



The Prophet's Golden Rule: Ethics of Reciprocity in Islam

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In the name of Allah, the Gracious, the Merciful

The ethics of reciprocity, known as the “golden rule,” is any moral dictum that encourages people to treat others the way they would like to be treated. Although the term was originally coined by Anglican ministers such as George Boraston, the principle can be found in the sacred texts of the world’s great religions, as well as the writings of secular philosophers. Due to its ubiquity in many contexts, it has become an important focal point for interfaith dialogue and the development of international human rights norms.

The rule often appears as a summarizing principle of good conduct, the supreme moral principle of right action between human beings. Though not always understood literally, as it is often qualified by competing moral imperatives, it generally functions as an intuitive method of moral reasoning. Despite the different formulations, wordings, and contexts in which the rule appears across religions and traditions, Jeffrey Wattles argues that there is enough continuity in meaning and application to justify describing the ethics of reciprocity as *the* golden rule.¹

Some philosophers have scoffed at the rule, noting that a crude, literal adherence to the outward phrasing can lead to moral absurdities. Harry J. Gensler responds to this criticism by formulating the rule in these terms: “Treat others only as you consent to being treated in the same situation.”² Context matters in the process of moral reasoning; what the rule demands is not rudimentary application as much as it is ethical consistency vis-à-vis human beings, as the first principle from

¹ Jeffrey Wattles, *The Golden Rule* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 5.

² Harry J. Gensler, *Ethics and the Golden Rule* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 3.

which the morality of an action is analyzed. It is the locus of one's conscience, a guide for everyday behavior.

Moreover, application of the rule ought to be informed by a balanced collection of principles and values that manifest the rule in action. For this reason, writers throughout history have used the rule "as a hub around which to gather great themes."³ Notions of justice, love, compassion, and other virtues have all been related to the rule by various religious traditions. Accounting for all of these considerations and responding to common objections, both Wattles and Gensler have convincingly defended the golden rule from its detractors and have presented it as a viable principle for a modern moral philosophy.

Islam, as a world religion with over one billion followers, has an important role to play in facilitating dialogue and cooperation with other groups in the modern world. The golden rule in Islamic traditions has been explicitly invoked by numerous Muslim leaders and organizations towards this end. Recently, hundreds of Muslim scholars and leaders have signed the *A Common Word* interfaith letter, asserting that the Abrahamic faiths share "the twin golden commandments of the paramount importance of loving God and loving one's neighbor."⁴ The initiative grew into several publications and conferences, including the important and high-profile Marrakesh Declaration in early 2016, which cited *A Common Word* in its text as evidence of the compatibility between Islamic tradition and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The Golden Rule in Islam

The Qur'ān ascribes a number of "beautiful names" (*asmā' al-ḥusnā*) to God conveying virtues that Muslims, by implication, should practice, "The most excellent names belong to Him."⁵ Among the relevant names of God are Al-Raḥmān (the Merciful), Al-Wadūd (the Loving), Al-Ghafūr (the Forgiving), Al-Ra'ūf (the Kind), Al-'Adl (the Just), Al-Karīm (the Generous), and so on. Embedded in this description of God are many of the moral themes traditionally associated with the golden rule.

The distinguished Muslim scholar and mystic, Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazzālī (d.1111), locates the golden rule within God's loving nature as expressed in the verses, "My Lord is merciful and most loving,"⁶ and again, "He is the Most Forgiving, the Most Loving."⁷ He authored a treatise on the names of God in Islamic tradition, discussing their theological meanings and his

³ Wattles, *The Golden Rule*, 28.

⁴ Mu'assasat Āl al-Bayt lil-Fikr al-Islāmī, *A Common Word between Us and You* (Amman: The Royal Aal Al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, 2012), 7.

⁵ Sūrat Ṭāhā 20:8; Muhammad A. S. Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an: English Translation with Parallel Arabic Text* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 313.

⁶ Sūrat Hūd 11:90; Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an*, 233.

⁷ Sūrat al-Burūj 85:14; Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an*, 591.

understanding of the proper way in which Muslims should enact those names. God, in his view, benefits all creatures without desiring any advantage or benefit in return:

Al-Wadūd – The Loving-kind – is one who wishes all creatures well and accordingly favors them and praises them. In fact, love and mercy are only intended for the benefit and advantage of those who receive mercy or are loved; they do not find their cause in the sensitivities or natural inclination of the Loving-kind One. For another’s benefit is the heart and soul of mercy and love and that is how the case of God – may He be praised and exalted – is to be conceived: absent those features which human experience associates with mercy and love, yet which do not contribute to the benefit they bring.⁸

In other words, God should be understood as entirely and selflessly benevolent towards His creatures, without any need or desire for repayment. God does not benefit from the worship of His servants, nor does He take pleasure in punishing the wicked. Rather, God only prescribes worship and righteous deeds for the benefit of believers. By reflecting this divine nature in action, believers should unconditionally want for others the same as they want for themselves:

