

Straight from the "Hart"

Worship Service from February 20, 2022



Opening Prayer

Dear Lord, we have gathered to experience and express the lengths to which your love travels. Help us serve until it blesses the broken, love until it heals the hurting, and give until it helps those grasping for survival. Use these gifts of tithes, time, talent, and testimony to accomplish acts of compassion in your name. In Jesus name, Amen.

Call to Worship (LR: Lay Reader, ML: Music Leader)

LR: Come -- let us prepare our souls to wait on the Lord and be inspired to loving action, for time rushes on. Soon all sorrow, grief, disappointment, tears, and fears will fade away. Love's purest joys will be restored, and we will be safe, and blessed, with the Lord, forever.

ML: Of course, we don't prepare only for that coming day, we worship in order to prepare for each day we face now, reminding ourselves that God is faithfully on our side no matter what may come our way. Let's sing: Be Still, My Soul.

Music (vv 1,2) Be Still My Soul

ML: You may be seated as we continue to remind ourselves that God leads us and blesses us with restful peace against any oppressive pressures -- within or without -- that we may face each day. Let's sing: Only Trust Him

Music (vv 1,3) Only Trust Him

Theme

Pithy sayings (sayings that are short, powerful, memorable, and filled with meaning) have always been a common teaching tool. Later we are going to hear Jesus flesh one of those well-known wisdom sayings. To get us warmed up for that, and just for fun, we'll talk about some other popular sayings. I'll tell you the beginning of a popular saying and see if you can finish it. Then I'll give you the



answers that some 1st graders thought. Since it was new to their young ears, they didn't know them, so they tried to fill in the ending the best as they could. Are you ready?

Start of saying	End of saying	1st graders
Don't change horses	midstream.	until they stop running.
It is always darkest before	the dawn.	Daylight Savings Time
Don't bite the hand that	feeds you.	looks dirty.
The pen is mightier than the	sword	pigs. *
* (Apparently they lived on a farm so when they heard "pen" they didn't think of a writing instrument, they thought of the pen that holds in the pigs, and since it could, it was stronger than the pigs).		
An idle mind is	the devil's workshop	the best way to relax
Happy is the bride	that the sun shines on*	who gets all the presents
* (In some cultures -- rain is a sign of blessing on a couple's marriage, so if the couple is worried about the weather, I am sure to point that out to them).		
Don't put off till tomorrow	what you can do today.	What you put on when you go to bed.
Laugh and the whole world laughs with you, cry and	you cry alone.	you have to blow your nose.
It at first you don't succeed	try, try again	get new batteries
You get out of something only what you	put into it	see in the picture on the box.
Do on to others	as you would have them do onto you. ***	

(Thanks to Jackie-Manchester Kempke for posting this meme from Themeapicture.com.)

This last one saying wasn't given to the first graders, but it is the one Jesus is going to talk about. It is so popular that it has a label -- do you know what that label is? [The Golden Rule]. Most people know it -- though it is sometimes unintentionally or sometimes purposely misquoted -- twisting its meaning to the person's self-serving, gratifying interests -- as in this story.

Once upon a time, in an isolated village far away, where life was hard, but good -- the only game worth talking about -- was marbles. Two boys lived there. They were some of the best marble players in the village. Difgardel and Bowlefar knew of each other from school -- and each other's marble playing reputations, and both were eager, and yet a little nervous, about playing each other someday.

Now, Difgardel's mother had long ago instructed him in the proper manners of civility and sportsmanship, including the Golden Rule: To treat others the way you would want to be treated.

The big annual marble tournament was coming in a month. People from all over the world would descend on the little village to participate. The boys were finally old enough to participate and the way the brackets looked this year, there was a very good chance Difgardel and Bowlefar would end up playing each other for the first time, and for the championship.

Difgardel's eagerness to play Bowlefar faded as his nervousness about losing to him grew. The temptation to succeed by *any* means rose to the surface.

Players like Bowlefar and Difgardel become very attached to their favorite shooter marble -- even giving it a pet name. A shooter marble is like a favorite bat or club or racket in other sports. It feels better in the hand, and they play better with it.

