

What ever happened to the Golden Rule?



Highland Views
Chris Highland
Guest columnist

For a class I'm teaching on the Mountain Message (also known as the Sermon on the Mount), I kept stopping, stumbling, stuttering over Matthew chapter seven, verse 12. We've all heard it, perhaps memorized it. With parallels in other faiths, it's known around the world, even quoted by people who aren't Christians. Slipped in near the end of the great outdoor lecture, the famous line appears: "All things that you wish other human beings would do for you (or to you), the same even you do for them (or to them)." Updating the phrase that follows this instruction we might say: "For this is all the scripture, all the religion, all the faith you need."

Read like this, what would happen to the Church, the Christian religion and beliefs about Jesus and the Bible? As a teacher, I know how important it is to leave students with a few profound thoughts or ideas, something to reason with, to contemplate long after the class is over. A Philosophy professor in the Evangelical college I attended once wrote on the chalkboard: "The Power of an Idea." I've never forgotten that. I've carried that in the chalk dust of my memory ever since. Professor Johnson was a pious, conservative man, yet he also wrote on the chalkboard of our minds: "Conserve and Build." He thought conserving some things is a good idea—a powerful idea—and building upon a foundational idea was wise, like the GR, the Golden Rule.

Why call the famous principle "golden"? I suppose we do this because it's a precious treasure we value as a guide for life. It wasn't spoken by the Lecturer as a command so much as a guiding ethic, a rule of thumb as well as mind and heart (the Confucian principle of "reciprocity" is similar). The word "anthropos" is used

in the Greek—"other human beings"—and I wonder if that's significant. Others are humans too, so do for them, or to them, just what you want for yourself.

Do we want to be respected, heard, included, treated justly and equally? Do we want to have enough to survive and thrive, to live safe and free, to be content? What is it we really want for ourselves? Once we've figured that out, as we're figuring that out, we ought to consider what others are figuring out for their lives. Do they want what we want? What if they want, or need, things we don't actually want or need?

If this "rule" is ever to be "golden," a valuable and values-centered practice for life, it has to be taken seriously. The problem is that some who say they believe it don't seem to take it seriously. Take religion itself. Is a religious practice based on acting toward others in a thoughtful manner? To pressure others to believe as we do isn't treating them the way we wish to be treated. A secular practice of the Golden Rule should keep

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that in mind as well. I don't want to cause someone not to believe if that's their choice.

Now, I think there's something startling here, a powerful idea that builds on the conserving of everything that is good in us. The disturbingly wonderful question is: What if the Teacher of Nazareth was, perhaps unconsciously, presenting the end of religion—at least

the completion of religion as we've known it? Follow my reasoning here. He said this basic ethical principle was the Torah, the Bible. "For this IS the Law and the Prophets." Barring a whole bunch of theological gymnastics, we've stumbled onto the center of religion, the center of humanity itself—as we wish to be fully human, we wish that for others. End of story. The lesson: Do it; Live it. Religion, faith, theologies, bibles, can all be distractions drawing us away from the foundation—humanness, our own humanity.

Could it be the Golden Rule—poten-

tially a central ethical principle of life—in and of itself, is the only religion we need, the only one that truly makes sense for the present and the future?

I find it intriguing that immediately prior to the mountain-climbing master's message, he is portrayed as a supernatural superstar healing everyone in sight. Then, immediately following his lecture, he descends from the mountain and the first thing he does is heal someone. We might wonder if the religion that made the super-human wonderworker the centerpiece of the whole story overshadowed many lessons from

the Mountain Message, including perhaps the "heart" of the message itself.

It may be left to us, to those willing to climb these heights to hear this critical instruction, to reclaim the Golden Rule and our own humanity. This is the whole Torah, Gospel ... and Religion.

Chris Highland served as a minister and chaplain for many years. He is a teacher, writer and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife, the Rev. Carol Hovis, live in Asheville. His latest books are "Friendly Freethinker," "Broken Bridges" and "A Freethinker's Gospel." Learn more at chighland.com.

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