

The Golden Rule

Lesson 1: Four Competing Rules



Discovering God's Word

Bible Study Series

The Golden Rule

Lesson 1: Four Competing Rules

Learn about four "rules" for how people treat others (the "Iron Rule," the "Brass Rule," the "Silver Rule," and the "Golden Rule") and which one is pleasing to God

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My plea: It is my hope and prayer that you are searching for the truth that is contained in God's word, the Bible. My desire is to help you understand and obey these truths God has revealed in the pages of His word. It is to that end that I write this material. Please observe all of the Scripture references and evaluate whether the conclusions I have drawn are in harmony with God's word. If they are, I ask that you make honest application of those truths to your life and obey God's instructions.

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The Golden Rule

Lesson 1:

Four Competing Rules

God is interested in how you treat other people. In fact, Jesus identifies the second greatest commandment in all of God's law as: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:39). This was second only to loving God with all of your heart, soul, and mind (Matthew 22:37).

Jesus said that "all the Law and the Prophets" hang from these two commandments (Matthew 22:40). So, every other commandment that God gives directly relates and is dependent upon loving God or loving others. By implication, if you fail in either of these areas, you will fail to obey God in some way.

But, it is a radical concept to love other people in the same way that you love yourself. This is especially true whenever you consider that there are no limitations to this commandment. Since God commands you to love all people (even those who hate you, Matthew 5:43-48), this can certainly be a challenge.

Yet, the difficulty of this responsibility does not diminish it in any way. Instead, Jesus only enhanced this idea of loving others as much as you love yourself whenever He issued the (so-called) "Golden Rule" in Matthew 7:12. He said, "Therefore, whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets." In fact, this is just another way of commanding you to love others as much as you love yourself. For, if you

do this, you will always act according to what is in their best interest.

So, you have a choice to make in your life. You *must* decide how you will treat other people. But, this does not just apply to those who love you and treat you well. This choice even concerns the most wicked of all people who treat you with complete contempt. As you make this decision, let's evaluate four competing rules that people have adopted and weigh the merits of each one against the Scriptures. These have all been assigned a different representation of metal – the "Iron Rule," the "Brass Rule," the "Silver Rule," and the "Golden Rule."

The "Iron Rule"

One way that you can decide to treat other people is by following the "Iron Rule." Just as you are often hurt by those who practice this rule, you may decide to take advantage of it whenever it will benefit you. So, let's weigh its merit against the Scriptures.

"Might makes right"

The "Iron Rule" says that "might makes right." Those who follow this rule believe that whatever is yours is mine if I can take it by force. Sometimes, you will find yourself on the losing end of this rule because there will be other people who are more powerful than you are. But, there will be other opportunities that you will surely have to exercise your own force (whether physical strength, a position of authority, etc.) in order to take something that belongs to another. So, even though individuals do not desire to be the victims of the "Iron Rule," this does not keep people from using it to their advantage against others.

Example of Ahab and Jezebel

Consider the example of King Ahab and Queen Jezebel as an illustration of the "Iron Rule." Ahab and Jezebel were the king and queen of Israel and lived in a palace in Samaria (the capital of Israel). And, as 1 Kings 21 discusses, they were willing to use their power to get what they wanted.

There was a man named Naboth who owned a vineyard that Ahab desired to have for himself because it was near to his house. Ahab approached Naboth and said, “Give me your vineyard, that I may have it for a vegetable garden, because it is near, next to my house; and for it I will give you a vineyard better than it. Or, if it seems good to you, I will give you its worth in money” (verse 2). But, the trouble began whenever Naboth refused this offer, saying, “The Lord forbid that I should give the inheritance of my fathers to you” (verse 3). The text teaches this made Ahab extremely unhappy. So, he went to lay down on his bed, turned away his face, and would not eat any food. Whenever his wife came to him, she asked why he was acting in this way.

