

# THE PROBLEM OF THE NEGATIVE VERSION OF THE GOLDEN RULE IN EARLY CHRISTIAN ETHICS

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## Abstract:

The following paper discusses the principle known as the Golden Rule as formulated by early Christian authors. The principle is known from the gospels according to Luke and Matthew in a positive formulation. In many early Christian writings, however, the rule appears in the negative definition. The paper raises the question why the negative formulation was so widespread. An explanation could be, that while love as a virtue was understood to be the core of Christian practice, a moral principle like the Golden Rule was rather considered to punctuate the boundaries around practice – and that the negative formulation did that job better than the positive.

## Key Words:

The Golden Rule (negative), do not do unto others, Ethics, Luke 6:31, Matthew 7:12

## The Golden Rule

“And as you wish that men would do to you, do so to them” (καθὼς θέλετε ἵνα ποιῶσιν ὑμῖν οἱ ἄνθρωποι, ποιεῖτε αὐτοῖς ὁμοίως) (Luke 6:31). This principle, stated by Jesus in the Gospel according to Luke,

has at least since the 17<sup>th</sup> century been known as the Golden Rule. An almost similar formulation of the principle can be found in the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel according to Matthew, where Jesus is recorded to have said: “Therefore, whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them; for this is the law and the prophets” (Πάντα οὖν ὅσα ἐὰν θέλητε ἵνα ποιῶσιν ὑμῖν οἱ ἄνθρωποι, οὕτως καὶ ὑμεῖς ποιεῖτε αὐτοῖς· οὗτος γάρ ἐστιν ὁ νόμος καὶ οἱ προφῆται.) (Matt. 7:12).

What makes the version in Matthew stand out is the introducing οὖν, the “therefore”, which suggests that Jesus is here summing up his entire ethical teaching. This interpretation is supported by the concluding identification of the principle with the “law and the prophets”. As something similar is said about the commandment of love for neighbors later in Matthew (Matt. 22:39–40), the two principles are often thought to be expressions of the same fundamental idea of positive ethical reciprocity.

Now, the Golden Rule is widely acknowledged to be central to a wide range of religious and philosophical traditions.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, commentators have often noticed that before Christianity, we rarely find the principle in the positive formulation as it was made by Jesus according to Matthew and Luke. William Barclay even argued, that there were no prior parallels to the positive formulation of the principle in Matthew and Luke.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Jeffrey Wattles, *The Golden Rule*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1996; Olivier du Roy, *La Règle d'or – Histoire d'une maxime morale universelle*, 1+2, Paris: Cerf 2012.

<sup>2</sup> William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Vol. 2, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press 1968, 317. John P. Meier has, however, following Bultmann, argued that Jesus did not teach the Golden Rule, which, according to Meier, originated in “Hellenistic folk ethic”, even if it was here often formulated in the negative. See John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, New Haven/London: Yale University Press 2009, 553f. Sextus the Pythagorean is sometimes quoted for having formulated the Golden Rule both in the negative and the positive, perhaps as early as the fourth century B.C. But the source is the *Sentences of Sextus*, of which the earliest mention appears in Origen, making it uncertain whether the text had then already been modified in order to conform to Christian principles. Bowman has, against Meier, argued that the formulation in Matthew and Luke is precisely “distinctive enough in its formulation that one may appeal to the criterion of dissimilarity as confirmation that it did come from Jesus.” See Robert M. Bowman, “The Authenticity of the Golden Rule Logion in Matthew and Luke”, 8 ([https://www.academia.edu/35197350/The\\_Authenticity\\_of\\_the\\_Golden\\_Rule\\_Logion\\_in\\_Matthew\\_and\\_Luke](https://www.academia.edu/35197350/The_Authenticity_of_the_Golden_Rule_Logion_in_Matthew_and_Luke), accessed 22. november 2019).

In the rabbinic context in the first century, Hillel is often quoted for having said that “[w]hat is hateful to thee, do not unto thy fellow; this is the whole law.”<sup>3</sup> But in spite of clear similarities with Matthew, there is the obvious difference, that Hillel speaks about “not doing”, while Jesus talks about “doing”. Already in the book of Tobit we find the saying, that “what you hate, you shall not do to another” (Tob. 4:15). But again this is a negative, not a positive formulation of the principle as would later appear in the Gospels according to Matthew and Luke.

