



April 19, 2020
Rev. Dr. Mark Toone

Elevate Others: Love Matthew 7:12

Good morning, Chapel Hill! And an especially warm welcome to those of you who joined us for our virtual Easter service...and have returned for seconds! We are glad to have you back.

But I gotta say...that was one of the weirdest Easters ever! I'd normally preach five times over two days to thousands of people. Instead, I preached once to a camera and a handful of worship leaders! But God blessed those efforts. 2200 families joined us for our Easter celebration. And we spent more than 4300 hours together online during Holy Week, in prayer, devotionals and worship. Amazing! You've been so supportive as we adapt to our new reality and I'm proud of you.

In fact, a couple of folks came to our door last week with a basket of pastries...to thank me for being their shepherd. Here's a picture of one of the brownies. Can you tell what it is? A sheep! They made sheep brownies...to thank me for being their shepherd. Isn't that sweet? Of course, that meant that I had to bite the heads off my own sheep...which seemed wrong. But I got past it and **wolfed 'em down!** Get it? Sheep. Wolfed 'em down.

I do have to say, it seems ages since we worshipped together. The last time I preached in person was March 8. Even then our attendance was down, but there were still 800 folks present to hear me launch a four-week series called "20/20 Vision." We were going to use that series to cast vision for our plans for coming year.

Then came Corona. And all of those plans went up in smoke! That's not entirely true. Some of them are just on hold. And others... like our plan to Live-Stream our worship services...someday...that got pushed right to the front of the line!

Isn't it funny how, **in a moment**, our best-laid plans can be scuppered? Proverbs 16:9 says, The heart of man plans his way, but the LORD establishes his steps. In other words, we can make our best plans.... lay out our clever strategies. But in the end, it is our sovereign God who determines what actually happens!

I preached only one of our four vision sermons. So you got one-fourth of 20/20 vision. BUT... it was an important part. I shared our new mission statement based on The Great Commandment, the New Commandment and the Great Commission. Remember?

The **Great Commandment** is Jesus saying, “Love God with everything you have and love your neighbor as much as you love yourself.” The **New Commandment** is Jesus saying, “Love one another as I have loved you.” And the **Great Commission** is Jesus saying, “Go into all the world and make disciples for me.”

You could summarize those three teachings this way; God-love, Neighbor-love, Brother/Sister-Love and World-Love. And with those principles, we developed our mission statement. Chapel Hill exists to exalt Jesus, elevate others and launch disciple-makers.

Because we are Chapel “HILL”, we used uplifting verbs. Exalt. Elevate. Launch. The first one is pretty self-explanatory. **Everything** we do must always exalt...lift high the name of Jesus Christ. And the last one is pretty clear: we are going to be a church that prepares and LAUNCHES people who not only follow Jesus, but are equipped to help OTHERS follow Jesus. Disciple-makers.

But the middle one...that needs a little more explanation. What does it mean to be a church that “elevates others?” And NOW... in this season of isolation and social-distancing...NOW what does it mean to be a church that elevates others? In some ways, it is even harder. But in some ways, it has never been easier.... nor more important.

To kick off this series, I have chosen the most familiar verse in the New Testament... even more familiar than John 3:16: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but should have everlasting life.” That’s **pretty** familiar, right? What verse is more familiar than that one? How about this: “Do unto others... (finish it!)... as you would have them do unto you.” Heard of that? We even have a name for it. “The Golden Rule.”

Or course, that’s the King Jimmy version of the verse. Let’s take a look at a modern translation of this familiar passage from Matthew 7:12, in the Sermon on the Mount.

So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.

I think I’m right; this is the best-known of Jesus’ teachings. And if you looked for a summary verse for the idea of “elevating others,” could you do better? If you want to test your every action; if you want to test your heart motivation...with a biblical gut check, can you do better than this? “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”

So...give me a quick head nod through the camera...are you familiar with this passage? Do you think you understand what it means? Maybe... but I’ll bet you know less about it than you think! For instance, I’ll bet you’ve heard something like this: “The Golden Rule wasn’t unique to Jesus. You find some version of the Golden Rule in every major religion of the world, down through the ages.” Right? Well...not quite!

I contend that this teaching of Jesus was unique. That no one before him captured this principle the way Jesus did. **So let's take a deep dive into a tiny verse.** There are four things that make Jesus' Golden Rule unique from every other similar teaching:

It is positive, not negative; active, not passive; selfless, not self-centered; divine, not human.

