

BACKGROUND

- The exegetical technique employed by Jesus to connect Deut 6:5 and Lev 19:18 on the basis of the common use of the word translated “and you shall love” is actually a Hellenistic import. (Keener)
- Many (most?) commentators agree with Stott¹ that the golden rule of 7:12 “is found in a similar—but always negative—form elsewhere,” e.g. in the maxim of Confucius, “Do not to others what you would not with done to yourself” or in the OT apocrypha “Do not do to anyone what you yourself would hate” (Tobit 4:15). The positive form goes beyond sins of omission to sins of commission; as Carson² points out, “The goats in 25:31-46 would be acquitted under the negative form of the rule, but not under the form attributed to Jesus.” Green’s³ enthusiastic statement that Mt 7:12 “is without parallel in the teachings of the world,” may be qualified by noting with Keener⁴ that it not only occurs in Lev 19:18 (though in a sea of thou-shalt-nots), but *similar* positive forms are found in a few extra-Biblical sources as well, such as Seneca’s “let us so give as we would wish to receive” (*Ben.* 2.1.1)⁵. So Alan Kirk writes, “The comparative achievement of the rule seems to be its universality, itself a function of the high level of abstraction in its formulation, not the opening up of moral territory not covered to some extent explicitly or by implication by other maxims.”⁶
- In 6:22-23 Jesus talks about the eye as the “lamp” of the body, saying “if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light.” Here “healthy” is *aplous*, or “single,” in the sense of single-mindedness. This same expression was used to refer to generosity and righteousness, and to translate the Hebrew term for “perfect” in the Septuagint. By contrast, the “unhealthy” or literally “evil” eye was both stingy (or jealous or greedy) as well as one that could not see properly. “Body” (Greek *soma*) was idiomatic in Jewish thought for one’s whole self. Putting these together:

generosity/single-minded devotion to God	⇒	a healthy self and spiritual perception
stinginess/lack of single-mindedness	⇒	distorted spiritual perception and darkness

1 *Christian Counter-Culture*, IVP (1978), 190.

2 *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke*, Zondervan (1984), 187.

3 Michael Green, *The Message of Matthew*, IVP (2000), 107.

4 Craig Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, Eerdmans (1999), 248.

5 The earliest “anticipation” of the golden rule, according to Jeffrey Wattles [*Journal of Religious Ethics* 21 (1993), 69], is found in Homer’s *Odyssey*, where Calypso assures Odysseus, “I will work no secret mischief against you. No, I mean what I say; I will be as careful for you as I should be for myself in the same need.” William Phipps [*Theology Today* 39 (1982), 194] quotes Plato as saying, “Do to others as you would that they should do to you,” in the context of business ethics and referring specifically to property. According to Wattles, this doesn’t represent the self-sacrificial philosophy of Jesus, since “what virtuous restraint costs him financially will be made up by the gain of his soul of goodness, a reason that may seem ‘self-interested’” (82).

6 “‘Love Your Enemies,’ the Golden Rule, and Ancient Reciprocity,” *JBL* 122 (2003) 667.

Walking in the Dust of Rabbi Jesus

Chapter 4: Meeting Myself Next Door

1. Tverberg gives props to Hillel's negative form of the Golden Rule, by quoting Rabbi Telushkin:

He tells about a school teacher who asked his sixth graders to compose two "Golden Rule" lists, one of the actions they would want others to do to them, and the other of actions they would not want done. Their "Do" lists were brief and somewhat vague, containing things like "love," "respect," and "help." But the "Don't" lists were much longer, with practical prohibitions like "Don't hit," "steal," "laugh at," "snub," or "cheat." The negative version was clearer to the students because it was concrete and specific. As a result, it was more likely to change their behavior.

(Note that the Golden Rule is embedded in Lev 19, just such a chapter of don'ts.) A parent reading Tverberg may recall the well-known principle that it is more effective to redirect a child to a positive action rather than simply telling the child not to do something bad. ("Stop hitting your brother, put down that pipe, and draw something on the chalk board instead!") Psychologists have also amply demonstrated the efficacy of motivation centered on seeking something good rather than avoiding something bad.

