

Sermon by Ted Mosebach
First Congregational Church
United Church of Christ
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The Golden Rule

(Ninth in series, *Christian Wisdom for Life, Ten Easy Verses*)

In everything, do to others as you have them do to you; for this is the law of the prophets. –Matthew 7:12–

(Supporting Text—Matthew 18:23-35)

The memory verse this morning concerns no less a subject than how to make peace. Perhaps one of the best known verses in all of scripture, it even has its own title, *The Golden Rule*. It provides a strategy for interrupting the cycles of vengeance and retaliation. The powerful idea implicit within *The Golden Rule* is that healthy relationships require forbearance. Simple fairness is not enough. What is fair might not resolve a conflict. Doing what is fair might just keep us in the tit for tat of retaliation. Being fair comes with words like, *What goes around comes around*, or *He got what he deserved*, or *She had it coming*, or, *Now, how do **you** like it?* Fairness does not change anything. In order to live in peace, everyone needs to be gracious. Each person needs to live according to *The Golden Rule*. Each of us needs to do to others as we would **have them** (like them to) do to us.

In Jesus' Parable of the Ungrateful Servant is an example of someone who broke *The Golden Rule* because he lived only according to what was fair. He seemed to have forgotten that his very life was his only because of the graciousness he received from someone else. Consider this a brief review of the parable.

A servant owed a King ten thousand talents. When the servant could not pay it back and pleaded with the king that the servant and his family not be sold into slavery to pay the debt, the king relented, had mercy upon the servant, and forgave him the debt.

The servant was in turn owed by a fellow servant a debt of a mere hundred denarii. The first servant insisted that his fellow servant pay up and when he did not, the first servant had the debtor thrown into prison. When the other servants heard about it they told the King who was of course enraged and rescinded his grace from the servant who had received it. The king said to that servant, *Should you not have had mercy on your fellow servant as I had mercy on you?* And the king had that servant tortured until

the debt was repaid. The ungrateful servant broke *The Golden Rule* in a most egregious manner. Not only did the first servant not treat the second in the way the first would have wanted to be treated himself, the first servant did not even treat the second servant in the gracious way that the first, in fact, **was** treated.

Amazing as it seems, the ungrateful servant does not seem to include the tremendous grace he received as part of the equation of how he should treat others. He seems to have lost sight of just how much of a forgiven debtor he was. In fact, his own debt was so great that he had no other chance of life at all apart from the kindness that was extended to him which he did not at all deserve. We might be reminded of the hymn line, *O to grace how great a debtor, daily I'm constrained to be.* (From the hymn, "Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing," words by Robert Robinson) Yet that fact seems to elude the ungrateful servant.

The debt for which the ungrateful servant was forgiven was huge. It was astronomical. Specifically, it was ten thousand talents. A talent was equal to 20.4 kg of silver. That was equal to six thousand drachmas. Six thousand drachmas was equal to the wages of a typical working person for about fifteen years. So, fifteen years labor represents about one talent and the ungrateful servant owned ten thousand talents. Ten thousand times fifteen equals One hundred and fifty thousand. So the servant owed the king one hundred and fifty thousand years worth of labor. For Jesus to say that the servant owed ten thousand talents was to say that he owed an incalculable amount, an amount impossible to comprehend let alone repay. Another way to look at it would be that all the taxes for the Judean territories which Herod would collect for a year was about nine hundred talents. Ten thousand talents would exceed all the taxes put together from all the additional territories of Syria, Phoenicia, and Samaria. It would seem impossible for the ungrateful servant to have forgotten how much he had been forgiven, but he acted like he did.

On the other hand, the second servant owed a comparatively trifling amount, one hundred denarii. Scholars who study such things as ancient monetary designations have calculated that a comparison between one hundred denarii and ten thousand talents would be about one to six hundred thousand. But still, one hundred denarii was worth about one hundred days wages, so that amount too would have been difficult if not impossible for a servant to repay. The only alternatives in response to such a debt were forgiveness or condemnation. There were no other possibilities. Grace was the only hope of the servant and of the relationship. (All monetary evaluations were gleaned from the discussion of the Parable of the Ungrateful Servant in *The Interpreter's Bible*.)

But how does the parable apply directly to us and how does it help to explain *The Golden Rule*? Do we have debts that we can not repay, to God or to others?

I think so, yes, we do. Surely we are indebted beyond all measure to the grace of God. That fact is the core gospel message. All that we have, including life itself, is a gift from God we can not repay, including the full and free forgiveness of sin! But might we not also have debts even to other people that are beyond the limit of balancing? I think we tend to forget our weaknesses, the times we have needed the forbearance of others lest our relationships deteriorate. It is human, perhaps, to remember the wrongs done to us and forget those we have done to others. And the parable suggests that we be careful about that, not to fall for the delusion of it. Because it is so difficult to be objective about this we might in general consider ourselves to be the greater debtors in any relationship, that what we may need to forgive others is not as much as that for which we need them to forgive us. If that is our assumption we might much better keep *The Golden Rule*. If that is the attitude by which we manage our relationships we will be peacemakers, and be called children of God (Matthew 5:9).

In everything do to others as you want them to do for you. *The Golden Rule* is deep. It is profound. It is pro-active. It is not just cute for children to memorize. It is for everyone who has had enough of the broken hearts and broken bodies of retribution and war. It is hope of every relationship, individual or national, in the world.