One is loving-kind among God’s servants who desires for God’s creatures whatever he desires for himself; and whoever prefers them to himself is even higher than that. Like one of them who said, ‘I would like to be a bridge over the fire [of hell] so that creatures might pass over me and not be harmed by it.’ The perfection of that virtue occurs when not even anger, hatred, and the harm he might receive can keep him from altruism and goodness.⁹

Commentators of the Qur’ān often found the rule implied in several verses. When ‘righteousness’ (*taqwā*) is first mentioned in Qur’ān (when reading cover-to-cover), classical exegetes typically define it by appealing to traditional wisdom-sayings. Abū Ishāq al-Tha’labī (d. 1035) narrates several exegetical traditions to define and explicate the meaning of righteousness. The early authorities Sufyān al-Thawrī (d. 778) and Al-Fudayl ibn ‘Iyād (d. 803) say that the righteous man (*al-muttaqī*) is “he who loves for people what he loves for himself.” Al-Junayd ibn Muḥammad (d. 910), on the other hand, disagreed with them and took it a step further, “The righteous man is not he who loves for people what he loves for himself. Rather, the righteous man is only he who loves for people greater than he loves for himself.”¹⁰ In Al-Junayd’s telling, true righteousness is not simply the equality implied in the golden rule, but rather a definite preference to benefit others that amounts to altruism (*al-īthar*).

⁸ Abū Ḥāmid Ghazzālī, David B. Burrell, and Nazih Daher, *The Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names of God: Al-Maḥṣad al-Asnā fī Sharḥ Asmā’ Allāh al-Ḥusnā* (Cambridge, UK: Islamic Texts Society, 2011), 118-119.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 119.

¹⁰ Tha’labī, *Al-Kashf wal-Bayān ‘an Tafṣīr al-Qur’ān* (Bayrut: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, 2002), 1:143.

In contrast, the Qur’ān severely rebukes cheaters in weights and measurements, “Woe to those who give short measure, who demand of other people full measure for themselves, but give less than they should when it is they who weigh or measure for others!”¹¹ That is, they demand full payment for themselves while they give short-change to others. The golden rule was understood by Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 1209) to be the clear implication of this passage, as he reports the saying of the early authority Qatādah, “Fulfil the measure, O son of Adam, as you would love it fulfilled for yourself, and be just as you would love justice for yourself.”¹²

Most of the explicit golden rule statements in Islamic tradition are found in the Ḥadīth corpus, the sayings and deeds of Prophet Muḥammad. According to Anas ibn Mālik (d. 712), the Prophet (ṣ)¹³ said:

None of you has faith until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself.¹⁴

This is the most prominent golden rule statement in the Ḥadīth corpus. The two leading Sunni Ḥadīth scholars, Muhammad ibn Ismā‘īl al-Bukhārī (d. 870) and Muslim ibn al-Ḥajjāj (d. 875), both placed this tradition in their “book of faith,” near the introductions of their respective collections. The implication is that the lesson in the tradition is essential to true faith itself, not simply a recommended or value-added practice.

Commentators sometimes mention that “all good manners” are derived from this tradition and three others, “Whoever believes in God and the Last Day, let him speak goodness or be silent,” and, “It is from a man’s excellence in Islam that he leaves what does not concern him,” and, “Do not be angry.”¹⁵ Like many religious writers and philosophers, Muslim scholars took note of the summarizing function of the golden rule as a broad principle for good conduct.

A key question for the commentators was the meaning of ‘brother’ in the tradition of Anas. It is generally agreed upon that ‘brother’ refers to Muslims, but several commentators expanded the meaning to include non-Muslims or unbelievers. Prolific author and Shāfi’ī jurist, Muḥyī al-Dīn al-Nawawī (d. 1277), explained the tradition this way:

Firstly, that [tradition] is interpreted as general brotherhood, such that it includes the unbeliever and the Muslim. Thus, he loves for his brother – the unbeliever –

¹¹ Sūrat al-Muṭaffifīn 83:1-4; Abdel Haleem, *The Qur’an*, 588.

¹² Fakhr al-Dīn Rāzī, *Al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr* (Bayrūt: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, 1999), 31:84.

¹³ The symbol (ṣ) represents the phrase *ṣall Allāhu ‘alayhi wa sallam* (peace and blessings of God be upon him). It is religious custom for Muslims to say this after mentioning the name of Prophet Muḥammad.

¹⁴ Muḥammad ibn Ismā‘īl Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (Bayrūt: Dār Ṭawq al-Najjāh, 2002), 1:12 #13.

¹⁵ Yahyá ibn Sharaf Nawawī and Ibn al-Ḥajjāj al-Qushayrī Muslim, *Sharḥ al-Nawawī ‘alá Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* (Bayrūt: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, 1972), 2:19 #47.

what he loves for himself of embracing Islam, as he would love for his brother Muslim to always remain upon Islam. For this reason, to pray for guidance for the unbeliever is recommended... The meaning of ‘love’ is to intend good and benefit, hence, the meaning is religious love and not human love.¹⁶

Al-Nawawī’s concept of “religious love” (*al-maḥabbat al-dīnīyah*) parallels the distinction Christian writers made between agape (ἀγάπη) and eros (ἔρως). The highest form of love, according to him, is that which is purely benevolent for God’s sake, in opposition to sinful passions, caprice, or ordinary types of love.

