the greatest and first commandment. 39 And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' 40 **On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.**"

Paul:

Rom. 13:9-10: "9 The commandments, 'You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet'; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' 10 Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law."

Gal. 5:14: "For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'"

The clear contextual setting for the other statement of the Golden Rule in Luke 6 points unmistakably to brotherly love as the context setting for actions toward others.

27 "But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, 28 bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. 29 If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. 30 Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. 31 **Do to others as you would have them do to you.**

32 "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. 33 If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. 34 If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. 35 But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. 36 Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

If we seek to sum up the responsibilities of Christian discipleship then loving God and loving others captures the heart of being a follower of Jesus. The Golden Rule of Jesus has meaning only inside this context and helps depict the boundaries of expressing brotherly love to others.

2. What does the text mean to us today?

- 1) How have you understood the Golden Rule?
- 2) How has that understanding changed as a result of this study?
- 3) Do you reach out to others according to the Golden Rule as defined by Jesus?
- 4) What are some false understandings of the Golden Rule in our day?

³³Cf. the nine instances in the New Testament where this Jewish label is used by Christians.