

The Golden Rule

*If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty give him something to drink; for by doing so you will heap burning coals upon his head.*¹

While the first part of this scripture is challenging the second part is somewhat perplexing to say the least, and one could question as to why this passage should relate to the Golden Rule. That is, unless you realize that in the culture of the time an ongoing fire in the hearth was important for heat as well as cooking. If the fire went out, an easy way to get it going again was to visit your neighbor who would put hot coals into an insulated basket that could be carried on the head! This indeed puts a positive connotation to the passage indicating the most powerful effect of doing a good turn, especially to an enemy.

Early in the Old Testament we read: *When you come upon your enemy's ox or ass going astray, see to it that is returned to him. When you notice the ass of one who hates you lying prostrate under its burden, be no means desert him; help him, rather, to raise it up.*²

I'm reminded of the story told by a priest who explained that on his way back to the university one weekend he had car trouble and was stranded alongside a busy highway waiting for help. Some colleagues passed him by and later told him they saw him but knew that he would get proper help so they didn't stop. He related the episode to the story of the Good Samaritan, and rightly so, but I imagined the car to be the ass lying prostrate under its load. If we sometimes (even in ignorance or innocence) give so little thought to our friends, how can we ever live up to the expected behavior we are to have for our enemies?



The sage Hillel Ha-Babli (30 BCE) put it this way: *Whatever thou wouldst that men should not do to thee, do not do that to them. This is the whole Law. The rest is only explanation.* Even before that time we read: *Do not do to others what would anger you if done to you by others.*³

In the New Testament the Golden Rule is spelled out clearly: *Do to others whatever you would have them do to you. This is the law and the prophets,*⁴ *and Love your enemies and do good to them, and lend expect nothing back; then your reward will be great and you will be children of the Most High, for he himself is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked.*⁵

¹ Romans 12:20

² Exodus 23:4-5

³ Isocrates 375 BCE

⁴ Matt 7:12

⁵ Luke 6:35

Besides **Christianity**, the world religions have accepted the Golden Rule as a universal principle of highest aspiration. Consider the following:

Baha'i: *Lay not on any soul a load which you would not wish to be laid upon you, and desire not for anyone the things you would not desire for yourself.*

Buddhism: *Hurt not others in ways you yourself would find hurtful.*

Confucianism: *If there is one maxim which ought to be acted upon throughout one's life, surely it is the maxim of loving kindness. Do not do unto others what you would not have them do unto you.*
(the Analects)

Islam: *None of you is a believer until he desires for his brother that which he desires for himself.*
(Sunnah)

Judaism: *What is harmful to you do not to your fellow man.* (Talmud)

Hinduism: *This is the sum of all true righteousness: deal with others as thou wouldst thyself be dealt by. Do nothing to thy neighbor which thou wouldst not have him do to thee hereafter.* (The Mahabharata, 150 BC)

Zoroasterism: *That nature alone is good which refrains from doing unto another whatsoever is not good itself.* (Zoroastrian scriptures)