

The Golden Rule

> “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”

The Golden Rule is an ethical principle rooted in every major culture. You can find it in the writings of Confucius and Aristotle as well as in the scriptures of virtually all religions. You don't want to be lied to, yelled at or treated unfairly, so don't lie to, yell at or be unfair to others.

It's a terrific rule to create a more kind and just society, and it is central to the ethical principle of respect. But if we're not careful we can twist the meaning of the Golden Rule by treating it as a rule of exchange rather than a

rule of ethics. In other words, we are honest, kind or fair to others only so they will be honest, kind and fair to us.

There is, of course, a practical aspect to the Golden Rule. Kindness often begets kindness, and people are more likely to be honest with us if we're honest with them. The trouble is that if we anchor our willingness to treat others well in expectation that they will return the favor, what is our moral duty with respect to selfish, disrespectful and dishonest people? Can we modify the rule to “Do unto others as they have done unto us,” or “before they do it to us?”

Is it ethical to lie to a liar or cheat a cheater? Not for a person of character. We may feel like suckers from time to time if we're honest and kind to everyone, but in the end the best reason to follow the Golden Rule is not because it assures that others will treat us right, but because it *is* right. You see, how we treat others is not simply about them. It's about us. It defines who we are. ■

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800 High Street, Chestertown, MD 21620 • ph 877.963.4966 • fx 800.283.4966

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