Difgardel's friends told him, "If you can help him "lose" his favorite shooter, you'll shake his confidence, and he won't be able to play as well with a back-up shooter in the tournament."

Difgardel hesitated, "But isn't that stealing?" His friends replied, "No, you are just "borrowing" it until after the tournament -- then it can magically re-appear. Besides," they added, "Doesn't the golden rule say, 'Do unto others as they would do unto you, and do it *before* they do it unto you'?"

That didn't quite sound right to Difgardel, but they quoted it so confidently that he didn't argue. Then his friends convinced him that if Bowlefar had the opportunity, he would certainly *steal* Difgardel's favorite shooter, so taking his was just getting his before he got Dif's. (Notice how they were going to *borrow* Bowlefar's, but Bowlefar was going to *steal* Difgardel's?)

Difgardel immediately retrieved his shooter to put it in a more secure place. Bowlefar, without suspecting anything, always kept his favorite shooter too close to give them a chance to "borrow" it. They had to come up with another plan.

"Let's tease him," they said. "He won't be able to play well if he is distracted by feeling bad and mad." And his friends convinced him that Bowlefar would taunt

Difgardel if he had the chance. And so Difgardel and friends begin to find Bowlefar between classes and during recess and trip him and make fun of him and intimidate him in every way they could think to make his life miserable.

It was clear that Bowlefar was becoming very upset by what Difgardel and friends were doing, but he did nothing in return. Difgardel was beginning to wonder if Bowlefar really would have taunted him if he had been given the chance.

Both boys went through the playground on their way to walking home after school each day. One day after school, Difgardel, away from his friends, found Bowlefar by the swings. Bowlefar was a little fearful but greeted him warmly. Difgardel was fearful too, but in the end, they parted without incident. They started meeting at the swings after school every day. At first a little wary of each other, but soon more and more defenses went down, and a friendship began to blossom.

When Difgardel's friends realized he had stopped attacking Bowlefar, they lost interest and left him alone. One day after school as they talked at the swings, Difgardel's curiosity got the best of him. He said, "We treated you terribly, yet you did nothing. You didn't run, but you didn't fight. Then when I came to you here that one day, you acted like we were friends. Why were you so nice when we were so mean?"

Bowlefar replied, "When younger, I was afraid people would make fun of me and so I decided to be mean to them first. I got some friends but only because they feared me or wanted to be mean like me. Secretly, I wished there would be at least one friend who liked the real me.

My mom reminded me that if I wanted to have a real friend, I needed to be a real friend. I told her I was afraid people wouldn't like me. She said the golden rule only works *if it is golden both ways*. It isn't only that others are supposed to do what you wish of them, or doing to them what you expect they'll do, and doing it first. It is about being the kind of person for others that you wish other people would be for you.

The rule is a way of figuring out what kind of people we want to be -- and not letting other persons, by words or actions, (or lack of words and actions) determine the kind of people we are going to be. So, if you want a true friend, you have to be a true friend, even if that friendship never develops.

"So I thought about it," he said, "and when I was angry and mean, I was wishing there was one would have understood, and forgiven, and accepted me. So when you started getting that mean with me, I didn't understand it, but I tried to be the

person I wished someone had been for me when I was that way. And when you came to me alone, I felt I had a chance to be that and see what happened... and for us, it looks like it worked out.

The tournament came and both did reach the championship game they looked forward to a great game of marbles, even cheering on each other's great shots... and it was the best tournament the town had ever had... The end.

Does living by this rule always work? It works in the sense that it will guide us to be closer to who we are called to be and want to be. God's reaches out in love because that is what he wants us to do for him and others -- and that is the kind of God he is going to be regardless of how we respond to him.

But it doesn't always work in bringing about the positive response hoped for. People still reject God. People may reject us, or what we hoped of them. God is not tempted to act differently, but we may be tempted to do what comes more easily and what may, especially short term, feel more gratifying and self-beneficial.

But both the Psalmist and Jesus encourage us to do what is right anyway and not worry about those who seem to succeed by violating the rule. We will hear from the Psalmist now, and Jesus later...

Responsive Reading (L - Lay Reader, C – Congregation)

L: Don't be upset when evildoers seem to succeed, or envious of those who do wrong; for soon they will wither like grass and fade like green plants in the fields.

