Church in Wales Dignity Charter
Bible Study A
Matthew 7.12

'In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.' (Matthew 7.12)

Embodying a positive ethic in a subversive way

This memorable and celebrated teaching – often called the 'Golden Rule' – occurs towards the end of Jesus' so-called Sermon on the Mount and it has some parallels in a diverse array of traditions, including early Jewish and Christian writings, Greek philosophy and various pagan sources. However, as the New Testament scholar R.T. France notes, the focus is usually negative – something like "don't do to others that which you wouldn't have them do to you."[1] That is, if you don't want to be at the receiving end of poor behaviour – such as anger, unfaithfulness, dishonesty, vengeance, hatred, hypocrisy, hardness of heart, greed, condemnation, and so on – then don't deal these out to those around you.

Earlier in the Sermon Jesus speaks at length about each of these negative behaviours[2], but doesn't simply say "don't do *X*". Rather, he says "don't do *X* … do *Y* instead." For example, in place of venting anger on a brother or sister, he calls his followers to be reconciled to those who feel wronged (5:21-26); rather than seeking retaliation against an opponent, do them good instead (5:38-42); instead of being consumed by hatred for enemies, love them and pray for them (5:43-47). It is in hearing and obeying Jesus' alternative ethic that the kingdom of heaven is seen and made known.

So, Jesus calls us to aspire to noble ways, to "be perfect … as [our] heavenly Father is perfect" (5:48). This can seem like an incredibly daunting ethic, beyond the capacity of broken, fallible sinners; but the notion is immensely positive. *Teleios*, the Greek word usually translated 'perfect', suggests more than legalistically 'ticking the boxes' but instead means completion, maturity and a complete alignment to the will and purpose of God who is unfailingly generous to both saint and sinner (5:45). It is in demonstrating this extravagantly charitable attitude towards others that we become "children of [our] Father in heaven" (5:45).

Hence, Jesus is not merely teaching an ethic based on prohibitions – "don't do this" – but one based on positivity – "do this instead". He is advocating a whole new manner of living and being that presents a way strikingly different to the 'flight or fight' responses

---

[1] R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), pp. 283-4.
[2] Here are the references: anger (Matthew 5:21-26); unfaithfulness (5:27-32); falsehood (5:33-37); vengeance (5:38-42); hatred (5:43-48); hypocrisy (6:1-8; 16-18); hardness of heart (6:15); greed (6:19-21, 24-25); condemnation (7:1-5).

which often characterise the instinctive reactions of our 'lizard brain' when feeling challenged or threatened. As Jesus speaks in the Beatitudes about the blessedness of the poor in the spirit, the mourners, the meek, the justice-thirsty, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, the persecuted and the reviled (Mat. 5:3-12), he isn't merely *imagining* a different state of affairs but, as the ensuing narrative of the entire gospel shows, he is *embodying* this new way, most fully in accepting obediently the way of the cross set before him. It is there – in shame, suffering and sacrifice – that he will be acclaimed as King (Matthew 27: 29, 27:37). Gently, but forcibly, the thorn-crowned Jesus reminds us that the prestige, influence and respect normally associated with human power, authority and dominion are subverted, redefined and transformed on the cross by this ruler of the coming reign.

The call to radical, costly discipleship

This unlikely, unconventional king calls women and men to become partners in this new venture, to repent by turning around from their former shady life to face the coming light and find their shadows cast behind them. Like them, we are called to recognise that, in Jesus, "the kingdom of heaven has come near" (Matthew 4:17). In one sense, this is indeed a brand-new reality breaking in from heaven itself to overcome the old realm of sin and death. But in another sense, this is nothing other than the ancient wisdom of Israel coming at long last to its stunning completion in the Messiah. Where Israel had repeatedly failed to live up to its identity as the chosen, covenantal people of God and so became subject to severe prophetic judgement, here is one who fulfils the law and the prophets, whose righteousness reflects not compromised human standards but the life of heaven itself (5:17-20).

