A Golden Promise and the Golden Rule

Matthew 7:7-12

Introduction: 1) John Piper, in a sermon entitled “Ask Your Father in Heaven,” says, “When you pause to consider that God is infinitely strong and can do all that he pleases, and that he is infinitely righteous so that he only does what is right, and that he is infinitely good so that everything he does is perfectly good, and that he is infinitely wise so that he always knows perfectly what is right and good, and that he is infinitely loving so that in all his strength and righteousness and goodness and wisdom he raises the eternal joy of his loved ones as high as it can be raised – when you pause to consider this, then the lavish invitation of this God to ask him for good things, with the promise that he will give them, is unimaginably wonderful” (12-31-06).

2) Matthew 7:1-6 picked up again on the idea of hypocrisy (6:2, 5, 16; 7:5). Matthew 7:7-11 picks up again on the theme of seeking (6:33; 7:7-8) in the context of prayer and the incredible privilege it is (cf. Luke 11:5-13). Matthew 7:12 with its reference to “the Law and the Prophets” links up with Matthew 5:17 forming what is called an *inclucio*. The phrase brackets or sandwiches the whole section. In essence the so called “Golden Rule,” as Quarles notes, “summarizes and concludes Jesus’ interpretation and application of the Law (5:17-48), and His instruction for life in the world including both one’s relationship to possessions (6:19-34) and to people (7:1-6), as well as 7:7-11” (Quarles, 306). In other words, showing the connection of verse 12 to verses 7-11, we need to seek the Lord and ask Him to give us His righteous disposition. We need to seek the Lord, His kingdom, His righteousness, if we are to do for others what we would want them to do for us. Without God’s enablement we are destined to be judgmental of others (7:1-5). With his strength and power we can love our neighbor as we love ourselves (Matt. 22:39-40). Further, because God gives His children the good gifts of 7:9-11, we should live out the Golden Rule as an act of gratitude and thanksgiving towards others. Matthew 7:7-12 actually hangs together quite well.

3) The guarantee of answered prayer is truly a Golden Promise. Doing to others what you would want them to do to you is also a Golden Rule. Like the two Great Commandments to love God and others, these two nuggets of gold first direct out attention to our God; then, and only then, do they direct our attention to others. The order is crucial and important. First I talk to God about His good gifts. One of these good gifts is the supernatural ability to live out the Golden Rule.

I. God promises to answer our prayers 7:7-11

* Sinclair Ferguson says these verses contain “beggars’ logic” (*The Sermon* *on* *the Mount*, 157). I might add that they contain the “beggars’ privilege.” Prayer is the great blessing that puts our impotence in touch with God’s omnipotence, our lack in touch with His supply, our needs in touch with his riches.
* Our negligence in this vital spiritual discipline is an evidence of a beggar’s foolishness. Prayer is, as it were, an invitation to an extravagant banquet where everything that we need is present. Like fools we so often send back the word, “I’m too busy.” We send back the word, “Not today, maybe later.”
* James 4:2 reminds us, “You do not have because you do not ask.” Missionary and former college president Robertson McQuilkin adds, “Why are we so weak and impotent? Why have we watched in our lifetime as the number of lost people has increased geometrically? Are we not weak in impact for God because we are weak in time spent with God?” (Quoted in *EGT*, 218). God promises to answer our prayers. In light of the fact that we have his word on this, how should we respond?

1. We should ask persistently 7:7-8

* I believe God’s Word often commands us to do what we naturally will not do. It encourages and admonishes us where we are weak, where we struggle. Perhaps there is no spiritual discipline where this is more true than the discipline of prayer. Jesus invites us to pray by means of a 3-fold command: 1) ask, 2) seek and 3) knock. All three verbs are imperatives, words of command. All three verbs are in the present tense calling for continuous action. Ask and keep on asking is the idea. Seek and keep on seeking is the idea. Knock and keep on knocking is the idea. And, when you persistently pray like this, God promises to answer. “Ask and it will be given to you. Seek, and you will find. Knock, and the door will be open.” As John Piper puts it, “The asker receives. The seeker finds. The knocker gets an open door. Your Father will give you good things” (Ibid).
* Verse 8 reveals the inclusive and comprehensive nature of this promise to the children of God (v. 11). “Everyone!” Not some. Not most. Not almost all. Everyone who calls God their Father is the recipient of this promise. Jesus, no doubt, understands our hesitancy to pray, especially when we are aware of our sin and unworthiness. The great Reformer Martin Luther has a helpful word at this point: “He knows that we are timid and shy, that we feel unworthy and unfit to present our needs to God…. We think that God is so great and we are so tiny that we do not dare to pray…. That is why Christ wants to lure us away from such timid thoughts, to remove our doubts, and to have us go ahead confidently and boldly.” (*The Sermon on the Mount*, translated by Jaroslav Pelikan, Vol. 21 of *Luther’s Works*, [Concordia, 1956], p. 234). God hears us when we ask. God reveals Himself when we seek. God opens doors when we knock. My friend James Merritt says, “What we need in our [churches] today is not a declaration of independence. What we need is a declaration of dependence” (“The Power of Purposeful Praying,” Sermon). 1 Thessalonians 5:17 is a good word to remember, “Pray without ceasing.”