C: We will trust in the Lord and do good. We will be dependable and maintain our integrity. We will live in the land and feed on faithfulness.

L: Take delight in serving the Lord and he will give you your heart's desires. Commit your future to the Lord. Trust in (depend on) him, and he will act on your behalf. He will make it clear that your choice to live faithfully is right. He will publicly defend the justice of your cause.

C: We will trust in the Lord and wait quietly for his help.

L: Don't fret or be upset over the apparent success of people who carry out wicked schemes. Stop being angry and frustrated, or you will want to do evil too and that only leads to trouble. For evildoers will be cut off...

C: but those who call on the Lord will inherit the land and enjoy abundant peace.

L: Take note of those with integrity. The ones who promote peace have a future. The Lord is the one who delivers the godly. He is their strength in times of trouble.

C: He helps them and rescues them because they take refuge in him.

(From Psalm 37:1-11, 37,39-40 (CJB, ERV, NET))

Pastor: The Psalmist David tells us that we who call on the Lord will find peace and prosperity and be saved from our enemies by God who is our refuge, and while this particular reading of this Psalm didn't have the words, he wrote many times that this means God is worthy of being exalted and praised. This is the essence of the lyrics of the song, I will call upon the Lord, -- well let me read the lyrics:

I will call upon the Lord
 who is worthy to be praised
 So shall I be saved from my enemies.
 The Lord liveth, and blessed be the Rock
 And let the God of my salvation be exalted.

Now let's hear the instruments play...

Special Music (Instrumental)**I Will Call Upon the Lord**

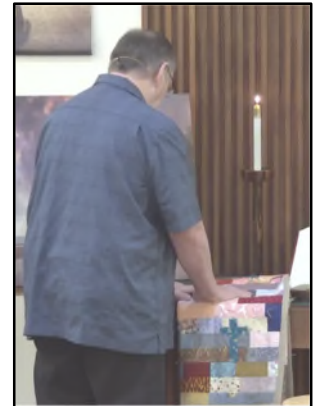
Pastor: Do you mind if I tell you a joke? It is not in the script and we don't have time for it, but ... a stand up comedian was talking about his father overanalytical way playing Pictionary. So with one word, he drew a boat, and they were guessing boat, and water, and oars, and all these other things, and – do you know how sometimes people get when after they've drawn a picture they just keep repeatedly pointing at it while shaking their head to all the wrong answers? Eventually, the time ran out, and they asked “Well what is it?” And he answered, “Well, you know how you sing “row, row, row your boat, gently down the stream?” Well, [like this song we just heard] It is a round, and the word was “round”. So instead of drawing a *circle*, he drew a boat. Okay, that's the joke. 😊 (It wasn't mine, so...)

Now let's prepare our hearts for calling on the Lord, for if we are really, truly, going to live the golden rule, we are going to need his strength and his presence walking with us. Let's sing, Just a Closer Walk with Thee...

Music (R,1,R)**Just a Closer Walk with Thee**

Just a closer walk with thee, grant it, Jesus, is my plea,
 daily walking close to thee: Let it be, dear Lord, let it be.
 I am weak, but thou art strong; Jesus, keep me from all wrong;
 I'll be satisfied as long as I walk, let me walk, close to thee.
 Just a closer walk with thee, grant it, Jesus, is my plea,
 daily walking close to thee: Let it be, dear Lord, let it be. CCLI # 2561297