First, the Golden Rule is positive, not negative. Of the six world religions that predate Christianity and have some form of this teaching... **every one of them is stated negatively.** For instance, Confucianism teaches: **Do not do to others what you would not like yourself.** *See the difference? DON'T do anything to someone else that you wouldn't want them to do to you. Taoism, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Rabbinic Judaism all teach the same thing.*

*In fact, this NEGATIVE approach to the Golden Rule has its own name: the **Silver Rule.** It's precious...but not as precious as gold. Why? **Because, it urges you to avoid negative behavior...instead of encouraging you to perform positive acts of kindness.** There is a difference between saying "Do GOOD things"...and "Refrain from doing naughty things..." Jesus said "Do good!!!" Everyone else said, "Don't do bad!"*

Which leads us to the second distinctive; The Golden Rule is active, not passive. If all you need to avoid breaking the Silver Rule is NOT do bad things....you could do NOTHING...and still obey the rule, right? But the command of Jesus is active. DO! DO unto others. Initiate. Act. Take the lead. Reach out!

Cyndi and I love our neighborhood. And we determined we were going to be proactive in reaching out to our neighbors; loving and caring for them. Most have been responsive, but there was one older woman who was not. We never heard from her, she never responded to our emails and when we knocked on her door, even when we knew she was home, she didn't answer. We assumed that she was afraid. But we...and by we, I mean Cyndi...just kept reaching out.

*Tuesday we were out working in the yard and this woman walked by. She stopped and engaged in delightful conversation. And at the end she said, "I just want to thank you for continuing to reach out to me. It is so comforting to know that there's someone in the neighborhood who cares for me." I'd say that was a win, wouldn't you? And it was because Cyndi chose to **actively** love our cautious neighbor. **Positive...Active...***

Here's the third point. The Golden Rule is selfless, not self-serving. If you look at other versions of this teaching, many are self-serving. You might assume that the Golden Rule is Jesus' recipe for the Good Life." A spiritual quid pro quo. "If I do good things to others...then THEY will do good things to me! This is the formula for my best life. Treat others kindly and, voila, they will treat ME kindly and my life will be good."

Sounds plausible...if you only look at verse 12. But this is set in the context of the Sermon on the Mount. Three chapters. And in chapter 5, Jesus made it clear that even when we do what he tells us to do...even when we observe his teaching and live life his way, it **may result in persecution, not praise.**

Listen to the last two of the Beatitudes, for instance.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven....

Does Jesus promise that those who behave righteously toward others will always be treated in kind? To the contrary, there will be times when, even though we seek to live righteously, we will be persecuted for it. **Which MEANS... we "do" unto others, not because we hope for a return on investment,** but because it is what Jesus taught and empowered us to do. It is selfless.

And finally, The Golden Rule is Divine, not human. What do I mean by that? It is toooo easy to treat this as a moralism. In other words, it nice for us to be nice...and we try hard to be nice. But we think this based on human goodness... we aren't reading the whole verse. **Because the Golden Rule is bookended by reminders that this teaching is of divine power, not of human effort.**

Remember the first word in the verse? "So..." **So ...whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them....** Now you might say, "So what?" Here's what! When Jesus starts a teaching with, "So..." what he is saying is, "Therefore...on the basis of what I just taught you, do this!" And what did Jesus just teach? He taught that God the Father pours out good gifts upon his children. Because he loves us, he lavishes us with kindness. "**SO....**" Do THAT unto others. "**Since our heavenly father is lavish in his love toward us, you should treat others with the same lavish love.**"

That's how the verse starts. "So." AND...how does it end? "...for this is the Law and the Prophets." In other words, Jesus says, this teaching summarizes all that God has said in the past. "...the Law and the prophets." The Golden Rule isn't a human moralism. It is a divine declaration of how things should be. (Source)

But...if the Golden rule is positive, active, selfless and divine... and we are, by nature negative, passive, self-centered and idolatrous... then it's impossible for us to live this way in our own strength. But we don't need to! Before Jesus ever taught the Golden Rule, he lived it! He gave to us this love that was positive, active, selfless and divine! He has given us his Spirit so that we

might do unto others as he has already done unto us. We elevate others, not in our power...but in HIS power!

I heard an inspiring example of how our Chapel Hill students are elevating others. We have a great team of lay leaders in our youth program and four of them are first-responders; they've been on the front line of this COVID crisis. And our kids decided to bless them. What they do? They gave them a "heart attack." **Yes...that's what they called it...and only high schoolers could get away with that.** They went to the front door of every first-responder and decorated it with hearts...a symbol of their love for their leaders who are serving others with courageous love; who are "doing unto others...." Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

The longer this lockdown goes...the more we allow a scarcity mindset to freak us out....the more we worry about our supplies, our wealth, our well-being...the easier it will be for us to FORGET about elevating others...and to focus on ourselves. Now...more than ever...the followers of Jesus...you followers of Jesus... need to tap into his Holy Spirit and DO UNTO OTHERS.