Then, whenever Jezebel heard what had transpired, she told him, “You now exercise authority over Israel! Arise, eat food, and let your heart be cheerful; I will give you the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite” (verse 7). She proceeded to write letters in her husband’s name and put his seal on them, sending them to the elders and nobles who lived in Jezreel with Naboth. She instructed that they proclaim a fast and seat Naboth in a place of high honor among the people. Then, they were to seat two wicked men before him so that they would testify against Naboth, saying that he had blasphemed God and the king. Afterward, Naboth was to be taken out and stoned to death.

When the thing was done, Jezebel told Ahab that Naboth was dead and he took possession of the vineyard. The following verses (17-29) demonstrate that God condemned the wicked actions of the king and queen. And, God promised consequences for their wickedness.

Example of David

Consider the example of an earlier king over Israel, King David. Although he, generally, was a man after God’s own heart, he chose to live according to the “Iron Rule” on one occasion. This, as described in 2 Samuel 11 and 12, concerned another man’s wife.

One evening when David was walking on his roof, he saw a beautiful woman bathing. When he inquired about her, he was told that her name was

Bathsheba and that she was the wife of Uriah, the Hittite (verse 3). Still, David sent messengers and had her brought to him. When she came, he committed adultery with her.

Later, after Bathsheba revealed that she was pregnant, David tried to cover up his wickedness. Yet, Uriah was an honorable man who was loyal in the king’s army. So, David gave instructions to have Uriah set on the front line of the fiercest battle and then to withdraw from him so that he would be killed. After Bathsheba was told about her husband’s death and she concluded her mourning, she became David’s wife.

Then, when God sent the prophet, Nathan, to David, Nathan told David a story that was applicable to the situation (2 Samuel 12). Nathan said that there was a rich man in a city who had a great many flocks and herds, and a poor man who had nothing except one little ewe lamb. This poor man had bought and taken care of it. It grew up with his children. It ate his own food, drank from his cup, and slept in his arms. It was like a daughter to him. But, whenever a traveler came to the rich man, the rich man refused to take from his own flock to prepare a meal for his guest. Instead, he took the one small ewe lamb from the poor man and had it prepared for his guest.

Both of these stories are perfect illustrations of the “Iron Rule.” Both men used what power and influence they had to take what belonged to another. The interesting thing is that David had failed to recognize his error until he heard this story. Then, he became infuriated with the rich man who had done such a horrible thing and pronounced that the rich man should die and restore fourfold to the poor man “because he had no pity” (verses 5-6). After this, Nathan told David, “You are the man,” identified that he had done evil in God’s sight, and promised consequences for his actions (verses 7-12).

Not approved by God

Whenever the merits of the “Iron Rule” are weighed against the Scriptures, it is clearly found to be lacking. Both of these examples plainly demonstrate that God is not pleased by those who use their might to harm others. This surely does not act in a way that shows love and compassion toward

others. Even when the “Iron Rule” is used to make another person “happy” (as was the case with Jezebel and Ahab), it still fails to please God because it always harms someone.

God directly teaches us not to live according to this rule. For instance, 1 John 3:15 says, “Whoever hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.” Although this passage directly pertains to the love that Christian brothers and sisters are expected to have for one another, the implications go even further. For, God equates hating someone with murder and says that they will miss out on eternal life because of their hatred. Therefore, whenever we use the “Iron Rule” we must recognize that we are showing hatred toward someone by trying to harm him/her. And, doing so makes us as guilty before God as a murderer!

The “Brass Rule”

Another way that you can decide to treat other people is by following the “Brass Rule.” I believe this “rule” is far more commonly used than the “Iron Rule.” In fact, this may be the most popular of all these “rules” in the world. So, let’s weigh its merit against the Scriptures.

“Get even”

The “Brass Rule” says that “you should do to others according to what they have done to you.” Those who follow this rule believe that you should try and get revenge for yourself whenever someone treats you in a way that is not right. This “rule” follows the idea that “what goes around comes around.” So, if you follow this rule, you will be looking to “pay back” the evil things that have been done against you in the past. And, even though individuals do not desire to be the victims of the “Brass Rule” (in fact, many people fear the revenge that others will take against them), this does not keep them from using it against others.