Prayers Lord, we know that our lives do not blossom unless we invest it, but even more so if we invest it in what you intend us to be. Therefore, we need to walk through this life close to you. For ultimately our satisfaction does not come from getting what we want from others but being the kind of people we are meant to be. Reveal to us the gifts and graces you have given us and grow the seeds of fruit of the Spirit that you have planted within us. Help us to move from our sin to your glory, from our worldliness to your spirituality, from our weakness to your power. Lord, blessed are all those who find their strength in you, and whose life is a journey toward your heart, moving from strength to strength... May your work with us continue to bring healing as we lift our joys and sorrows to you. **Praises and Petitions** * We continue to pray for the health of Jim Mallott * for the family and friends of Ione Bennett, who passed away last week, * and Karen's sister Rita, who is now home from the hospital and recovering,* for the family and friends of Doris Dunn who passed away last week, we also pray for Gar Lemon, whose surgery was rescheduled. We also pray for those who have not been named today except in our hearts and minds. **QUILT** and finally, we pray for Elizabeth Harton's sister Julie Evans, whose cancer has spread into her lungs and bones; and for whom we now dedicate this quilt. [Pause] Dear Lord, today we ask from you a special blessing on Julie Evans. We pray for your loving arms to enfold her with your strength to give her faith and endurance through this difficult journey. In the quiet times, as she wraps this quilt around her, let your peace reign within her, and your spirit calm her. Let the love and prayers of this church bring comfort to her heart, and rest to her body. Even in the darkest of nights, remind her that you are with her, always awake, keeping watch, holding her close, sharing her innermost thoughts. For you hold a special place in your heart for each one of us and you are with us each moment of every day... reminding us that we are never alone. We pray this prayer for Julie, and for those friends and family that support her; we pray the blessing of this quilt in the name of the One who endures all of our sorrows and celebrates all our joys right beside us, Jesus Christ our Lord, the ultimate healer and Shepherd of our lives, and it is in his name that we pray. (Pause) Thank you for hearing our hearts through Jesus Christ who came so that we can be restored in your image and inherit a place in your kingdom, through the grace of Jesus Christ who taught us to pray. **LORD'S PRAYER**



Pastor: The Golden rule gives us a general guide of what we may want to do, but this song reminds us that no matter what we do -- love needs to be behind it. Let's stand before the reading and sermon and sing...

Music # 408 The Gift of Love

Though I may speak with bravest fire, and have the gift to all inspire,
and have not love, my words are vain, as sounding brass, and hopeless gain.

Though I may give all I possess, and striving so my love profess,
but not be given by love within, the profit soon turns strangely thin.

Come, Spirit, come, our hearts control, our spirits long to be made whole.

Let inward love guide every deed; by this we worship, and are freed.

CCLI # 2561297

Bible Reading Introduction

For the faithful, love is the primary motivation and action of all that we do. But it also raises a question. This question becomes especially important in cultures where the common, normal expectation -- is that the collective public good of all -- takes a back seat to the self-interest of a select few. In these cultures, while concern for others may receive lip service -- and perhaps acted on in small circles -- it is usually only considered seriously when it becomes a sound strategic steppingstone to the personal success of the select.

And when the perception is that personal success is indeed achieved by neglecting -- or even taking advantage of others, -- then the faithful may begin to wonder how to faithfully navigate their lives of love.

The question -- which goes back as far as faith itself, has never been whether we love, but whether there are limitations -- as to how that love is expressed, -- to whom that love is offered, -- and for how long. We've already heard the Psalmist David weigh in, -- now let us hear Jesus get very specific in a portion of what is called his -- "Sermon on the Plain".



Bible Reading

This is what I say to all who will listen to me: Love your enemies. Be good to everyone who hates you. Ask God to bless those who ask for bad things to happen to you. Pray for those who are cruel to you. If someone slaps you on the side of your face, let them hit the other also. If someone takes your coat, do not withhold your shirt from them. Give to everyone who asks you for

something, and don't ask them to return what they have taken from you.

Treat others just as you want to be treated. If you love only those who love you, should you get any special praise for doing that? No. Even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good only to those who are good to you, should you get any special praise for doing that? No. Even sinners are kind to those who are kind to them. And if you lend things to people expecting repayment, should you get any special praise for that? No. Even sinners lend to sinners expecting to be repaid in full.

I'm telling you to love your enemies and be good to them. Lend without expecting anything back. If you do this, you will have a great reward and you will be true children of the Most High God. For God is good and kind to people who are full of sin, ungrateful and cruel. Give love and mercy just as your [heavenly] Father gives love and mercy. Don't judge others, and God will not judge you. Don't condemn others, and you will not be condemned. Forgive others, and you will be forgiven. Give to others and you will receive more than you can hold -- pressed down, shaken together, spilling over and poured into your lap. The way you give - and treat others -- is the way God will give and treat you.