### The Negative Formulation Was Widely Used

So, with these preliminary observations we would perhaps expect the Golden Rule, as formulated by Jesus according to the Gospels, to play a central role in early Christian writings. But this is quite far from being the case. The *Biblia Patristica* lists surprisingly few references to Matthew 7:12 and Luke 6:31.<sup>4</sup> But perhaps even more surprising is the fact that, while the principle is formulated in positive terms in Matthew and Luke, surprisingly often only the negative version appears in early Christian authors in the first centuries.

Of course, the positive version of the Golden Rule does appear in some early writings, for example when Clement of Alexandria in the *Paedagogus* describes the precept as formulated in Luke 6:31 as an “all-embracing” exhortation of life (βιωτικὴ παραίνεσις, πάντα ἐμπεριέχουσα).<sup>5</sup> But in many other cases, it is the negative version that is quoted. For example, in the *Didache*, we do have the positive formulation of the commandment of neighborly love, as *Didache* 1,2 encourages the recipient to “love your neighbor as yourself”. But it is then added: “in everything, do not do to another what you would not want done to you” or perhaps rather “what you would not want to happen to you” (πάντα δὲ ὅσα ἐὰν θελήσῃς μὴ γίνεσθαί σοι, καὶ σὺ ἄλλω μὴ ποίει).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Hillel, *Shabbat* 31A, tr. Michael L. Rodkinson, in: *The Babylonian Talmud, vol. 1*, Boston: New Talmud Publishing Company 1903.

<sup>4</sup> See <http://www.bibindex.mom.fr> (accessed 22. november 2019).

<sup>5</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Paedagogus* 3.12.88.1, in M. Harl, H.-I. Marrou, C. Matray, and C. Mondésert (eds.), *Clément d'Alexandrie. Le pédagogue, vol. 3* (Sources chrétiennes 158), Paris: Cerf 1970.

<sup>6</sup> *Didache* 1.2, in: Bart D. Ehrman, *The Apostolic Fathers: Volume I. I Clement. II Clement. Ignatius. Polycarp. Didache. Barnabas*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003.

Apparently, here the negative definition of the Golden Rule seems to merely mirror the positive commandment of neighborly love among Christians, rather than playing an independent role of its own. In the apocryphal *Epistula Apostolorum* (2nd century) the negative version of the Golden Rule is extended to enemies as it is situated together with Jesus' commandment of love among the disciples as well as for enemies: "Love your enemies, and what you do not want done to you, that do to no one else."<sup>7</sup> Something similar is going on in the second epistle of Fabian, where the negative formulation of the Golden Rule is followed by the positive precept of neighborly love which is then identified with the Pauline saying that "love works no evil".

Clement of Alexandria (150–215), in the second century, takes the negative version of the Golden Rule, as it appears in Tobit, to prohibit hypocrisy.<sup>8</sup> Clement mentions the principle in an excursus on marriage, but does not discuss it further in this context. In many similar cases the negative formulation of the Golden Rule appears together with negative statements about idolatry. The apology of Aristides (2nd century) describes Christians as refraining from idolatry, and then more or less *en passant* adds that "whatsoever they would not that others should do unto them, they do not do to others". Aristides goes on explaining that Christians do not eat food consecrated to idols, and so on.

The source for this contextualization of the Golden Rule may be the Western version of the Acts of the Apostles 15, which is also quoted by Irenaeus. In this version of Acts, the Apostles agree that the necessary things for Christians is to abstain from fornication, blood and meats offered to idols, to which it is again added that Christians should live according to the precept, that "whatsoever ye do not wish to be done to you, do not ye to others" (*et quecumque non vultis fieri vobis, aliis ne faciat*).<sup>9</sup>

While this version of Acts, like Aristides, describes what is presented as particularly Christian morals, a more general statement is made by Theophilus of Antioch (d. 181). Theophilus explains that before the coming of Christ, the Father and Creator gave a law and sent prophets to teach the whole race "that there is one God," and, again, to abstain

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<sup>7</sup> *Epistula Apostolorum* (Duensing version), 142.18, in: Ron Cameron, *The Other Gospels*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press 1982.

<sup>8</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 2.23.97–98 (PG 8).

