

The Golden Rule

By Nathan Warner

“In everything, therefore, treat people the same way you want them to treat you, for this is the Law and the Prophets.”
(Matthew 7:12 NASB)

The Sermon on the Mount was revolutionary. There, on a Galilean mountain, Jesus shared some of God’s expectations for human behavior, which dealt with the heart and motivations, rather than the outward appearance. It was a harsh contrast, not only to the Jewish legalistic practices of the time, but also to the lawless ways of the entire pagan world.

WHAT IS PAGANISM?

Depending on your Bible translation, the term Paganism is equivalent to “Heathenism” and refers to the spiritual ways of the Gentiles: *“You know that when you were pagans, you were led astray to the mute idols, however you were led”* (1 Corinthians 12:2), *“and the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the heathen through faith, preached before the gospel unto Abraham, saying, in thee shall all nations be blessed”* (Galatians 3:8 KJV).

Boiled down very succinctly, paganism (or heathenism) means the worship of the creature, rather than the Creator—it is the worship of gods, angels, spirits, demons, men, animals, nature, ideas, philosophies, etc. All the ancient religions prior to Christ are considered “pagan.” God considers them “ignorant,” as Paul explained to the heathen Greeks, *“having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent”* (Acts 17:30 NASB).

As the Gospel light spread, unrepentant paganism was forced underground and into the shadows to become the “occult,” which means “to hide, conceal, or cover up.” It has served the *“god of this world”* (2 Corinthians 4:4b) who is the false *“ruler of this world”* (John 14:30b) from the shadows, ruling kingdoms from behind the curtain. But the occult is beginning to resurface in the mainstream in these last days.

PAGAN WORSHIP

Before we continue discussing paganism, let’s first clear up what it means to worship something. Now, to “worship” means most simply to show devotion to someone or something as the judge of what is good and right. In this way, the Believer worships the Creator and looks to Him as judge of what is good and right. This is because *“God Himself is judge. Selah”* (Psalm 50:6b). But from the beginning people have worshipped things other than God as judge. The ancient pagans, for example, worshipped all aspects of the creation, as we mentioned earlier. Contrary to modern thought, worship doesn’t have to take place before stone idols or temple altars. Today, we see people worshipping the cults of “stars” and celebrities, and we see them worshipping at the altars of media such as movies, videogames, and pop-culture with all its fragmented sub-cultures. They worship possessions and money—they worship the flesh and philosophies. Why do we say they are worshipping these things? Simply because these people devote themselves to these “idols” for inspiration in their daily living and for guidance on what is acceptable moral behavior—these idols become their judge of what is right and wrong.

In America today and around the world, we are seeing the resurgence of “paganism” — the worship of the creature, rather than the Creator. Whether self-worship, pop-star worship, media worship, or leader worship, the occult is seeping back into the mainstream. In the open, paganism is increasingly “in” and “cool” because it appeals to the flesh, because it is fleshly (of the creature). Their “truths” about right and wrong are preached as “gospel” by the idols that perform for them in theaters, on tv, on stage, on the radio, and on the internet. Because they are derived from the flesh, they titillate the fleshly senses of their devotees.

Even our “greatest” minds of today in universities, schools, and research centers teach us to worship the creation (i.e. nature). They tell us that the creation created us and we must look to it for guidance to understand what is right and wrong for us to do. This negates the concept of sin because all behavior is seen as a product of nature – your fleshly desires are how you were made, and therefore, they are not intrinsically wrong, if nature made you that way. This has given rise to sayings such as, “I was born this way” and “If it makes me happy, how can it be wrong?” Meaning, respectively, that you are not responsible for your actions, and if you desire “it” (whatever “it” is), it is right for you because you were made in the image of nature, and how could it be unnatural for you to want what you want?