1. We should ask expectantly 7:9-11

* Verses 9-11 basically make two points. First, when you pray you are praying to your Father. Second, your heavenly Father is so much better than any earthly father. Verses 9 and 10 ask two rhetorical questions with very expected answers. First (v. 9), what father on earth, “if his son ask him for bread, will give him a stone;” something that looks like bread but has no nutritional value and will probably break his teeth? Answer: no loving, earthly father would even consider doing such a thing. Second (v. 10), what father, when asked for a fish, will give his son a snake, something that resembles a fish but is both poisonous and dangerous? The answer is the same: no loving, earthly father would even consider doing such a thing.
* Verse 11 then contains a lesser to greater argument. In sum: evil (sinful) earthly fathers “give good gifts to [their] children.” If that is true, and it is, “how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him?” Even depraved, fallen, sinful fathers will seek to meet the legitimate needs of their children simply because they love them. You have a perfectly good, holy and righteous Father in heaven who loves you so much more! You can expect Him to do so much more! He delights in blessing His children and giving them good things when they ask, seek and knock. He is honored by our persistence (vs. 7-8). He is honored by our expectancy (vs. 9-11). And, I would add that since He is our perfect, heavenly Father, we can ask trustingly, knowing we will always and only get what is best for us to live for Him and do His will. Infinite love is the well out of which God’s good gifts always flow to His children. C.H. Spurgeon puts it perfectly: “Our heavenly Father will correct our prayer, and give us, not what we ignorantly seek, but what we really need. The promise to give what we ask is here explained, and set in its true light. This is a gracious correction of the folly which would read the Lord’s words in the most literal sense, and make us dream that every whim of ours had only to put on the dress of prayer in order to its realization. Our prayers go to heaven in a Revised Version. It would be a terrible thing if God always gave us all we asked for. Our heavenly Father himself ‘knows how to give’ far better than we know how to ask” (Matthew, 71).

II. God challenges us to obey the “golden rule” 7:12

* Though it may not appear to be the case at first glance, we have seen that verse 12 is intimately connected to verses 7-11. John Piper again is very helpful when he says, “the word *so* (“therefore,” *CSB*) at the beginning of verse 12 implies three things: 1) that you can’t live the Golden Rule – treat others the way you would like to be treated – without experiencing the truth of verses 7-11 – that is, without the deep confidence that your Father will give you every good thing you really need; 2) that if you really experience the truth of verses 7-11 – the assurance that your heavenly Father meets all your real needs – you will have the inner freedom and impulse to live the Golden Rule: to do the good to others that you would like them to do for you; and 3) that the reason the Golden Rule fulfils the law and prophets is that is assumes the love of verse 12 is all flowing from faith in the work of Jesus Christ to ransom us by his blood and secure for us God’s mercy and everlasting Fatherhood. All of that is implied in the word *so* – 1) if you really treasure your heavenly Father who meets all your needs by only giving you what is good for you, then you *can* live for others; 2) if you really treasure your heavenly Father who meets all your needs by only giving you what is good for you, then you *will* live for others; and 3) if your living for others flows from trusting in your Father through the Messiah, Jesus, who paid your ransom and forgave your sins, then this kind of life fulfills all that the law and the prophets were aiming at” (“The Spring of Persistent Public Love,” 1-14-07).
* Chuck Quarles provides an amazing and much unknown insight concerning verse 12 and the Golden Rule. He notes that the name “dates to at least as early as the end of the Middle Ages.” Further, and very surprising, he notes, “contrary to popular opinion, this name was not inspired by the preciousness of this important moral principle. This name relates to accounts claiming that the Emperor Alexander Severus had Matthew 7:12 inscribed in gold on the wall of his throne room” (p. 306, citing France, *Matthew*, 145). While this may be true as to its origin, there is certainly a golden quality to this rule that has made it one of the most memorable and quoted verses in all of God’s inerrant Word. We can see three essential components to the verse.