<sup>9</sup> Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* 3.12.14, tr. Philip Schaff, in: ANF 1.

from idolatry and similar things, to which it is finally added that “whatever a man would not wish to be done to himself, he should not do to another.”<sup>10</sup>

Theophilus could be said to situate the knowledge of the principle as part of a particular revelation to the prophets, though directed at the human race in general. Origen (182–254), on the other hand, argues that when Paul mentions the law written on the hearts of the Gentiles (Rom. 2:15), this is a universally known law, equal “according to the spirit” to the second table of the Decalogue and the negative version of the Golden Rule: “What could be nearer to the natural moral senses”, says Origen, “than that those things men do not want done to themselves, they should not do to others?”<sup>11</sup>

I won’t mention more examples here, but just notice that the negative version also appears in, for example, Athenagoras, the Acts of Thomas and the Gospel of Thomas, the Ethiopian version of the apocryphal Book of Thekla, the Didascalia and the Pseudo-Clementine Homilies.<sup>12</sup>

## The Negative Formulation Was Often Distinguished from the Positive

So, what is going on here? Why do we find so many examples of negative definitions of the Golden Rule already from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, rather than the positive versions as in Luke and Matthew? Now, according to some twentieth-century commentators, the negative formulation of the Golden Rule logically implies the positive version. G.B. King, in an article from 1928, argued that “the command to love one’s neighbor has as a basis a negative command”. King also argued that the positive and negative versions are basically the same in idea and origin, being a matter of moral reciprocity.<sup>13</sup> Bruce Alton has likewise suggested that the widespread use of the negative form in early Christian liter-

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<sup>10</sup> Theophilus, *Ad Autolyicum* 2.34, tr. Philip Schaff, in ANF 2.

<sup>11</sup> Origen, *Commentaria in Epistolam B. Pauli ad Romanos* 2.9.9, tr. Thomas P. Scheck, in: *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans, Books 1–5*, Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press 2001, 131.

<sup>12</sup> See a list in David W. T. Brattston, *Traditional Christian Ethics, Volume 2: Affirmative or Positive Commandments*, Bloomington: WestBow 2014, 404.

<sup>13</sup> G.B. King, “The ‘Negative’ Golden Rule” in *The Journal of Religion*, 8.2 (1928), 268–279.

ature indicates that it might have been taken to be equivalent to the positive form.<sup>14</sup>

As a matter of abstract logic it could of course be argued that double negations can be resolved into affirmative propositions, so that for example saying that “I do *not* wish others *not* to love me” is simply equivalent to saying that “I do wish others to love me”. By assuming such logic, the negative version of the Golden Rule could of course be said to imply the positive.<sup>15</sup>

This may perhaps explain the absence of positive formulations in early Christian ethics. But I do not think it is enough to assume that early Christian authors silently saw the negative formulation to logically imply the positive. A few examples do suggest that this could have been the case, perhaps Justin Martyr, when he in the dialogues with Trypho says that “the man who loves his neighbor as himself will wish for him the same good things that he wishes for himself, and no man will wish evil things for himself.”<sup>16</sup> But obviously the case here is rather that the positive commandment of neighborly love implies the negative demand not to do evil.

It is far from obvious that the negative was seen to imply the positive version of the Golden Rule. On the contrary, there are examples that the opposite was considered to be the case. For example, Bardaisan (154–222), in the second century, distinguishes the two formulations of the Golden Rule, as he held that the negative version demands “that we shall never serve any evil upon anyone, from that which we would not will to befall to ourselves”, while the positive version demands “that we should do that which is good, what is pleasant to us and what we desire to have done to ourselves.”<sup>17</sup>

Something similar is going on in Tertullian’s (155–220) fourth book

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<sup>14</sup> Bruce Alton, *An Examination of the Golden Rule* (PhD-thesis), Stanford University: 1966.

<sup>15</sup> See also Paul Ricoeur, “Ethical and Theological Considerations on the Golden Rule”, in: *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative and Imagination*, Minneapolis: Fortress: 1995, 293–302.

<sup>16</sup> Justin Martyr, *Dialogus cum Tryphone* 93, in: “Dialogue with Trypho”, trans. Thomas B. Falls, in: *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 6: *The First Apology, The Second Apology, Dialogue with Trypho, Exhortation to the Greeks, Discourse to the Greeks, The Monarchy Or The Rule of God*, Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press 2010, 296.

