

Three Golden Rules

David Feddes

WWJD has showed up a lot in recent years. WWJD sounds like the call letters of a radio station, but people with WWJD on bracelets and T-shirts and bumper stickers aren't trying to promote a radio station. For many, WWJD is a motto, a reminder to ask themselves in every situation, "What Would Jesus Do?" That can be helpful. If WWJD helps you not to forget the Lord and reminds you to be more Christlike, it's good for you. But WWJD has its limits. I don't want to discourage those who find it helpful to ask "What would Jesus do?" but we should watch out for possible pitfalls.

One drawback is that WWJD is a money maker. It's a golden rule in the sense that it's made money for marketers, and it can lose its meaning. Originally the question "What would Jesus do?" was the theme of a bestselling book of an earlier era called *In His Steps*, by Charles Sheldon. In this fictional story, the people of a town are transformed in wonderful ways when they decide to always ask themselves "What would Jesus do?" before they do anything. Now the whole book has been reduced to the slogan "What would Jesus do?" The slogan has been reduced to four letters, WWJD. And the four letters have become a religious fashion item that generates cash.

In some ways, this process typifies trends in Christian marketing. The desire for in-depth Bible study and careful reflection decreases, and the appetite for religious fiction increases. Then some folks don't even want to bother with the fiction; they'd rather not read at all. They prefer slogans and wall hangings. Then even these tidbits are cut down to fit an earring or bracelet. In many Christian bookstores, more money is spent on fiction than non-fiction, and more is spent on videos, T-shirts, jewelry, mugs and other such items than on books.

Now, fiction isn't necessarily bad, and slogans and jewelry aren't necessarily bad either. But when such things replace thoughtful reading and careful study of God's truth in the Bible, when religious "bookstores" do more to peddle trinkets than to promote thinking, something is wrong. Something is wrong when people wear a cross as jewelry but don't want to study Bible truths, such as atonement, substitution, or justification, which express the true meaning and importance of the cross. So too, something is wrong when people wear WWJD and ask "What would Jesus do?" but don't study what Jesus actually did and said in the Bible. In such cases, WWJD is junk and nothing more.

Not everyone is so phony or shallow. I know some wonderful Christians who eagerly study Scripture and have deep knowledge of God, and who also find it helpful to have a brief motto or special item to help them keep their focus. They may wear a cross, not as a replacement for prayerful study, but as a constant reminder of the Savior and all that he means to them. They may wear a WWJD item, not as a replacement for Bible knowledge, but as a constant reminder to put into practice what Jesus teaches in the Bible. For them, WWJD can be helpful.

Still, even if you're not shallow or thoughtless, even if WWJD is more than just a marketing fad for you, there's another limit you should be aware of. In some situations, it may be helpful to tell yourself, "Do what Jesus would do," but in other cases, it's not helpful at all. What would Jesus do at a funeral? He would walk up to the coffin and raise the dead person back to life. What would Jesus do about hungry crowds? He would borrow a little boy's lunch and feed 5,000 people with it. What would Jesus do

about Satan? He would take Satan on directly, after forty days in a desert without any food, and conquer Satan's strongest temptations. You and I are not going to raise dead people, feed thousands from a lunch bucket, or defeat the prince of darkness by our own power and purity the way Jesus did. In many cases, we are utterly unable to do what Jesus would do, and we shouldn't try.

In other cases, we must do things Jesus would never need to do. What would Jesus do if he fell into sin? Bad question! Jesus never sinned. But you and I often sin; we disobey God and wrong other people. We often need to repent and apologize and ask forgiveness, but Jesus never needed to say he was sorry, because he never did anything wrong.

So there are times when it's not helpful to ask, "What would Jesus do?" You're not Jesus. Jesus did things (like raising the dead) that you *can't* do, and you must do things (like repenting and apologizing) that Jesus never *needed* to do.

Still, there are times when it's helpful to ask "What would Jesus do?" especially when doing the right thing might be hard or costly or painful. The Bible says, "Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps" (1 Peter 2:21). Despite huge differences between us and Jesus, there is a biblical basis for following Jesus' humble, holy example, seeking to do what's right rather than merely what's easy. So I encourage all WWJD folks to live up your motto wherever it rightly applies.

At the same time, I want to offer three other mottoes that have even stronger grounding in God's Word, three golden rules that are even more valuable than WWJD.

1. Do to others as you would have them do to you.

This statement of Jesus in Luke 6:35 is commonly called *the* Golden Rule, so it's fitting to make it the first of our three golden rules. Some people might aim to do what Jesus would do, but the Golden Rule which Jesus gives us doesn't sound quite so lofty or spiritual. You don't have to put yourself in Jesus' shoes; just put yourself in other people's shoes, and do to others as you would have them do to you.

If you're a husband sitting with a remote control in your hand, watching TV while your wife toils away cleaning up dishes and getting the kids ready for bed, put yourself in your wife's shoes. What would you want if you were an overworked woman at the end of a long day? Wouldn't you want some help? Then click off the TV and help her!