1. Start with what you would want

“Therefore” connects verse 12 to verses 7-11. The Golden Rule must flow out of the Golden Promise. Jesus begins by saying, “whatever you want others to do for you.” “Whatever” is comprehensive. There are no exceptions. “You want others to do for you.” Jesus is stating a well-known principle in the positive not the negative. The negative form was the more common. For example, Rabbi Hillel said, “What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow creatures” (cited in Carson, 112). Jesus in essence turns the principle around and raises it to a higher and more proactive level. Carson is right:

“Jesus gives the positive form of this rule, and the difference between the two forms is profound. For example, the negative form would teach behavior like this: If you do not enjoy being robbed, don’t rob others. If you do not like being cursed don’t curse others. If you do not enjoy being hated, don’t hate others. If you do not care to be clubbed over the head, don’t club others over the head. However, the positive form teaches behavior like this: If you enjoy being loved, love others. If you like to receive things, give to others. If you like being appreciated, appreciate others. The positive form is thus far more searching than its negative counterpart. Here there is no permission to withdraw into a world where I offend no one, but accomplish no positive good either. What would you like done to you? What would you really like? Then, do that to others. Duplicate both the quality of these things, and their quantity – ‘in everything.’” (Carson, 112).

1. Finish with what others want

Jesus says what you would like others to do for you, “do also the same for them.” Look inward and then move outward in action. And, recognize, in particular, that it will always be a challenge to love well those who are different from you. Put this in a cultural and ethnic context for the purpose of application. “Would I want to be made fun of because of the way I look? Would I want to be shunned by others? Would I want to be talked down to as an inferior? Would I want to never be invited over for dinner? Would I want to never be considered for a job I’m qualified for? Would I approve if people didn’t want to be my neighbor? Would I approve if no one would consider me for a home loan though my credit is good? Would I approve if I was never considered for a promotion at work though I am qualified for it?” (Piper, “The Spring of Persistent Public Love”). These are probing questions. And this is a powerful principle that cannot leave you the same. We should ask our good heavenly Father to give us the good ability to live out in a true and authentic fashion the Golden Rule.

1. Rejoice that this is what God wants

* The phrase “the Law and the Prophets” is a shorthand way of referring to the whole of the Old Testament. It strategically appears three times in Matthew’s gospel.
  + Matthew 5:17-18 – Jesus came to fulfill the Scriptures.
  + Matthew 7:12 – The Golden Rule captures the heart of the Scriptures.
  + Matthew 22:40 – Loving God and loving your neighbors are the foundation of the Scriptures.
* Quarles says, “The point is that verse 12 is the summation of the essence of the character God required of His people in the Old Testament” (p. 306). Osborne says much the same, that the Golden Rule is “the essence of the Law and Prophets’ in terms of elucidating its true meaning” (*Matthew*, ZECNT, 262). Carson would add, “such behavior sums up the Law and the Prophets. In other words, such behavior conforms to the requirements of the Kingdom of God” (p. 112). The Golden Rule, then, captures the moral and spiritual intention that under girds the whole of the Old Testament, especially as it relates to how God’s imagers treat one another. At its core it is simply an expression of divine love, something Scripture embodies from Genesis to Revelation. As only he can, the Baptist preacher, C. H. Spurgeon, paints a picture of this verse that we cannot help but gaze at for our joy and our edification. He writes:

“This is the sum of the Decalogue, the Pentateuch, and the whole sacred Word. Oh, that all men acted on it, and then there would be no slavery, no war, no sweating, no striking, no lying, no robbing; but all would be justice and love! What a kingdom is this which has such a law! This is The Christian Code. This is the condensation of all that is right and generous. We adore the King out of whose mouth and heart such a law could flow. This one rule is a proof of the divinity of our holy religion. The universal practice of it by all who call themselves Christians would carry conviction to Jew, Turk, and infidel, with greater speed and certainty than all the apologies and arguments which the wit or piety of men could produce.

Lord, teach it to me! Write it on the fleshly tablets of my renewed heart! Write it out in full in my life!” (*Matthew*, 72-73).

Conclusion

These verses speak powerfully to our hearts because they powerfully show us Jesus! No one ever prayed to the Father so persistently and expectantly as did our Lord. He never stopped talking to His Father. He never stopped trusting His Father. He knew more intimately than anyone that He is a good, good Father! And, no one ever loved like Jesus! No one! Friend or foe, His love was a river of compassion, grace and mercy. You long to see the Golden Rule in real life? Look simply to Jesus and His love for sinners like you and me. There will be no disappointment. Just utter amazement. He is that good! He is that wonderful!!!