Example of Simeon and Levi

Consider the actions of Simeon and Levi (two of Jacob’s sons) in Genesis 34 as an illustration of the “Brass Rule.” A man named Shechem (a Hivite prince) saw Dinah, the daughter of Leah and Jacob, “took her and lay with her, and violated her” (Genesis 34:2). Verse 3 says that “His soul was strongly attracted to Dinah the daughter of Jacob, and he loved the young woman and spoke kindly to the young woman.” This man then went to his father Hamor and requested Dinah as a wife.

Now, there is certainly no excuse for what Shechem did. He acted with wickedness in forcing himself on Dinah. And, the Israelites had no agreement with the Hivites to make marriages with them prior to this time. Remember that the Israelites were God’s special people and God had made three great promises to the patriarchs of Israel (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob).

Yet, even though Shechem had acted wickedly, this did not give Dinah’s brothers the right to return wickedness to him! For, whenever Hamor came to speak with Jacob about making marriages between the Israelites and the Hivites, living together, and providing a dowry and gift for Shechem to marry Dinah, Simeon and Levi devised a wicked plan. The sons of Jacob told Shechem and Hamor that there could be no such agreement without every male being circumcised. But, if they would comply with that condition, the two peoples would become one.

Shechem did not delay in doing this thing, because of his delight for Dinah. So, all of the men in the city were circumcised in order that they might be one people with the Israelites. However, on the third day, when all of the men were in pain, Simeon and Levi each took swords and attacked the city, killing every male. They also killed Hamor and Shechem and plundered the city, taking of the sheep, oxen, donkeys, all their wealth, and took all their children and wives captive.

This thing greatly displeased Jacob whenever he learned of their actions. He said that it had made him “obnoxious among the inhabitants of the land” and was concerned that the people would gather

themselves against him and kill him and his household (verse 30). Still, Simeon and Levi tried to justify themselves by saying, “Should he treat our sister like a harlot?” (verse 31). Yet, we must recognize that the wickedness of Shechem did *not* actually justify their actions! Instead, they were just as wicked as Shechem was!

Example of the Jews toward Jesus

Consider the example of the Jews toward Jesus as further illustration of the “Brass Rule.” However, I want you to think about a little bit of a different twist to this “rule.” Sometimes it is possible to treat other people badly because of our perception of what they have done to us.

This was the case between many of the Jews and Jesus. Jesus Christ did *not* commit sin the entire time He lived on this earth (Hebrews 4:15). So, this *cannot* be a classic case of the “Brass Rule” (where individuals carry out revenge toward those who have done evil against them). Jesus never did anything that was actually wrong or against the Jewish people (or anyone else). Instead, He only acted with love for all people and did whatever was in the best interest of others (particularly on a spiritual level).

Still, this example illustrates how people can misinterpret the actions of others and try to take revenge on others for the evil they *think* has been done against them. For, many of the Jews (especially the Jewish leaders) saw Jesus as a threat to their power and saw Jesus exposing their hypocrisy to the people. Jesus’ life exposed their own wickedness and they desired to destroy Him for it.

They always put as negative an interpretation on Jesus’ actions as they possibly could so that they could have cause to put Him to death. For instance, John 5:18 says, “Therefore the Jews sought all the more to kill Him, because He not only broke the Sabbath but also said that God was His Father, making Himself equal with God.” On another occasion, John 11:53 says that “from that day on, they plotted to put Him to death.” And, whenever Jesus was on trial, Pilate (the Roman governor of Judea) saw that the Jews had handed Jesus over “because of envy” (Matthew 27:18).

Now, my point is simply this: Sometimes, we can misinterpret the actions of others to think someone is doing us harm when they are really doing what is best for us. Remember that Jesus said (while He was on the cross), “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do” (Luke 23:34). Yet, if we live according to the “Brass Rule,” we will attempt to punish and avenge ourselves of even this! Not only can this be seen in the life and death of Jesus, but also in the persecution of Christians who desired to help sinners find salvation through Jesus Christ.

