

Everybody knows the golden rule, but not everybody practices it. We have the opportunity every time we deal with conflict. Some people like the old rule, “An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.” If your enemy plucks out your eye, you have the right to pluck out theirs. If someone hits you at school, you hit them back. The Old Testament tried to keep people from taking two eyes for one eye and four teeth for one tooth. Even so, Christians don’t recommend this advice; it is not the golden rule.

Others like what is sometimes called the silver rule: don’t do to others what you don’t want them to do to you. If you don’t want people talking behind your back about you, don’t talk behind their back about them. If you don’t want a business to cheat you, don’t cheat it. If you don’t want a wild bear to attack you, don’t pick a fight. It makes practical sense, and you can live a good, safe life that way. But even that’s not the golden rule.

The golden rule appears in today’s gospel. Jesus says, “Do to others as you would have them do to you.” The silver rule is about avoiding bad things; the golden rule is about doing good things. If you want people to treat you with respect, treat them with respect first. If you want someone to visit you, visit them. If you want people to believe what you say, believe what they say. If you want someone to pick you up when you feel down, start doing that for others. That’s the golden rule.

There are two reasons for doing this. One is a “pay it forward” theory. If we do good, people will do good in return. If we all treated others the way we’d like to be treated, wars would cease. Hunger would disappear. Jobs would materialize. The sick would have better health care. We would outdo one another in kindness. The world would be a beautiful place.

The other reason for the golden rule is that this is how God treats us. God is good to us so that we might return the favor. Jesus even says that God “is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked.” It is annoying to us that some evil people prosper, but this is the golden rule: God does to them the way they should do back to God. God loves the wicked in spite of their sin – just as God loves us in spite of our sin. One reason why we should love our enemies is that God does, and when we do, we become more like God.

The golden rule is not about retaliation: an eye for an eye. It is not about merely avoiding the wrong thing. It is about doing the right thing, with the right spirit, even when you don’t feel like it. Jesus says love your enemies; do good to them. Pray for those who mistreat you. Love the person who breaks into your house and steals your computer? Love your former boyfriend’s new friend? Love members of the other political party, people who go to other churches, the insurgents in Iraq? Jesus doesn’t say we have to love what our enemies do, but love them, care for them, pray for them, that they will act with love. Showing them love makes it easier for them to respond with love.

It is perhaps the most challenging command in the gospels: love your enemies. But when we do it, we practice the golden rule.