Are Tverberg and Telushkin right? When does it help to focus on what to avoid rather than what to do? If it helps, give some examples relevant to your interactions with your family.

2. Tverberg points out that Lev 19:18 can, in Hebrew, be read, "love your neighbor who is similar to yourself."⁷ She also points out that recognition of our similarities and especially our common flaws can aid us in loving our "neighbors." Conversely, we are particularly susceptible to be judgmental of those who are least like us.

Presidential elections seem especially to magnify the gulf between us and those of other parties and ideologies. Have you experienced this, and with what groups? Following Tverberg, list the common attributes you share with one such group, and consider how this might aid you in prayer for that group.

3. In Jesus' day, Jews were as distasteful to Samaritans as Samaritans were to Jews. In trying to identify modern equivalents, commentators point to Irish Protestants and Catholics, Israelis and Palestinians, and black and white South Africans. Marian Ronan, in her article "The Guy in the Ditch" (*The Living Pulpit*, Jul/Sep 2002), writes:

...the equivalent of the person left in the ditch in Luke 10:25-37 must be those we ourselves would bypass today on the road to Jerusalem. The cast of candidates is extensive, but my vote goes to... men and women whose sexual lives so repel us that we push them beyond the bounds of what we consider to be real humanity.

7 It may be noted that, in contrast to this illuminating translation of the Hebrew of Lev 19:18, the Greek of Mt 22:39 does not admit this reading, nor does Mt 6:12 allow the translation suggested on p. 62.

Ronan includes in this category the “young gay man left to die tied to a fence post outside Laramie, Wyoming,” sexual predators, and pedophilic priests.

Do you agree? Who do we find as distasteful as Samaritans and Jews found one another?

4. What parallel to the Good Samaritan from 2 Chr 28:1-18/2 Kings 16:1-4 does Tverberg point out on pp. 63-64? How does this inform your reading of this passage? How would it have affected the hearing of this passage by Jesus' disciples and critics?
5. Tverberg emphasizes the centrality of community in Jewish prayer and worship. She contrasts the strong community of the early (Jewish) church described in Acts 2:42-47 with “American Protestants, [who] still maintain a strong sense of 'Jesus and me' individualism, emphasizing one's personal relationship with Christ as the essence of faith” (p. 57).

Modern commentators have highlighted community as an overlooked aspect of Biblical thought. Though many of Jesus' sayings do focus on the individual, such as the Parable of the Sower, the Pearl, the Hidden Treasure, the Prodigal Son, the Sheep and the Goats, the Great Supper, the Unmerciful Servant, etc. What would we gain by a communal focus in our worship? What do we gain by focusing on the individual in worship? How would we accomplish the former? Discuss this balance also in the areas of salvation or even outreach.

Chapter 5: Gaining a Good Eye

6. The “good eye” is for Jews idiomatic of a generous spirit. When Jesus warns that the opposite, a parsimonious attitude, fills one with darkness, what does he mean? Have you seen this principle at work in the lives of others around you?
7. First-century sages debated the relative importance of various sins. Jesus entered into this debate when he used “I desire mercy, not sacrifice” to permit healing on the Sabbath.

In Mt 6:22-23, the Good Eye saying from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus delivers a stern warning. He requires of his disciples generosity, or single-minded service of God and neighbor, and warns of the risks of self-encompassing darkness for the stingy.

Elsewhere in the Bible we see similar dire warnings. Paul writes in 1 Cor 6:18, “Shun fornication! Every sin that a person commits is outside the body; but the fornicator sins against the body itself.” James writes, “And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell” (3:6). The OT prophets place tremendous emphasis on the dangers of idolatry.

Consciously or unconsciously, our choices reveal our own ranking of which sins are most dangerous or damaging—choices of how we vote, what causes claim our time and money, and where we give sin the widest berth. What do your choices indicate about your ranking of sins? How far down the list is stinginess?