

Are Bible translations hiding the real Golden Rule?

AM Thomas, 2015

Many Bible translations and commentaries propose that the Golden Rule for human conduct is to treat others as one wishes to be treated. Certainly, this is a hugely important rule, and it is given by the Lord (Matt. 7:12; Luke 6:31). It must be kept. But let's take a look at the two texts where that rule is found, and ask:

- (1) Is that rule the most important rule that the Lord gives, in these texts?
- (2) How do the contexts help us to understand the rule?
- (3) Are Bible translations and commentaries misunderstanding the rule's meaning?

For example, why does the Lord say "therefore" (*oun*, in the Greek original), when He introduces the rule in the second text (from St. Matthew)? It seems possible that the Lord means that because God is ready to answer prayer, we must treat others well, because if we don't, our prayers may not be answered. Indeed, this is how one of the earliest and most respected commentators of the Bible, Chrysostom, understood it.

Text 1: from the Gospel according to St. Luke 6:27-38

²⁷ But I say unto you which hear, Love your enemies, do good to them which hate you, ²⁸ bless them that curse you, and pray for them which despitefully use you. ²⁹ And unto him that smiteth thee on the *one* cheek offer also the other; and him that taketh away thy cloke forbid not *to take thy* coat also. ³⁰ Give to every man that asketh of thee; and of him that taketh away thy goods ask *them* not again. ³¹ And as ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise. ³² For if ye love them which love you, what thank have ye? for sinners also love those that love them. ³³ And if ye do good to them which do good to you, what thank have ye? for sinners also do even the same. ³⁴ And if ye lend *to them* of whom ye hope to receive, what thank have ye? for sinners also lend to sinners, to receive as much again. ³⁵ But love ye your enemies, and do good, and lend, hoping for nothing again; and your reward shall be great, and ye shall be the children of the Highest: for he is kind unto the unthankful and *to* the evil. ³⁶ Be ye therefore merciful, as your Father also is merciful. ³⁷ Judge not, and ye shall not be judged: condemn not, and ye shall not be condemned: forgive, and ye shall be forgiven: ³⁸ give, and it shall be given unto you; good measure, pressed down, and shaken together, and running over, shall men give into your bosom. For with the same measure that ye mete withal it shall be measured to you again.

Text 2: from the Gospel according to St. Matthew 7:7-23

⁷ Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: ⁸ for every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened. ⁹ Or what man is there of you, whom if his son ask bread, will he give him a stone? ¹⁰ Or if he ask a fish, will he give him a serpent? ¹¹ If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask him? ¹² Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets.

¹³ Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide *is* the gate, and broad *is* the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: ¹⁴ because strait *is* the gate, and narrow *is* the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it.

¹⁵ Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves. ¹⁶ Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? ¹⁷ Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit. ¹⁸ A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither *can* a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit. ¹⁹ Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire. ²⁰ Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them.

²¹ Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven. ²² Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? ²³ And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity.

Now we can briefly consider how some well established commentaries deal with “the Golden Rule” as it appears in the text from St. Matthew’s Gospel.

Text 3

“This separate logion is probably added here by the evangelist because of the reference in the preceding pericope to the giving and receiving of good things. But the connection is not that clear, and this may explain the omission of [*ouv*] in some MSS [manuscripts]. This logion functions as the summarizing and climactic demand of the main body of the sermon.” (Donald A. Hagner, *Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 33A, Matthew 1-13, Dallas: Word Books, 1993, p. 176)

Text 4

“Although the so-called ‘golden rule’ sums up in brief the right conduct towards others and therefore appropriately closes 6.19-7.11, a section on social behaviour, 7.12 is not simply the conclusion of 6.19-7.11 (or of 7.1-11). Rather does it bring to a climax the entire central core of the sermon on the mount, 5.17-7.11. (The verse should therefore be printed as a separate paragraph, as in the NEB and HG.).... The ‘therefore’ of 7.12a has been understood in several different ways. (1) It can simply be omitted on textual grounds (so Zahn, p.310). (2) The connexion could be with 7.11 or with 7.7-11: because God treats you so well, you must treat others well (cf. Schlatter, p. 246; Gundry, *Commentary*, p.125). Or, as Chrysostom has it (*Hom. on Mt.* 23.6), if you desire God to hear your prayers (7.7-8), do this, namely what 7.12 enjoins.” (W.D. Davies and Dale Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to St. Matthew*, vol. 1, Introduction and Commentary on Matthew I-VII, Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988, pp. 685, 688)

However, Davies & Allison conclude that Chrysostom is wrong, without any specific reasons. If Chrysostom is correct about the rule, it is funny to recall that Chrysostom’s name means “golden-mouthed”. Perhaps because he correctly understood the Lord’s rule?

Here is Chrysostom's commentary¹ on the text:

After this, to indicate that we ought neither to feel confidence in prayer, while neglecting our own doings; nor, when taking pains, trust only to our own endeavors; but both to seek after the help from above, and contribute withal our own part; He sets forth the one in connection with the other. For so after much exhortation, He taught also how to pray, and when He had taught how to pray, He proceeded again to His exhortation concerning what we are to do; then from that again to the necessity of praying continually, saying, "Ask," and "seek," and "knock." And thence again, to the necessity of being also diligent ourselves.

"For all things," saith He, "whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them."

Summing up all in brief, and signifying, that virtue is compendious, and easy, and readily known of all men.

And He did not merely say, "All things whatsoever ye would," but, "Therefore all things whatsoever ye would." For this word, "therefore," He did not add without purpose, but with a concealed meaning: "if ye desire," saith He, "to be heard, together with what I have said, do these things also." What then are these? "Whatsoever ye would that men should do to you." Seest thou how He hath hereby also signified that together with prayer we need exact conversation? And He did not say, "whatsoever things thou wouldest to be done unto thee of God, those do unto thy neighbor;" lest thou should say, "But how is it possible? He is God and I am man:" but, "whatsoever thou wouldest to be done unto thee of thy fellow servant, these things do thou also thyself show forth towards thy neighbor." What is less burdensome than this? what fairer?

Then the praise also, before the rewards, is exceeding great.

"For this is the law and the prophets." Whence it is evident, that virtue is according to our nature; that we all, of ourselves, know our duties; and that it is not possible for us ever to find refuge in ignorance.

¹ Available here, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf110.iii.XXIII.html>