<sup>17</sup> Bardaisan, *Liber Legum Regionum* 11, in: “Bardaisan – Liber Legum Regionem”, in: F. Nau, *Patrologia Syriaca*, vol. 2, R. L. Graffin, ed. Paris: Firmin-Didot 1907, 490–610.

against Marcion. Tertullian argues that the negative version of the rule is “without doubt” implicit in the positive, but it is not clear that the reverse is the case. Tertullian suggests that the Golden Rule, in its positive and negative versions, teaches “love, respect, consolation, protection, and benefits of that nature” and not to do “to another what I should wish another not to do to me, violence, insult, despise, deceit, and evils of that kind”.<sup>18</sup>

Moving on to the 3rd century, Lactantius (240–320) in the *Epitome of the Divine Institutes*, perhaps following Tertullian, identifies the “root of justice” (*radix iustitiae*) with the principle “that you should not do that which you would be unwilling to suffer”. When Lactantius then adds that “the first step of justice is not to injure, while the next is to be of service” he seems to imply a distinction between the two versions of the Golden Rule as referring to different levels of justice, though he does not mention the positive version of the Golden Rule in this context.<sup>19</sup>

Of course, we are now moving further away from from the early apostolic and apologetic context. But it might be helpful to be aware, that in the fourth century we find a similar and quite clear distinction between the Golden Rule in its positive and negative versions. For example, Basil of Caesarea (330–379) quotes the rule in its positive and negative versions, as what we could perhaps call principles dealing with good and evil, respectively: “Do you know what good you ought to do to your neighbor? The good that you expect from him yourself. Do you know what is evil? That which you would not wish another to do to you.”<sup>20</sup> John Chrysostom (349–407) likewise distinguishes between the negative and the positive formulations, as the negative form from Tobit is meant to “induce to a departure from iniquity”, while the positive

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<sup>18</sup> Tertullian, *Adversus Marcionem* 4.16, tr. Ernest Evans, in: *Adversus Marcionem*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1972, 344–345.

<sup>19</sup> Lactantius, *Epitome divinarum institutionem* 55 (60), in: *Firmiani Lactantii Epitome Institutionum Divinarum: Lactantius’ Epitome of the Divine Institutes*, edited and translated by E.H. Blakeney, Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers 2010, 44.

<sup>20</sup> Basil of Caesarea, *In Hexaemeron* 9.3, in: “The Hexaemeron”, tr. Philip Schaff, in: Philip Schaff (ed.), *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Second Series*, Vol. 8: *Basil: Letters and Select Works*, 103.

induces “to the exercise of virtue”.<sup>21</sup> Something similar is the case in Augustine (354–430), who in the dialogue *De libero Arbitrio*, has Euodius saying, that “[a]nyone who does to another what he does not want done to himself does evil.”<sup>22</sup>

While there are differences in detail in the cases just mentioned, it seems that often the distinction between the negative and the positive versions of the Golden Rule runs parallel to a distinction between evil and good. This does not mean, of course, that the positive was not sometimes considered to be implicit in the negative formulation, but we cannot simply take such an identification for granted.

### Explaining the Widespread Use of the Negative Formulation

So, why was the negative formulation of the Golden Rule so widespread in early Christian texts? The most obvious explanation is, of course, that early Christians initially drew on Hillel’s negative formulation of the Golden Rule and then only later became aware that the principle is formulated in the positive in the Gospels according to the Matthew and Luke. Perhaps we cannot go much further than this: As the texts in question rarely explain why the negative version is quoted rather than the positive, we may easily end up in pure speculation when trying to account for possible further factors that may have led authors to quote the negative rather than the positive.<sup>23</sup>

That the negative version of the Golden Rule is sometimes quoted together with the positive commandment of neighborly love (e.g. in the *Didache*), does give us some hints, though. Arguably love, considered as a practice or a virtue, was seen to be more central to Christian living than, say, an abstract principle like the Golden Rule. In order not to

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<sup>21</sup> John Chrysostom, *Ad populum Antiochenum de statutis* 13, in: “Concerning the Statutes” trans. by Philip Schaff, in: Philip Schaff (ed.), *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: First Series*, vol. 9: *Chrysostom: On the Priesthood, Ascetic Treatises, Select Homilies and Letters, Homilies on the Statutes*, New York: Christian Literature Company 1889, 428.