Scientifically, this philosophy is bolstered by the “Theory of Evolution,” which states that the creation made the creature, and this holds sway in higher education, although it is neither a theory nor scientific. As Paul said of these sorts of men, *“professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures. Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them. For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen”* (Romans 1:22-25). Increasingly, we are seeing Paul’s words playing out before our eyes.

PRACTICAL EFFECTS OF PAGANISM

So, spiritually, we are seeing a return to pagan idolatry. But what does this return mean practically? Well, for one thing, a return to paganism means a break down in love and empathy in our culture and around the world. That might seem unconnected at first but not when we understand that love and empathy are Christian inventions.

Prior to Christ, the pagan world (Gentiles) was composed of vying groups or tribes serving a patron deity, which was a demon, for *“the things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons and not to God”* (1 Corinthians 10:20a). It was a brutal time when only the strong survived and the spoils went to the victor. Kings ruled from thrones of abuse and slavery by divine right or by murderous intrigue. As Jesus reminded His disciples: *“You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them”* (Matthew 20:25).

People sought protection in groups—families, tribes, and clans. You might not be treated very well inside your group, but it was generally better than how you’d be treated by the opposing group. There was little protection outside of your group. Opposing tribes made war on each other, killed the warriors, enslaved the women and children, and took their stuff.

There was no love or empathy for the people in the opposing group. It was “us” versus “them.” And if you were in a different group, you deserved what you got, especially if you got the worst end of the stick.

THE GOSPEL CONTRASTED

Into this brutal culture, God sent His Son Jesus, and He shared the mind of God, teaching that God had different expectations for us than we had for ourselves. One of the most radical teachings Jesus shared was that in everything, you were to *“treat people the same way you want them to treat you”* (Matthew 7:12b). This was a revolutionary notion, because there was a hierarchy of rights and treatment even inside your group. The strongest by might or by birth deserved the best treatment, while the weakest by strength or blood deserved the worst treatment. But Jesus didn't just mean the people in your group—He had explained earlier that it even extended to people outside your group—even to enemies:

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous” (Matthew 5:43-45). The way of pagan life was to love your neighbor (the person in your group) and hate your enemy (everyone else). But Jesus taught something different, and He laid it out in very practical terms: *“I say to you who hear, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. Whoever hits you on the cheek, offer him the other also; and whoever takes away your coat, do not withhold your shirt from him either. Give to everyone who asks of you, and whoever takes away what is yours, do not demand it back”* (Luke 6:27-30).

Jesus was teaching that God expects us to have empathy for people around us, and what's more, to love them—even our enemies. This had never been said before, but now God was revealing to mankind more of His mind through Jesus Christ, and the practical, tangible outcome of it was empathy and love. *“Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law”* (Romans 13:8). *“Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law”* (Romans 13:12). *“If, however, you are fulfilling the royal law according to the Scripture, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself,’ you are doing well. But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors”* (James 2:8-9). *“For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in the statement, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ But if you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another”* (Galatians 5:13-15).

Many Jews agreed with these words, but we see that they (like the pagans) had a different definition than God of who was their “neighbor”: *“And a lawyer stood up and put Him to the test, saying, ‘Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?’ And He said to him, ‘What is written in the Law? How does it read to you?’ And he answered, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.’ And He said to him, ‘You have answered correctly; do this and you will live.’ But wishing to justify himself, he said to Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbor?’”* (Luke 10:25-29) Here, the lawyer wanted to justify himself by pointing out that clearly a “neighbor” was someone of your own group or tribe (in this case, Jews) and did not extend to those outside your group. He did not have to love the Romans or the Greeks, did he? Surely not! He could use and abuse them every chance he got because they were “enemies” to his group, right? In response, Jesus told the parable of the good Samaritan to show that God's

definition of a “neighbor” extends even to your hated enemies, for *“there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus”* (Galatians 3:28).