(Luke 6:27-38 (NIV, ERV, CEV))

Sermon Called Beyond the Call

The Golden Rule was in the center of that reading, and everything in the reading is intended to be a practical commentary and application of the rule. It is also a commentary on Old Testament Law which talks about: leaving extra in the fields so that the poor and stranger have something to eat, to not steal, cheat or lie to each other, to be honest, not oppressing, cheating, robbing, or holding back wages, about making things more difficult for the disabled, and treating people fairly, regardless of wealth or social status, to not slander, or ignore others in danger, and then concluding with: "Do not hate your brother in your heart, [work it out] so you do not sin, and do not take revenge "or bear a grudge against any of your people; rather, love your neighbor as yourself; [for] I am *ADONAI*. [God Almighty]" (Leviticus 19:(9-17)18 (CJB))

The question of the golden rule, or loving your neighbor rule; was not so much *how* we should treat others, that has always been clearly spelled out -- but *with whom* do we have to apply this rule? The question is the interpretation of defining "your people", "your brother", and "your neighbor" or in the rule itself, who are the "others" we are supposed to be doing this to? Common thought was it was limited

to people we considered were like us *and* worthy of fair treatment. Jesus stretches us beyond that limited thinking and says we are to reach out beyond worthy neighbors, beyond our “own” people, not only to enemies in abstract theory, but to personal ones who actively mistreat us.

Now he is not saying to the world, “Feel free to take advantage of us Christians. Hit us, rob us, ask for loans that you have no intention to repay because we can’t do anything about it because the golden rule says we can’t. That is not what he is trying to say here. He is not talking to *them*. He is not affirming the evil activities of the evil nor is he calling Christians to be abused doormats to the world or to each other.

Other biblical principles of love are applied when necessary. But Jesus knows it is in our nature to create loopholes, exceptions to the rules, and living by those exceptions instead of the rule. That’s how we got to “only worthy neighbors like ourselves” in the first place. He doesn’t want to undermine the expectation by arming us with exceptions.

The Psalmist and Jesus call us to move beyond minimal expectations, to move beyond what comes easily and naturally and solely self-beneficial, to go beyond the call of culture and answer the call to live for God and the benefit of all people, and leave the results and rewards of living faithfully in God’s hands. Even when exceptional actions must be made, those are made because it is because it is in the best interest, love, and hope *for* the enemy and the wider good of all.

Love your enemies

The goal of loving enemies is to create healthy relationships built on genuine love exhibited by people who are called to love as God loved us. Jesus gives examples on how to get there.

We love enemies with good deeds and good will and positive prayers. We do that

Good deeds, good will and prayers

because while we were still sinners, enemies of God, Jesus died for us. Good thing he didn’t and doesn’t treat us as an exception to the rule of love and grace when we violate *his* sensibilities, right? God does not let our bad attitudes and mistaken actions change the kind of God he is. Neither should we let others’ negative attitudes and actions determine the kind of person we are going to be. Otherwise, we may propagate and escalate the wrong rather than trying to transform the situation.

A customer in a bad mood takes it out on the business owner. The owner yells at the manager, the manager yells at the employee, the employee goes home and

yells at the spouse, the spouse yells at the kids, the kids yell at the dog, the dog snarls at the cat, and the cat torments and murders the mouse, leaving three innocent and dependent pinkies orphaned -- all because a customer in a bad mood chose to lash out, and whole series of now miserable people decided to react to how they were treated rather how they would have wanted to be treated, by being the kind of person God calls them to be -- beloved, and loving. We've experienced that too many times, haven't we, and that is why we are laughing.

Example two is turning the other cheek. Jesus lived this one out when he was cross examined by the Sanhedrin in John 18:19ff), he sidesteps the answer to the high priest's question by giving asking him a question. A nearby official does not like the answer Jesus gave that answer and so he slaps him (scholars say this was more of an insult rather than a *violent* act, and it was for violating the rule, "do not... curse the ruler of your people." (Exodus 22:28) which Jesus did not actually do. Jesus could have attempted to strike back, at least verbally if not physically, which could have led to an escalation of the conflict -- but instead he simply asked the official to *testify* to what it was he had said that was wrong -- for he had only spoken the truth.