<sup>22</sup> Augustine, *De libero Arbitrio* 1.3, trans. Thomas Williams, in: *On Free Choice of the Will*, Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett 1993, 4.

<sup>23</sup> It could, e.g., be argued that the widespread persecution of Christians in the first centuries could account for why the negative version of the Golden Rule was quoted together with other precepts about how to behave when relating to the surrounding culture, as it would be natural to exhort Christians not to respond violently to persecution. I have found no conclusive arguments for this explanation, though.



make a principle take center stage, it must be formulated in the negative in order to let something else, i.e. the practice of love considered as virtue, assume the positive main role.

The Golden Rule cannot operate in a “value vacuum”, as Jeffrey Wattles have argued, but requires a fuller philosophy of moral living.<sup>24</sup> According to the “virtue ethical” perspective made popular by the works of, e.g., Alasdair MacIntyre and Pierre Hadot, the moral virtues and the formation of character were the primary themes around which much late antique ethical thinking revolved, rather than moral rules and principles as in modern ethics.<sup>25</sup> This approach to ethics may very well have been shared by those Christians who sought to formulate Christian ethics in a Hellenistic context. While love (or charity) was usually seen by early Christians to be the primary virtue characterizing the Christian life, arguably a principle like the Golden Rule was only quoted to punctuate the limits that formed the space in which this virtue should flourish. Love is “the fullness” of the law, as Paul puts it (Rom. 13:10). As Paul Ricoeur has argued, Jesus’ demand of neighborly love is “supra-ethical”, i.e. it transcends what can be captured by ethical principles. Only in the light of the Christian narrative does something like the Golden Rule become a conveyor of love in a way that transcends ordinary moral norms.<sup>26</sup>

In other words, love was arguably understood by Hellenistic Christians to be a virtue and a practice rather than an abstract moral principle, while moral principles like the negative version of the Golden Rule was only used to frame love as a positive practice. For this purpose a negative formulation of the Golden Rule may have served better than the positive, as it negatively delimits the boundaries of ethical conduct by saying what one should not do, rather than speaking about what one should actually do. As various negative formulations of the Golden Rule were well known in the cultural climate inhabited by the early Christians, this arguably made it easy to quote a principle that was perhaps even considered to be “common sense”. Early Christians, when quoting the negative version of the Golden Rule, perhaps drew on Hillel and Hellenic sources, rather than reformulating the Golden Rule as known

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<sup>24</sup> Wattles, *Golden Rule*, 165–166.

<sup>25</sup> See Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press 2007, and Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, Oxford: Blackwell 1995.

<sup>26</sup> Ricoeur, “Ethical and Theological Considerations”, 293–302.

from Matthew and Luke, but they did so in order to delimit the boundaries inside which the supraethical practice of love could be positively affirmed. As the unknown author of *The Epistle to Diognetus* puts it (though without mentioning the Golden Rule), Christians obey the moral norms and laws of the cities in which they live, but at the same time they surpass the laws with their lives.<sup>27</sup>

At any rate, the Golden Rule was arguably not seen as being “fundamental” in the way that we are perhaps accustomed to think of ethical principles. The Golden Rule does not seem to have served as a basic principle in a system from which more specific principles could be deduced or generated. Rather, the Golden Rule served as what might be called a negative rhetorical placeholder; instead of meticulously listing all possible moral rules, one can simply list the most important ones, and then, rather than saying “etcetera”, quote the Golden Rule in the negative. Exactly by being negatively defined, the rule does not make a claim of comprehensively covering all morality, but only of being a negative backdrop, so to speak – a framework which must be filled out with the positive narrative of the Gospel and the ethical practices entailed by it, as Ricoeur argued.<sup>28</sup>

Only gradually did Christian writers become aware of the fundamental status of the Golden Rule as a positive principle from which more specific principles can be deduced. From there it grew to be the most widely quoted ethical principle in Western ethical thinking. Today it might help us to remember that the Golden Rule did not always enjoy the fundamental status that it now has, but that even this principle has a history. This conclusion is not only important for Christian ethics but for moral philosophy as such.

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<sup>27</sup> See *Epistula ad Diognetam*, in: H.-I. Marrou (ed.), *À Diognète*, 2nd ed. (Sources Chrétiennes, 33bis), Paris: Cerf 1965.

<sup>28</sup> Ricoeur, “Ethical and Theological Considerations”, 293–302.