Not approved by God

Whenever the merits of the “Brass Rule” are weighed against the Scriptures, it is also found to be lacking. Both of these examples plainly demonstrate that God is not pleased by those who try to harm those who have harmed (or have been perceived as harming) them. This surely does not act in a way that shows love and tries to do what is in the best interest of others. Even though vengeance is *due* to the wickedness that has been committed against you or another (think about Shechem’s wickedness against Dinah), the “Brass Rule” still fails to please God because it always harms someone and exercises vengeance for yourself or others.

God directly teaches us not to live according to this rule. For instance, Romans 12:17-21 instructs us, “Repay no one evil for evil. Have regard for good things in the sight of all men. If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men. Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, ‘Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,’ says the Lord. Therefore ‘If your enemy is hungry, feed him; If he is thirsty, give him a drink; For in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head.’ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

The “Silver Rule”

Another way that you can decide to treat other people is by following the “Silver Rule.” I believe that there are many well-intentioned people who believe that this rule is the fulfillment of Jesus’

command to love their neighbors. So, let's weigh its merit against the Scriptures.

"Do no harm"

The "Silver Rule" is no doubt a great improvement over the previous two "rules" we have considered. The "Silver Rule" says that you should "do nothing to others that you would not want them to do to you." So, its guiding principle is "do no harm" to others. If you would not want the thing to be done to you, do not do it to anyone else.

Example of the priest and Levite

Consider the example of the priest and Levite in the parable of the good Samaritan Jesus taught in Luke 10:30-36. While we most often think about the good Samaritan, Jesus also gives us these two other individuals to consider. But, before considering these two characters in Jesus' story, it is important to consider the context of the parable.

Verses 25-29 explain that Jesus was being tested by a certain lawyer, who asked Him, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" (verse 25). When it was established that he must love God with all his heart, soul, strength, and mind and that he must love his neighbor as himself (verses 26-28), this man wanted to justify himself. So, he asked Jesus a follow-up question, saying, "And who is my neighbor?" (verse 29). In response, Jesus taught the parable of the good Samaritan.

The parable depicts a man traveling on a dangerous road from Jerusalem to Jericho and being attacked by robbers. These robbers stripped the man of his clothing, beat him, and left him half dead. It happened that two men traveled on this same road (before the good Samaritan). The first man was a priest. The second was a Levite.

Both should have known God's law about showing love to their neighbors. But, whenever they saw the man, they passed him by on the other side. Now, as these are contrasted with the good Samaritan who acted in the man's best interest by helping him, Jesus demonstrates that these two men did *not* love their neighbor by failing to help the man. Although they did not do anything (directly) to harm the man, they did not help him either.

Thus, they lived by the "Silver Rule" – at least on this occasion. Perhaps they thought that if they did not directly harm others they were fulfilling God's commandments. Yet, they demonstrate that God expects more from His people than just not harming others. They neglected their opportunity to do good to the wounded man. And, that is what God desired from them on that occasion.

Example of the older son

Consider another character in one of Jesus' parables. This example comes from the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15:11-32. I believe that he is further illustration of the "Silver Rule." But, before studying this individual character, consider the context of his story.

Jesus was teaching people who viewed sinners with great contempt about the value of the soul. In doing so, He taught them about a shepherd searching diligently until he found the one sheep that was lost and a woman searching diligently until she found the one coin that she lost. Then, following these two parables, Jesus teaches about a man who lost his son.

This man had two sons. The younger of the sons demanded his share of his father's inheritance early. And, he took it and wasted it on reckless and wild living. After he spent all that he had been given, he worked to feed pigs. Then, when a famine hit the land, he would have even been happy to eat the food he was giving to the pigs. It was at this point that he came to himself and determined to return to his father, confessing his sins.

When his father saw him, his father ran to him, fell on his neck, and kissed him. The son confessed his sins and his father restored him, put the best robe on him, put a ring on his hand, put sandals on his feet, and threw a great celebration for him. But, when the older son came near and heard all that was going on, he did not have the same kind of positive reaction to his brother's repentance.