This notion of Jesus fulfilling the manner of life to which God's people are called, brings us back to the Golden Rule for, says Jesus, this is the very essence of the law and the prophets (7:12). Furthermore, this rule helps to appreciate that he isn't proclaiming a negative ethic – "don't do *X* so that they won't do *X* to you" – but is instead urging a wholesome positive outlook – "you show forth in your own life the very best you would love others to do to you". So, in our relationship with each other we are called to set before us Jesus' own way of life, to imagine how we would like our neighbours to treat us. Following the teaching Jesus gives in the Sermon on the Mount this would entail a spirit of reconciliation, faithfulness, truthfulness, generosity, love, transparency and kindness. But more than merely *imagining* how such a life could be, we are called to *manifest* it, to make it known in the depth and quality of our relationships with others.

That doesn't mean waiting for hostile Harri to be unusually kind at last so that I can respond with kindness, or expecting mean Jean finally to be uncharacteristically generous so that I can be generous in turn. Jesus, in the golden rule, tells me that the onus isn't on Harri or Jean, first and foremost, but on *me*. To emphasise the point we might say, "***you*** do to others as you would have them do to you." That requires a good deal of self-

reflection on my own demeanour, giving thanks for the ways in which I manifest Jesus' loving-kindness, righteousness and peacefulness, whilst contritely reflecting on the ways in which I disparage, diminish or manipulate others, to my own advantage.[3]

Hence, I am called to show the good fruit which is a sign of the goodness within, whilst recognising that a failure to do so will result in judgement by God who understands the secrets of my heart and the wellspring of my motivations (Mat. 7:15-23). Corporately this personal responsibility and accountability can serve to shape the culture of the wider church, for good, or for ill.[4] To fail to seek the good fruits which Jesus expects is to risk being sub-Christian, or even anti-Christian. Paul the apostle draws this distinction sharply as he contrasts "the works of the flesh … fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these" (Galatians 5:19-21) – with "the fruit of the Spirit … love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." (Galatians 5:22-23).

Relating Jesus' Golden Rule to the Church in Wales' Dignity Charter

Thankfully, we are not hopelessly consigned to the old life of the flesh for the fruits of the Spirit can be made manifest in us all. As the Church in Wales' Dignity Charter states,

> The scriptures also teach that change is possible: the Greek word often translated as repentance, *metanoia*, has an active quality to it. Repentance is a decision to change one's mind, to resolve not to repeat error, and all are called to reconciliation and restoration.[5]

Implicitly, the Charter echoes Jesus' Golden Rule when it states that a reciprocal goodness is expected:

> Everyone has a right to be treated with dignity and respect and this means that everyone also has a duty and responsibility to treat others with the same dignity and respect.[6]

---

[3] Reflecting, with thankfulness, on the blessings given to me each day, as well as repenting for the ways I have failed to be a blessing to others is a profound, prayerful discipline which many Christians practise daily. Inspired by the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola, this 'Examen of Consciousness' can help us discern the Holy Spirit revealing to us the ways in which we choose to cooperate with God's will for us and the ways in which we turn away to follow our own sinful paths. Committing ourselves to pray the Examen can help us to know ourselves better, to give thanks for our strengths and repent of our weaknesses, and so, with the Spirit's help, be transformed, led into the fullness of life which Jesus bestows (John 10:10). A pattern for praying the Examen is given in the Church in Wales' daily prayer manual *Beunydd gyda Duw / Daily with God* (Cardiff: Church in Wales Publications, 2024).

[4] See the 2025 report of the Standing Doctrinal Commission, entitled 'Walking in Integrity: a Theological Reflection on the Use and Misuse of Spiritual Authority', p. 23. The report is available here.

[5] The Church in Wales, *Dignity Charter*, p.1.

[6] The Church in Wales, *Dignity Charter*, p.1.

