

After all the background I gave yesterday, I can now give a succinct answer to the question that was raised by a reader. Here it is again.

### **QUESTION:**

I was surprised to see that, in the Didache, the form of the Golden Rule is in the negative. I've read that the positive formulation in the Sermon on the Mount may be original to Jesus. If the Didache used Matthew as a source, how does one account for that reversion?

### **RESPONSE:**

I think this question has a simple answer. It is that the Golden Rule, which is known to everyone today mainly by the way Jesus said it, was a common teaching but was almost expressed negatively rather than positively (as I'll explain below). When the author of the Didache states the rule he does so in the form that he was most familiar with rather than in the form known to Matthew.

It is important to recognize that when one speaks of Matthew as a "source" for the Didache it is not the same thing as saying, say, that Mark was the source for Matthew. When Matthew used Mark as a source, he literally copied, in places word for word, entire sentences or even fuller passages from Mark. Most of Mark's stories are retained by Matthew, sometimes wholesale, sometimes changed a little, sometimes changed a lot.

The Didachist did not ...

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The Didachist did not use Matthew that way. Instead, if we assume he used Matthew at all (which I do), he took this, that, or the other saying of Jesus from Matthew (and from other sources) and rephrased it (often based on his knowledge of Luke, or some oral tradition, or some other written source). He was not producing a \*Gospel\* and so didn't simply take over entire passages wholesale.

And so, if he knew of a saying of Jesus, such as the Golden Rule, he may have known it from a wide range of sources and did not slavishly reproduce it. Even if he knew Matthew's form of the Golden Rule, he doubtless knew it in other forms as well - and usually it was expressed negatively rather than positively (Matthew has the positive form). I explain some of that in my New Testament textbook as follows:

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### **BOX 9.3 The Golden Rule**

The most familiar form of the golden rule is "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Many people think that Jesus was the first to propound this ethical principle, but in fact it was given in a variety of forms by moral philosophers from the ancient world. In most of these formulations, it is expressed negatively (stating what should *not* be done)

rather than positively.

The rule was found, for example, among the ancient Greeks many centuries before Jesus. One of the characters described by the Greek historian Herodotus (fifth century B.C.E.) said, "I will not myself do that which I consider to be blameworthy in my neighbor," and the Greek orator Isocrates (fourth century B.C.E.) said, "You should be such in your dealings with others as you expect me to be in my dealings with you." The saying was present in Eastern cultures as well, most famously on the lips of Confucius (sixth century B.C.E.): "Do not do to others what you would not want others to do to you."

Nearer to Jesus' time, the golden rule was endorsed (in various forms of wording) in a number of Jewish writings. For example, in the apocryphal book of Tobit, we read, "And what you hate, do not do to anyone," and in an ancient Jewish interpretation of the book of Leviticus we find "Do not do to him (your neighbor) what you yourself hate."

Perhaps the best-known expression of the rule in Jewish circles, however, comes from the most revered rabbi of Jesus' day, the famous Rabbi Hillel. A pagan approached the rabbi and promised him that he would convert to Judaism if Hillel could recite the entire Torah to him while standing on one leg. Hillel's terse reply sounds remarkably like the statement of Jesus in Matt 7:12: "What is hateful to you do not do to your neighbor; that is the whole Torah, while the rest is commentary. Go and learn it."

Jesus, in short, was not the only teacher of his day who taught the golden rule, or who thought that the essence of the Law of Moses could be summed up in the commandment to love. [/private]



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