Instead, Luke 15:28-30 describes his attitude. "But he was angry and would not go in. Therefore his father came out and pleaded with him. So he answered and said to his father, 'Lo, these many years I have been serving you; I never transgressed

your commandment at any time; and yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might make merry with my friends. But as soon as this son of yours came, who has devoured your livelihood with harlots, you killed the fatted calf for him.”

Now, think about how this is a demonstration of the “Silver Rule.” This older brother did not wish harm on his brother, nor did he do anything to directly harm his brother. However, the error that this individual made was that he did not *do* what was in the best interest of his brother. Instead, his jealousy prevented him from celebrating his brother’s return.

Not all God desires

Whenever the merits of the “Silver Rule” are weighed against the Scriptures, it is also found to be lacking. Both of these examples plainly demonstrate that although these individuals could have done worse, they still did not fully comply with God’s law to love their neighbors as themselves. Surely, it is a great first step for someone who has lived according to the “Iron Rule” or the “Brass Rule” to decide not to harm anyone else. But, it is only a *first* step. As we saw (especially with the priest and Levite), the “Silver Rule” can leave much that is good undone!

God directly teaches us that this rule is good, but incomplete. For instance, Romans 13:10 says, “Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.” Yet, love also *does* a lot of things that are good (see 1 Corinthians 13:4-7). 1 John 3:16-18 demonstrates. “By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But whoever has this world’s goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him? My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth.”

The “Golden Rule”

A final “rule” we should consider regarding how you can decide to treat other people is the “Golden Rule.” This is the most challenging of all the various “rules” that a person could live by

regarding how to treat others. So, let’s weigh its merit against the Scriptures.

“Do unto others”

The “Golden Rule” goes one big step beyond the “Silver Rule” and is infinitely better than the “Iron Rule” or the “Brass Rule.” The “Golden Rule” is exactly what Jesus taught in Matthew 7:12. “Therefore, whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.” So, it’s guiding principle is to “do unto others” according to what you would want them to do to you – if you were in their situation. Then, your responsibility is to *act* accordingly.

Example of the good Samaritan

Consider the example of the good Samaritan. Remember that Jesus was teaching this parable in response to a question about who is the neighbor we have responsibility to love as ourselves (Luke 10:25-29). And, remember that Jesus has already shown us two examples (the priest and Levite) who did not show love to the one who had fallen among thieves.

Now, here comes a Samaritan journeying on the road that passed from Jerusalem to Jericho. When he came to the place where the wounded man was, Jesus said that “when he saw him, he had compassion” (verse 33). What follows is an excellent example of doing good to someone as there is opportunity and acting in that person’s best interest (in the same way that we would desire someone treat us if we were in the situation of the wounded man).

Verses 34 and 35 say, “So he went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine; and he set him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. On the next day, when he departed, he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said to him, ‘Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, when I come again, I will repay you.’”

When Jesus asked the lawyer who had questioned him, “So which of these three do you think was neighbor to him who fell among the thieves?” (verse 36), the man could not deny that it was the one “who showed mercy” (verse 37). Thus, Jesus instructed him, “Go and do likewise” (verse

37). Of the three, the good Samaritan was the only one who truly demonstrated love as a neighbor to the one who was in need. Just seeing him and deciding to do no additional harm was *not* enough. Instead, God desires us to be active in *doing* good to those we have the opportunity to do good toward.

Apply the “Golden Rule” to this situation. Suppose you had been the one who was traveling, was beaten, and left half dead. Would you desire for those who saw you to pass you by without helping you? Or, would you desire to have someone take care of you to the best of his/her ability (like the good Samaritan)? We all know the answer to this question!

Example of Jesus

Consider the perfect example of Jesus as further illustration of the “Golden Rule.” For, not only did Jesus *teach* the perfect law of God so that we could follow His law, but He gave us the perfect example so that we could follow in His steps. This area of how we ought to treat others is no different.

