

Variations on “the Golden Rule”

Among the most famous words ever attributed to Jesus are those found in Matthew 7:12, “Do to others as you would have them do to you.” The passage has traditionally been called the “Golden Rule.” Not surprisingly, similar sayings have been attributed to other respected teachers or sages throughout history.

Confucius (551–479 BCE): The Chinese wise man is reported to have said, “Do not do to others what you would not want others to do to you.”

Herodotus (484–425 BCE): This Greek historian is quoted as saying, “I will not myself do that which I consider to be blameworthy in my neighbor.”

Tobit (ca. 225–175 BCE): The protagonist of this Jewish folktale tells his son, “What you hate, do not do to anyone” (4:15)

Ben Sira (ca. 200–180 BCE): This Jewish teacher instructs his students to “Judge your neighbor’s feelings by your own” (Sirach 31:15)

Rabbi Hillel (ca. 110 BCE–10 CE): The famous Jewish rabbi who lived in Jerusalem only a few decades before Jesus is also credited with a version of the Golden Rule. The context is interesting: a gentile comes to Rabbi Hillel and indicates that he would like to become a Jewish proselyte but keeping Torah seems overwhelming.

He says he will become a convert if the rabbi can teach him the entire Torah while standing on one foot. The rabbi complies and, standing on one foot, says, “What is hateful to you, do not to your neighbor. That is the whole Torah, while the rest is commentary.”

This last example has the closest affinity to the teaching of Jesus because it suggests keeping the Golden Rule fulfills all that God requires:

- Jesus: “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; *for this is the law and the prophets*” (Matt. 7:12, emphasis added).
- Hillel: “What is hateful to you, do not to your neighbor. *That is the whole Torah, while the rest is commentary*” (emphasis added).

Scholars have noted that Jesus is remembered as making the point positively while Hillel (and others cited above) is remembered for making the point negatively.

Naturally, scholars have wondered whether Jesus might have been influenced by Hillel’s teaching; perhaps he was echoing his own version of the popular rabbi’s wisdom. Another possibility, however, is that the tradition concerning Hillel was influenced by the New Testament Gospels—the teachings of Hillel were not put into writing until long after the New Testament and, though there is some

evidence that this Hillel tradition dates to the first century CE, it cannot with confidence be dated prior to the historical time of Jesus.

Thus it is possible that

1. Hillel followers remembered Hillel as having said something that actually should have been attributed to Jesus, or
2. Jesus-followers remembered Jesus as having said something that actually should have been attributed to Hillel, or
3. both Hillel followers and Jesus followers correctly remembered their teachers as saying similar things.

In any case, the basic sentiment expressed in the Golden Rule seems to have widespread cultural and historical support.