Of course, the only way love and empathy can sincerely be sustained inside us is if we have been born again by the Baptism of the Holy Spirit. Only in this way do we truly receive the “mind of the Spirit” from within. *“For those who are according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who are according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace, because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God”* (Romans 8:5-8), *“for He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He intercedes for the saints according to the will of God”* (Romans 8:27). *“‘For who has known the mind of the Lord, that he will instruct Him?’ But we have the mind of Christ”* (1 Corinthians 2:16).

PRACTICAL EFFECTS OF THE GOSPEL

The practical outcome of the Gospel is love and empathy from Believers to their neighbors. Love means devotion, commitment, and faithfulness for the good of the one you love. Empathy is the idea that I should understand what you are experiencing and feel for what you are feeling. It is the foundation upon which western society was built and which all peaceful civilization rests. Without empathy, I will act solely for my own self-interest at the expense of all others. I will do things to you for my material benefit that may hurt you, but I will not care. Empathy proceeds from within, rather than being forced upon us from outside by laws or rules.

Christian restraint on human passions was universally understood in the west. This is the restraint of the Holy Spirit, which society partakes of through the good works (fruit) of the Spirit in Believers who act out their faith to their neighbors.

The Founders of our western civilization recognized the very practical good of Christianity in society and the danger to any society that abandons Christianity. Though some were deists and some were even in the occult, they universally held that Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount was the best teaching on practical morality that the world had ever seen or was ever likely to and that it was essential to a free society.

Not long after the conclusion of the American Revolution (1829), Supreme Court Justice Joseph Story set the record straight on the real-world value of the Gospel: “One of the beautiful boasts of our municipal jurisprudence is that Christianity is a part of the Common Law [the basis of the western legal system]. There never has been a period in which the Common Law did not recognize Christianity as lying at its foundations.” Even those Founders who were deists respected the practical effects of the Word of God on people and promoted Christianity as being vital to the well-being of society. Though not a Believer in the deity of Jesus, Thomas Jefferson affirmed that “the practice of morality being necessary for the well being of society, He [God] has taken care to impress its precepts so indelibly on our hearts that they shall not be effaced by the subtleties of our brain. We all agree in the obligation of the moral principles of Jesus and nowhere will they be found delivered in greater purity than in His discourses.” Even as a deist, Constitutional delegate Benjamin Franklin shared what was necessary for a good society: “A Bible and a newspaper in every house, a good school in every district—all studied and appreciated as they merit—are the principal support of virtue, morality, and civil liberty.” The great French historian Alexis de Tocqueville came to America to learn about what made the new

country such a blessed place, and this was his conclusion: “In the United States the sovereign authority is religious,... there is no country in the world where the Christian religion retains a greater influence over the souls of men than in America, and there can be no greater proof of its utility and of its conformity to human nature than that its influence is powerfully felt over the most enlightened and free nations on earth.... Christianity, therefore reigns without obstacle, by universal consent; the consequence is, as I have before observed, that every principle of the moral world is fixed and determinate.... I sought for the key to the greatness and genius of America in her harbors...; in her fields and boundless forests; in her rich mines and vast world commerce; in her public school system and institutions of learning. I sought for it in her democratic Congress and in her matchless Constitution. Not until I went into the churches of America and heard her pulpits flame with righteousness did I understand the secret of her genius and power. America is great because America is good, and if America ever ceases to be good, America will cease to be great” (Democracy in America).

PAGAN RESURGENCE

Unfortunately, today, there are dangerous elements of our society that are growing in influence, attempting to dissolve the Christian foundation of western society. They labor to demolish our love and empathy by distracting our focus on the mind of the Spirit as revealed in the Word of God. They are working to fragment us all into “tribes” that have animosity and hate towards one another. In order to do this, they must get us all in the flesh, create opposition between people so they will form into groups (or tribes), and then demonize all the people in opposing groups. *“These are the ones who cause divisions, worldly-minded, devoid of the Spirit”* (Jude 1:19).

By exciting our earthly fears and desires, they succeed in getting us to act out the deeds of the flesh towards others: *“immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these”* (Galatians 5:19-21a).