Begin by thinking about what Jesus *could* have done. Jesus was not the one who committed sin. So, He did not need to die for His own sin. Therefore, He could have chosen not to leave Heaven and come to earth to suffer and die. In doing so, He would *not* have done any harm to anyone. The harm that would have come upon them (eternal punishment in Hell) would have been entirely self-inflicted.

Yet, Jesus chose to *do* what He could to save those who were lost in sin. 2 Corinthians 8:9 says, “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich.” Although Jesus could have left us poor and spiritually destitute in our sins, He acted in our best interest by coming to this earth and sacrificing His own life on the cross to save us!

Even though many people showed their contempt for Jesus while He was living on earth, Jesus acted in their best interest. 1 Peter 2:21-25 says, “For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps: ‘Who committed no sin, Nor was deceit found in His mouth’; who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered,

He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously; who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness—by whose stripes you were healed. For you were like sheep going astray, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.”

In everything that Jesus has ever done, He has lived by the “Golden Rule.” He did *not* live by the “Iron Rule” – even though He was (and is) the Almighty God and could demand anything He desires. He did *not* live by the “Brass Rule” – even though every person who has ever lived (who has reached the age of personal accountability) has done evil against Him and He has the power to do them all harm. He did *not* even live by the “Silver Rule” – even though He did not *have* to sacrifice Himself for us.

Instead, He is the perfect example of the “Golden Rule.” So, whenever we interact with *anyone* (friend or foe), we must consider how Jesus would treat that person if He was on this earth. Ultimately, Jesus is the one we will all answer to for how we have lived our lives on earth (2 Corinthians 5:10). And, Jesus taught us that when we act in the best interest of another, we do the thing to Him. But, when we fail to act in the best interest of another, we fail to do good to Him (see Matthew 25:31-46)!

Exactly what God desires

Whenever the merits of the “Golden Rule” are weighed against the Scriptures, it is found to be exactly what God desires. Both examples plainly demonstrate that proactively doing what is in the best interest of others fulfills God’s law to love our neighbors as we love ourselves! This demonstrates compassion and mercy on others and desires to help someone in whatever way you are capable of helping.

God directly teaches us that this rule is exactly what He desires, not only in Matthew 7:12, but, in many Scriptures. For instance, Romans 12:20-21 says that if your enemy is hungry to “feed him” and if he is thirsty to “give him a drink.” In doing so, you will not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. Although this “rule” goes against what

many people in the world believes is appropriate, we must not be conformed to this world and be transformed by the gospel of Jesus Christ (Romans 12:2). For, what we often *think* is right (or that *feels* right) will lead us in a way that goes against God and results in eternal punishment in Hell (Proverbs 14:12).

Conclusion

If you desire to please God in your conduct toward others, you *must* live by the “Golden Rule.” No other “rule” that has been devised by man will suffice. They all fall short in some way. And, even though following the “Golden Rule” requires you to sacrifice of yourself for others, remember how much Jesus Christ willingly sacrificed for you! If you will follow Jesus’ instructions in Matthew 7:12 (that has been appropriately called the “Golden Rule”), it will completely transform the way that you interact with others in a way that will please God!

Study Questions

What are the two greatest commandments in all of God’s law? Why are these two the greatest?

1. The “Iron Rule”

What is the “iron rule”?

How does the example of Ahab and Jezebel illustrate the “iron rule”?

How does the example of David illustrate the “iron rule”?

Is the “iron rule” approved by God?

2. The “Brass Rule”

What is the “brass rule”?

How does the example of Simeon and Levi illustrate the “brass rule”?

How does the example of the Jews toward Jesus illustrate the “brass rule”?

Is the “brass rule” approved by God?

3. The “Silver Rule”

What is the “silver rule”?

How does the example of the priest and Levite illustrate the “silver rule”?

How does the example of the older son illustrate the “silver rule”?

Is the “silver rule” approved by God?

4. The “Golden Rule”

What is the “golden rule”?

How does the example of the good Samaritan illustrate the “golden rule”?

How does the example of Jesus illustrate the “golden rule”?

Is the “golden rule” approved by God?