It also reflects on the corrosive and debilitating effects of not meeting this basic shared standard for our common life:

> Treating people in a manner which is discourteous and undignified in any way or which causes harm undermines individual dignity as well as the life and ministry of the whole church. Poor relationships will make people feel undervalued and unhappy. They can cause distress, affect physical and mental wellbeing, and have adverse effects on social relationships.[7]

That does not mean that we avoid criticism which is expressed considerately and constructively, but it should make us reflect carefully on the use (or misuse) we make of the power granted to us in our life as a church. Before noticing and pointing out faults in others we should be alert to our own shortcomings which may be far greater than the failings we see in others (Mat. 7:1-5). Moreover, in terms of our own organisational policies and procedures we need to adhere to the highest standards of safeguarding, as well as ensuring that grievance, whistleblowing and disciplinary protocols are upheld. Our paramount duty of care should be for the victims of wrongdoing rather than to shield the reputation of the powerful.

Jesus does not set his Golden Rule as a model of 'best behaviour' which I adopt when I'm seeking to conform, impress others, or seek special favour. No, this is the basic standard around which I should organise my entire outlook on life and my conduct day by day, minute by minute: "**In everything** do to others as you would have them do to you." So as the Dignity Charter rightly states,

> The right to be treated with dignity and respect extends to all aspects of our church life including those which are outside of the typical workplace, for example, working with the community, church services, business meetings and work-related social events or through the use of social media.[8]

Character formation according to the generosity of God in Christ

Adhering to the Dignity Charter is not merely another 'hoop to jump through' but is about the formation of our *character* as people who value, respect and honour one another and show these principles in all our interactions with others. Many a secular organisation would be happy to espouse much of the Church in Wales' Dignity Charter in its own shared life. However, the Church finds enshrined in both the Old and New Testaments a distinctive ethic which is centred on abundant mercy and generous regard for the other, whilst being alert to the abuses of power which Jesus identifies with such intense, searching clarity.[9]

---

[7] The Church in Wales, *Dignity Charter*, p.1.
[8] The Church in Wales, *Dignity Charter*, p.1.
[9] The Church in Wales, *Dignity Charter*, p.1.

Ultimately, our standard is Jesus himself in his compassionate concern for the flourishing of the downtrodden, his fearless commitment to truth (despite the cost) and his willingness to suffer for the cause of right. At the creation of men and women, God declares, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness (Genesis 1:26; cf. Wisdom 2:23; Sirach 17:3), thereby giving each human being an innate, God-given dignity which underpins the dignity we are called to show each other. Moreover, as people made in the divine image, we find this identity fully embodied in Jesus Christ who, unlike us, is not 'merely' *in* the image of God, but rather *is* the very image itself. As Paul writes, he himself is "the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation" (Colossians 1:15; cf. 2 Corinthians 4:4; Wisdom 7:26). He shows us then what it means to be truly human.

The fundamental ethic which the Church in Wales' Dignity Charter seeks to describe finds its inspiration in God himself. Matthew places Jesus' giving of the Golden Rule following his teaching on persistence in prayer: those who ask will receive; those who seek will find, and those who knock will have the door opened to them (7:7-8). If this is true in human relations – as parents bestow good gifts on their children – so much more will the heavenly Father give abundantly to those who call upon him (7:9-11). This extravagant divine generosity – which far exceeds the limitations of human creatures who are inclined to evil – that provides the immediate context for the Rule. So in being kind to Harri *before* he is kind to me, and in being charitable to Jean *before* she does likewise to me, is what sets the distinctive 'culture' of the authentic Christian community.

As Jesus observes repeatedly in the gospels, his way is narrow and difficult (Matthew 7:13-14), demanding self-sacrifice which runs counter to the easy way of the world. Yet whilst the world's compromised, self-aggrandizing ethic leads to destruction, the difficult road, the way less travelled, will lead to life. In our common life as a Church lets us seek that life-giving way in our attitudes and actions and thereby honour one another as cherished sisters and brothers and members together of the body of Christ – crucified, risen and glorious.

Questions for reflection

1. Do you seek the apply Jesus' Golden Rule in our life?
2. Where do you see the Golden Rule at work in others?
3. Why does it matter than Jesus calls us to be *proactive* in doing good to others, rather than waiting for others to take the initiative?
4. Reflect on an instance in the life of the Church when the Golden Rule was not observed, with Christians failing to embody in their lives the standards which Jesus expects. What needs to happen in order to change this and so align ourselves more fully with pattern of the kingdom of heaven?