They entice some with lust — “you deserve what those people have!” ; “take what you deserve!” ; “hurt those that hurt you!” ; “oppress your oppressors!” ; etc.

Others they entice with fear: “those people will take all your stuff!” ; “they’ll hurt your children!” ; “they’ll treat you like Hitler treated people!” ; etc. They must make the “others” appear to be monsters, so that the people in your group will have no empathy or mutual love for them. Thus, we see comparisons being made of people and groups to such extremes as Hitler and the “devil,” or any other ultimate form of evil.

Whatever the ploy, they need you to set your mind on the flesh, not the Spirit, so that you will not be tempered by love and empathy in your attitude to the other group. If they succeed, they have weaponized you to spread hate and violence. Increasingly, we’ve all heard people saying, “There’s no such thing as a good ___!” (input lawyer, cop, politician, white person, black person, Republican, Democrat, etc—any group but your own).

How did we get here? Well, in our contemporary cultural mind, is there any room for you to empathize with or love absolute evil? Can you love Hitler? No. Can Hitler be redeemed? No. There is only room to defeat and destroy him, for he is irredeemable—an embodiment of evil. By drawing these sorts of comparisons, they are saying everyone in an opposing group is irredeemable, only worthy of being destroyed. And so, we bite and devour one another. This is fundamental paganism.

In this new scheme, the opposition is “evil” and there can be no good in them—the opposition deserves whatever it gets, because they are “Nazis,” “monsters,” and “the very demons from hell!” It is ironic that this is how Stalin and Hitler rose to power in the first place—by demonizing the “opposition” and then enticing the people they had weaponized through the lusts of the flesh. This is not the mind of God but that of demons!

These advocates have become very loud and violent in our culture. They’re openly advocating for a return to racism, sexism, and slavery of opposing groups—opposing Galatians 3:28, which tells us that God does not see people in groups of race, sex, or class (or blood).

PAGAN TRIUMPH, FOR AN HOUR

Scripture tells us in prophecy that they will succeed eventually, for there is coming a time when the kings of the earth will conspire to throw off the restraint of God’s Spirit upon the world—the fetters and cords of God and His Anointed that keep the world from a “vain thing” they imagine: *“Why are the nations in an uproar and the peoples devising a vain thing? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers take counsel together against the Lord and against His Anointed, saying, ‘Let us tear their fetters apart and cast away their cords from us!’”* (Psalm 2:1-3)

The rulers of the earth have seen the light of Christ and heard the mind of God, but they want to throw off the restraint of the Spirit, so they can do the evil that they want to do. And there is a ruler coming who will do just that—the beast—the antichrist: *“And you know what restrains him now, so that in his time he will be revealed. For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only he who now restrains will do so until he is taken out of the way”* (2 Thessalonians 2:6-7). This will be the time when mankind’s unrestrained nature will supersede even the evil of pagan days, for they will have rejected the light after having seen it. While the ancient pagans did not have the mind of God, the modern occult knows what God expects, and they are still going to reject Him. How dark that darkness will be!

But the antichrist’s reign of darkness will be short, for Jesus will return to earth as a conquering King and will end this rebellion against God. Jesus will set up His eternal Kingdom and will rule the world from Jerusalem. *“He will delight in the fear of the Lord, And He will not judge by what His eyes see, Nor make a decision by what His ears hear”* (Isaiah 11:3), for *“the Spirit of the Lord will rest on Him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and strength, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord”* (Isaiah 11:2) —the mind of God! What a blessed day that will be for the whole world!

Praise God that we have the mind of Christ dwelling in us today, through the Holy Spirit. May we be grateful to God for that beautiful gift of life and light through Jesus Christ our Lord! May we act out our faith to our neighbors—be they black or white, man or woman, near or far, friend or foe.

May we *“bear one another’s burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ”* (Galatians 6:2). Even so, Amen.