

How to Grow Your Soul

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



"Much Love" by Elizabeth Chapman

Prayer of Illumination

Almighty God, in you are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. Open our eyes that we may see the wonders of your Word; and give us grace that we may clearly understand and freely choose the way of your wisdom, found in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Amen.

Gospel Reading: Luke 6:31 (RNJB)

"Treat others as you would like people to treat you."

*The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.*

SERMON – How to Grow Your Soul

In Karen Armstrong's excellent book *"The Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life"* she tells the story of Rabbi Albert Friedlander, who grew up in Nazi Germany. As a child he was confused and distraught by the cruel anti-Semitic propaganda he heard on every turn.

One night when he was eight years old, Albert made a list of all of his good qualities, telling himself sternly, "I am NOT what the Nazis say I am. I have many talents, gifts, and strengths of heart and mind." He then listed them one by one. Then he vowed, that if he survived, he would use his gifts to build a better world.

Rabbi Friedlander always said that he could have done no good at all unless he had learned, at that terrible moment in history, to love himself.

We must first have compassion on ourselves in order to live out the Golden Rule. If we hate ourselves, we will do unto others what we do to ourselves—we will hate.

Jesus invites us along a very different path:

Treat others as you would like people to treat you.

To narrow it down to just two words: Be compassionate.

- To yourself.
- To your family.
- To your neighbors.
- To fellow employees.
- To your fellow Christians.
- To all people—period.

Some dictionaries define compassion as "pity." That's not the best definition. Compassion means to "suffer, experience, or undergo." Compassion means to endure something with someone. To get in another's shoes. To attempt to not only see their pain, but feel their pain. Get to know their pain.

God uses the Golden Rule to retrain our mental habits and our responses to be kinder, more thoughtful, and less fearful. In other words, to be more like Christ.

The Golden Rule had been stated negatively in many different ways long before Jesus.

- Confucius said, "Never do to others what you would not like them do to you."
- Buddha said, "A person who loves the self should not harm the self of others."
- The Hippocratic Oath says: Do no harm.
- In the Hadith, the Prophet Muhammed said, "Not one of you can be a believer unless he desires for his neighbor what he desires for himself."
- An older rabbi named Hillel who died when Jesus was a child said this, "What is hateful to you, do not do to anyone else; that is the whole Law, all else is commentary. Go and learn."

This is a very good principle to live by:

Don't hurt other people so that they won't hurt you.

Jesus takes the same idea, but focuses on the positive.

- "Do to others as you would have them do to you."

German philosopher Immanuel Kant expanded with his Categorical Imperative:

- “Never treat other people as merely a means to an end. But always treat each person as ends themselves.”

Jesus is bringing us back to the basics once again. Reminding us and empowering us to do what is uncomfortable and hard and so good for our souls.

- Love yourself.
- Love your neighbor as yourself.
- Love God in whose image we are made.

Jesus emphasizes what we’re to do (the positive)—not merely what we shouldn’t do (the negative).

In fact, Jesus uses the word “do” 7 times over in the next several verses in Luke 6.

- Treat others well, no matter how they treat you.
- Love others—period.

Later Jesus adds to this and says, “Be merciful.”

This is radical. Because this isn’t a “tit for tat,” “you scratch my back, I’ll scratch yours” existence. We don’t do good for the purpose of a reward. Of course, it’s great to have good returned to us. I like that. But that’s not why we ultimately treat others well. It’s not based upon the outcome. Christian behavior isn’t determined by who owes what to whom, or by what we expect to receive from others.

Doing good is to be carried out freely, without calculation, and without expectation of return. No strings attached.

The Golden Rule is the distinguishing mark of the children of the Most High. We’re different—a peculiar people. We stick out and stand out. We don’t compare ourselves to others and say, “I’m not doing that bad” or “everyone else is doing it.” No, we have a higher calling, a different standard. The gold standard. Because we believe all people are created in God’s image, we treat all people lovingly.

The Golden Rule is a gamechanger. It breaks the vicious circle and makes it a virtuous circle. It turns upside down the world’s way of doing things. Do you want rank and standing in the world? Then help others get rank and standing. It’s not only good for the world, It’s good for your soul. Grows your soul. It protects you from becoming cynical, jaded, and in-grown. The Golden Rule reflects not only what we’re to be like, it reflects what God is like. This is how our loving, merciful, and good God is: he sends down common grace—giving life, rain, food, and drink to all—the good and the evil.

God gave his only Son for the sins of the world, and the world crucified him. We’re to follow God’s example, not the world’s example. We follow the God who loved us while we were still enemies of God.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus takes the Golden Rule to an even higher level—you could call it the Platinum Rule—when he calls us to love others the way that Jesus loves them. A foot-washing love. A dying for others love. We’re called not only to see Christ in others, but to be Christ to others.

With Christ in us, we too can forgive and give, without expectation of return. We don't drag others into our expectations and obligations of repayment and owing. Bible scholar NT Wright put it this way,

"There are two astonishing things about Jesus' Golden Rule. First, how simple it is. Second, how scarcely we see it practiced."

Can you imagine what we would be like—what our world would be like, if we took God seriously on this?

It's important to remember that loving our enemies doesn't necessarily mean we "like" our enemies. And there's a difference between being nice and being kind. Don't be nice, but be kind. We're also not called to be doormats. To follow the Golden Rule doesn't mean that we're Golden Retrievers. And we don't have a Messiah-complex. Only Jesus can save the world—we can't do it all. To love our enemies means that we don't wish the downfall of our enemies. We also choose nothing but their highest good. And pray for them. It's easy to love those who love you, not so easy to love those who won't return our love, or love those who seek to harm us. Yet Jesus tells us we will be rewarded by God for treating others as we would like to be treated—for loving our enemies.

I'd like to conclude the sermon and the series with an extended quote from C. S. Lewis from his classic book "Mere Christianity":

"Every time you make a choice you are turning the central part of you, the part of you that chooses, into something a little different from what it was before. And taking your life as a whole, with all your innumerable choices, all your life long you are slowly turning this central thing either into a heavenly creature or into a hellish creature; either into a creature that is in harmony with God, and with other creatures, and with itself, or else into one that is in a state of war and hatred with God and with its fellow creatures and with itself. To be the one kind of creature is heaven: that is, it is joy and peace and knowledge and power. To be the other means madness, horror, idiocy, rage, impotence, and eternal loneliness. Each of us, at each moment is progressing to the one state or the other."

At the end of the day—do the best you can. God will help you grow in grace. When we get better, says C. S. Lewis, we understand more and more clearly the evil still left in us.

If you're not feeling the love, ask God for the desire to do to others what you want done to yourself. When you fail, ask for forgiveness. Pick yourself up. Try again. God gives us the power and grace to keep trying, to keep getting up, to keep seeking the good of all. This struggle grows our soul. It cures us of illusions about ourselves. Teaches us to depend on God and trust in God, and not ourselves. Teaches us to be little Christs, who love both our neighbor and our naysayer.

Amen.

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