If you're trying to sell something to another person, put yourself in that person's shoes. Would you want to buy something without being told of a potential problem? Would you want to be pressured into buying something you don't really need, something you can't afford without going deeper into debt? No, you'd want to know the honest truth, and you wouldn't want to get yourself in a financial bind. If that's how you would want to be treated, then treat your potential customers that way.

Treat others the way you want to be treated. This Golden Rule is the underlying pattern of all God's commandments for dealing with other people. "The commandments, 'Do not commit adultery,' 'Do not murder,' 'Do not steal,' 'Do not covet,' and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: 'Love your neighbor as yourself'" (Romans 13:9). God's commands aren't just orders to follow mechanically. They are ways to love others as much as you love yourself, ways to do to others as you would have them do to you. You wouldn't like to be killed, would you? Then don't murder.

You wouldn't like to be ripped off and robbed, would you? Then don't steal. You wouldn't want your spouse to betray you and go to bed with someone else, would you? Then don't commit adultery. You don't like to be lied to or slandered, do you? Then don't bear false witness. You don't want people circling you like vultures, wanting what is yours, do you? Then don't covet. "So in everything," says Jesus, "do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets" (Matthew 7:12).

An expert in religious law once came to Jesus. He knew that the heart of God's law is to love God above all and your neighbor as yourself—but he questioned who ought to count as a neighbor. His very question indicated a lack of love. If you love others as much as you love yourself, you don't try to figure out whether they qualify as neighbors. Instead, you make yourself a good neighbor to them. You treat them the way you'd want to be treated if you were in their shoes.

Jesus made this point by telling the religious expert the story of a man who was robbed, beaten, and left for dead. First one religious leader, then another, saw the poor fellow lying there but hurried past on the other side of the road. Then a half-breed Samaritan came along, tended the man's wounds, took him to an inn, and paid his bill for as long as it took the man to recover. Isn't that how you would want to be treated if you were in bad shape and had lost all your money? Then let that be your policy for dealing with every needy person you meet.

Do to others as you would have them do to you. The Golden Rule is simple; it doesn't take a scholar to understand it. The Golden Rule is also plainly right; you can't argue with it. Your conscience has to agree with it. You can't help admitting that this is how you ought to behave, that it's right to treat others the way you would want to be treated and wrong not to do so. The Golden Rule is a marvelous guide for human conduct. If everyone in the world loved others as we love ourselves, if we put ourselves in their shoes and did as we would want them to do to us, there would be no bickering, no divorce, no cruelty, no crooked business deals, no war—just understanding and love.

There's just one problem. No matter how simple and right the Golden Rule is, no matter how much we admire and praise it, we don't live up to it! We are self-centered. We wish people would understand us, but we don't try to understand them. We know how we want to be treated, but we don't treat others that way. If all we have is the Golden Rule, we will be frustrated and guilty and condemned. For although it shows us how we ought to feel and act toward others, it doesn't set us free from our selfishness or give us the power to love others and do to them as we would have them do to us. The Golden Rule shows the core meaning of God's law, but it doesn't enable us to live up to God's law. So let's consider a second golden rule.

2. Do to others as Jesus has done for you.

Before you can begin to escape selfishness and do to others as you would have them do to you, you must first know and delight in what Jesus has done. Before you can start to love others as yourself, you must first experience God's love for you, and love the Lord with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. After all, according to Jesus, the command to love others as yourself is the *second* greatest commandment; the greatest is to love God. And you cannot love God until you savor his goodness in Jesus and accept by faith all Christ has done.

You and I cannot create love in ourselves; we can only love as the result of the love of Another. God is love; I'm not. Love springs up within God with nothing to prompt it except the fact that God is love. But I'm not God, and love does not eternally spring from the depth of my being without being prompted. Love can flow from me only as God's love first flows to me in Christ and then through me to others. As the Bible puts it, "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19).

And so our second golden rule, "Do to others as Jesus has done for you," does more than show the *pattern* of how to treat others; it also shows where the *power* comes from to do so. The power comes from God's own love in Christ, revealed in the gentle, tender, gracious conduct of Jesus during his time on earth, and shown supremely in his willingness to die so that sinful people might have new life. When the Holy Spirit convinces you of Christ's love and fills you with joy and gratitude to him, the Spirit also moves you to love God and to love others as Christ has loved you.

If you try to do what Jesus would do before accepting what he has already done for you, if you take Jesus as your example before you trust him as your Savior and Lord, then you will be crushed by the burden of trying to be like him. But once you believe in Christ as the one who has already fulfilled God's Law for you by his perfect obedience and sacrificial death, you can accept his love and eternal life as a free gift, without feeling you have to earn it, and without being utterly defeated by your failure to measure up to the perfection of Christ.

Then, as you're caught up in the awesome power of God's love in Christ, that power becomes more and more dominant in your own conduct, and the pattern of Jesus' kindness to you shines all the more brightly and attractively as a marvelous pattern for your own behavior toward others: "Do to others as Jesus has done for you." The Bible applies that principle in many ways.