Turn the cheek

It is better to defuse a situation rather than escalate it into additional opportunities for more hurt and more pain. Have you noticed in sports, that the unsportsmanlike conduct call is almost always given to the person who is reacting? the one who retaliates rather than the one who instigates? The refs often don't see the instigator, they see the retaliator, and they are the ones who get penalized. If they could control themselves, they'd we are better off. "Get them back *between the whistles*" [during the play not after] as I heard one coach scream at his players after just such a penalty. We are better off if we can control ourselves.

The third example is to give generously without expecting return. Paul told us, "Let love be your only debt! If you love others, you have done all that the Law demands." Tony Compolo illustrates in his book, *The Power Delusion*. (My information is second hand and adapted, but he still deserves a tip of the hat for the idea). He says, People in relationships understand from 1 Corinthians 13, the love chapter, and Romans 13:8 (that I just quoted – let love be your only debt) that love requires commitment. Something we owe to people, and that loving people takes time, effort, and energy.

Give generously without expecting return

But unlike solid relationships that seek to outdo each other in love, too many people today seek only to collect the other person's love debt to them rather than to pay their love debt to the other. (They want the gold of the golden rule to flow only one way -- toward them). They take advantage of the other's good will. They expect much from the other and little of themselves because (à la today's text -- turn the other cheek, etc.) they think there is nothing the other one can do about it, they think they have them trapped over a barrel. It is not supposed to work like that. If that happens, the relationship is uneven, unhealthy, and tenuously weak. And if selfishness invades what we do with people we "love" -- then what does it mean for the fragility of the rest of our relationships?

Even before I was a pastor, people would quote scripture to me (and it usually had *nothing* to do with the topic at hand at all) seeking to manipulate me to do something they wanted me to do for them. What do you do in situations like that? Ideally, each of us would react without regard to how we were treated, and how those manipulation attempts happened, but on the basis of what is the right thing to do in that situation, as the Spirit guides us.

There is a practical side to all of this. Just as forgiving someone who wrongs us releases us as much or more than the person being forgiven; (you've heard that a lot of times, I'm sure) -- so emotionally releasing people from what we think they should have done for us to us can do a lot toward bringing inner peace and contentment rather than the ongoing turmoil and stress of constantly thinking about "what they didn't do for us and what they owe us" and trying to collect and making everything "even", if that were even possible.

Jesus' rationale for calling us beyond the call of cultural standards is that if we only do what everyone does, then how is God's love in us making any difference in us? Even sinners do what is minimally expected for full mutual repayment of whatever they are doing for each other.

In the center of all this is the rule we hopefully all know pretty well by now: ***Do to others (Treat others) as you would have them do to you (as you would have them treat you).***

Fulfilling the rule requires us to get in the shoes of the other person and see how our behavior toward them affects them. The negative form of this rule was already known for hundreds of years. It read like this: Don't do anything you don't want done to you. We don't want to be harmed by others, so we don't harm others. If you had a frustrating day (like our customer in the earlier illustration) and you

inadvertently, or purposely, lashed out and hurt someone else, would you prefer they lashed back even harder, or that by self-control, good will, words, and action, they diffuse the situation and help settle both of your spirits? If you found yourself in a place where you owed someone, be it a favor, a financial loan, or a debt of love -- and you discover that you are in over your head, at least for now, and you cannot repay your debt -- would you prefer it be thrown in your face every time you see them... or would you prefer that they let it go, for the sake of the relationship?

But Jesus calls for even more than that. He is saying not only, “don’t hurt and damage each other because you don’t want to be hurt and damaged by others”, he is saying if you want to be treated positively by another, then you need to be that for them! It is not just about refraining from negative things, it is a proactive, taking the initiative, doing the positive thing for someone else. It leads to those sayings like we heard in the story – If you want a friend – (be a friend) – It motivates us to take the initiative, to act first.

There are practical reasons, practical motivations to live like this. In a hostile situation, a good-willed non-resistance, or at least a non-aggressive response *may* steady or even calm the storm. Kind of like -- when facing an armed robber, cooperate with what he says and you might survive the ordeal. Conflict is better resolved through calm interactions than out of control emotional outbursts. In calmness, topics are addressed, and solutions may be proffered. If impulsive reactions take the lead, the topic is lost in favor of the personal “get backs” and “escalations”, and that doesn’t work.

**Practical Motivations:
Reduces chaotic conflict
and encourages peace**

Another practical reason is that it appeals to and encourages the best in ourselves and in the other. Loving responses *may* startle people awake -- to their

**Appeals to each other’s
humanitarianism**

own unloving actions. To use our earlier character, if I am mean to Bowlefar, and Bowlefar is nice to me anyway, then I may realize that I was mean to him and I need to make that right. It may move those who are not acting properly to encourage them to reconsider their actions. It may move them a small step from antagonism toward empathy, from confrontation toward cooperation, and maybe even towards conversion to a different way of living. Former President Lincoln said, “The best way to defeat an enemy is to become their friend.” Paul wrote, “Do not be overcome by evil, [repay evil for evil, respond evil-y] but overcome evil with good.” (Romans 12:21(NIV))

As an extreme example, (Acts 7-8:1) Stephen was a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit. Opposition arose to him, and that led some to persuasive slander about him and they produced additional false witnesses about him, and ultimately it led to his stoning. And as they did, he prayed Jesus receive his Spirit and that the Lord would not hold this sin against these people who were stoning him. And Luke concludes the story by saying that Saul was there giving approval to his death -- but many think Luke included this line about witnesses laying their coats at an approving Saul's feet into the story because Luke was implying that Stephen's truth-telling but non-resistant, forgiveness-seeking martyrdom planted a spiritual seed in Saul that helped prepare him for his conversion to Paul, the powerful missionary to the Gentiles for Christ.

Of course, in the face of evil, the practical only *may* work. There are no guarantees. Stephen didn't survive. Jesus was crucified. Not everyone is converted, not even in the long run. Many remain unmoved by loving actions -- some are even inspired to try to take advantage of them. Practical reasons of potential good returns are not the only reason that we do unto others as they would do unto ourselves. They are not even the most important reasons.

We also do it for theological reasons -- for God based reasons, for reasons of Christian character. Jesus says we are to be children (take on the characteristics) of the Most High God. We are kind and merciful to the ungrateful and wicked because that is how God is with them, and we are to be like him. If that is how God is with them, then we must be too. We are full of mercy because he is mercy-full. We love our enemies because he loved us while we were his enemies, sinners.

Theological/Character reasons
We act like God
our heavenly Father

Another theological reason is that God will treat us like we treat others -- (we reap what we sow) -- to the measure we judge and condemn, we will be judged and condemned. To the measure we forgive we will be forgiven. We will reap bountifully from God what we sow in others...

God treats us how
we treat others

And then finally, the blessings we reap, ultimately, come not from human gains but from God's heavenly blessings. God calls us

Our reward is not based on human gains, but God's blessings

to live not in response to how others treat us, or treat us back, or even how we hope they will treat us (that just helps us understand how we are supposed to be

treating them) -- but ultimately, we treat humans the way God has *already* treated us -- as he shows us in Jesus.

These expectations are not natural, they are far from cultural expectations, and very far removed from our sinful natures. The rule is golden not because it brings in “gold” but because by valuing like gold, as the highest prize, the highest priority, then we are richly, spiritually, blessed. Let’s pray.

Prayer Almighty Lord, we discover that the grace we experience in Christ does not lower the bar of Old Testament and cultural expectations, but heightens it considerably. The law of love in thought and action -- the life you lived on earth -- we cannot consistently find the motivation, and certainly do not have the power to accomplish it in our own strength. We need faith in your empowering. We need the Spirit of Christ within us to live this kind of life, and we need and want the kind of life that shows that we are true believers and followers of Christ. And so, we turn to you, the heavenly Potter, to continue to shape us into your image and into your love. We place ourselves into your creating and recreating hands, that in and through us, we can learn to be transformed and learn to accept and love and live as you did. In the name of Jesus that we pray Amen.

Let’s sing “Help Us Accept Each Other” (as Christ accepted us).

Music Help Us Accept Each Other

Blessing Now as you go, may you be strengthened, comforted, and inspired to live lives worthy of God, who calls you to the golden rule and covenants with you to sow and grow love and acceptance as we participate in his kingdom and family. Amen.