Love as Christ has loved you. "This is love," says the Bible, "not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another" (1 John 4:10-11). God calls us to have Christlike love in all our relationships, especially in marriage. Scripture says, "Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her" (Ephesians 5:25). What a splendid rule for marriage! Do whatever it takes to cherish and encourage and help your wife, even if it means giving up some of your own desires. Love your wife as passionately and sacrificially as Christ has loved you.

Another way of doing as Christ has done to you is to *give* as Christ has given for you. The Bible says, "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich" (2 Cor. 8:9). Since Jesus has given so generously to us, we should give generously of our wealth to people in need—even to the point of sacrifice. "This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?" (1 John 3:16-17)

Another application: *teach* as Jesus has taught you. The apostle Paul once wrote, "What I received I passed on to you as of first importance" (1 Cor. 15:3). In other words, he taught as Christ had taught him. If you've been taught God's truth in Scripture and the way of salvation through faith in Christ, don't let the truth be lost or watered down or twisted, and don't keep the truth to yourself. Christ taught this truth; many have

suffered and died to guard this truth and give it to their children and neighbors and spread it to many nations; so when you receive and believe this truth from Christ, guard it, keep it pure, and share it. Teach as Christ has taught you.

Here's one more vital way of doing to others as Jesus has done for you: "*Forgive as the Lord forgave you*" (Colossians 3:13). Do you count on Jesus to pardon you? Do you trust him not to hold your sins against you? Then forgive those who have wronged you. Don't hold their sins against them. They may not deserve to be forgiven—but do you deserve to be forgiven? Jesus forgives even when we don't deserve it. Do as Jesus as done for you: forgive even those people who don't deserve forgiveness. Do to others as Jesus has done for you—that's our second golden rule. Christ's goodness provides power for us to be good to others. What Jesus has done is the source and motivation of all conduct that is truly Christian. And the motivation becomes even more powerful when we consider our third golden rule.

3. Do to others as you would do to Jesus.

Show the same kindness toward everyone you meet that you would show to the Lord Jesus himself. Hebrews 13:2 says that we should be kind and welcoming toward strangers, "for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it." If you mistreated a stranger, only to find out later that you had mistreated an angel, wouldn't you be horrified? And if you showed kindness to someone who turned out to be an angel, wouldn't you be thrilled? Now, if helping an angel sounds exciting, how about helping Jesus, the King of angels? If we should be kind to strangers who might be angels, we should surely be kind if the Lord takes it as kindness to himself. Jesus says, "I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me" (Matthew 25:40). When you feed the hungry, you feed Jesus. When you give a drink to the thirsty, you give a drink to Jesus. When you give clothes to the needy, you give clothes to Jesus. When you visit sick people in hospitals or persons in prison, you visit Jesus. The other side of the coin is that when you neglect such people, you neglect Jesus.

Do to others as you would do to Jesus—because Jesus takes your treatment of others personally. There is no one so small or unimportant that they don't matter. Jesus says, "Whoever welcomes a little child in my name welcomes me" (Matthew 18:5), and he says that whatever we do to the lowest and last and least, we do to him. "He who oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker." "He who is kind to the poor lends to the Lord, and he will reward him for what he has done" (Proverbs 14:31; 19:17).

In one sense, there's no way we can do anything for Jesus. How can we possibly do anything for the One who already has everything? In his divine nature, the Son of God has all the riches and enjoyment of God the Father and God the Holy Spirit, so he doesn't need anything from us. And in his human nature, Jesus has ascended to heaven, so we can't see him or do anything for him directly.

And yet, though we can't do anything for Jesus directly, we can do many things for him indirectly. How? By showing kindness to those who bear the image of the Creator, Christ, and share the same human nature as Jesus. Would you want to be rude to Jesus? If not, then don't be rude to people who were created in his image. Do you want to show love to Jesus in response to his great love for you? Then show love to those whom Jesus calls his brothers. You can't see God, and you can't see Jesus on

his heavenly throne, but you can see other people—and you must treat them the way you would treat the Lord. "For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen," says the Scripture, "cannot love God, who he has not seen. And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother" (1 John 4:20-21).

It's a marvel to know that God has become one of us in the person of Jesus, and it's a joy to know by faith that Jesus makes himself your brother and friend. But keep in mind that he also counts himself a brother and friend to people you meet, and that he takes your treatment of them personally. So don't fight or bicker with another person unless you like fighting and bickering with Jesus. Don't neglect or mistreat others unless you want to neglect and mistreat Jesus. If you know Jesus as your brother and friend, then show your love for him by loving the people he sends into your life. Do to others as you would do to Christ.

Now that we've considered these three Golden Rules, I can picture a religious marketer saying, "Hey, I've got a great idea! I'll make a bunch of necklaces and chains with a golden 3 on them. That golden 3 will remind people of the three golden rules—and it might also make a lot of money." Well, I'm no marketing genius, and I won't try to sell you any golden 3's. But even if you never have a golden 3 dangling from your neck or wrist, I hope you'll treasure these three golden rules in your heart and, by God's grace, put them into practice.

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