Although inclusion of non-Muslims in a broader brotherhood of humanity was not universally accepted, proponents of this interpretation found a strong case for their position in all of the permutations of the golden rule in the Ḥadīth corpus. Even from the traditions of Anas alone, inclusive language was used by the Prophet (ṣ) often enough to justify a universal golden rule:

None of you will find the sweetness of faith until he loves *a person* only for the sake of God.¹⁷

None of you has faith until he loves for the people what he loves for himself, and only until he loves *a person* for the sake of God, the Great and Almighty.¹⁸

The servant does not reach the reality of faith until he loves for *the people* what he loves for himself of the good.¹⁹

In particular, a variant in Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim reads, “...until he loves for his brother – or he said his neighbor – what he loves for himself.” In this version, Anas is unsure if the Prophet (ṣ) said ‘brother’ or ‘neighbor.’ If neighbors are included, the term would certainly apply to non-Muslims as well.

Muḥammad ibn Ismā‘īl al-Ṣan‘ānī (d. 1768), a Yemeni reformer in the Salafī tradition, includes in his legal commentary a chapter on “the rights of the neighbor,” in which he employs some of the broadest language of the late classical to early modern period. Based upon the word “neighbor” in the version of Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, he concludes:

The narration of the neighbor is general for the Muslim, the unbeliever, and the sinner, the friend and the enemy, the relative and the foreigner, the near neighbor

¹⁶ Yahyá ibn Sharaf Nawawī, *Kitāb al-Arba‘īn al-Nawawīyah wa Sharḥuh* ([Cairo]: Dār Ḥarā’ lil-Kitāb, 1987), 38.

¹⁷ Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 8:14 #6041.

¹⁸ Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad al-Imām Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal* (Bayrūt: Mu’assasat al-Risālah, 2001), 21:353 #13875.

¹⁹ Muḥammad Ibn Ḥibbān, *Ṣaḥīḥ Ibn Ḥibbān* (Bayrūt: Mu’assasat al-Risālah, 1993), 1:471 #235.

and the far neighbor. Whoever acquires in this regard the obligatory attributes of loving good for him, he is at the highest of levels.²⁰

Perhaps most significant is Al-Ṣan‘ānī’s inclusion of enemies (*al-‘aduw*) in the list of people covered by the golden rule. In this case, the rule has at least some kind of application to every single human being.

‘Abd Allāh ibn ‘Amr (d. 685), who is said to have been one of the first to write down the statements of the Prophet (ṣ), narrates his version of the golden rule, “Whoever would love to be delivered from Hell and admitted into Paradise, let him meet his end believing in God and the Last Day, and let him treat people as he would love to be treated.”²¹ The rule here is a means of salvation and is expressed in terms of good behavior, rather than religious love.

Abū Hurayrah (d. 679), the most prolific narrator of Ḥadīth, also shares what he heard from the Prophet (ṣ), “Love for people what you love for yourself, you will be a believer. Be good to your neighbor, you will be a Muslim.”²² Like the tradition of Anas, the rule is associated with both true faith and good treatment of neighbors.

Sometimes Ḥadīth traditions do not explicitly state the golden rule, but it is drawn out by the commentators. Tamīm al-Dārī (d. 661) reports that the Prophet (ṣ) said three times, “Religion is sincerity.” The companions said, “To whom?” The Prophet replied, “To God, to His book, to His messenger, and to the leader of the Muslims and their commoners.”²³ Ibn Daqīq al-‘Īd (d. 1302) explains at length the meaning of sincerity or good will (*naṣīḥah*) in each context. As it relates to common people, he writes that sincerity is “to take care of them with beautiful preaching, to abandon ill will and envy for them, and to love for them what he loves for himself of good and to hate for them what he hates for himself of evil.”²⁴

Al-Nu‘mān ibn Bashīr (d. 684) relates the Prophet’s (ṣ) parable of the faith community as a single body, “You see the believers in their mercy, affection, and compassion for one another as if they were a body. When a limb aches, the rest of the body responds with sleeplessness and fever.”²⁵ A variant of this tradition reads, “The Muslims are like a single man. If the eye is afflicted, the whole body is afflicted. If the head is afflicted, the whole body is afflicted.”²⁶ The

²⁰ Muḥammad ibn Ismā‘īl Ṣan‘ānī and Aḥmad ibn ‘Alī Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī, *Subul al-Salām: Sharḥ Bulūgh al-Marām min Adillat al-Aḥkām* (Qāhirah: Dār al-Ḥadīth, 2007), 2:633.

²¹ Muslim Ibn al-Ḥajjāj al-Qushayrī, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* ([Bayrūt]: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Kutub al-‘Arabīyah, 1955), 3:1472 #1844..

²² Muḥammad ibn Yazīd Ibn Mājah, *Sunan Ibn Mājah* (Bayrūt: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, 1975) 2:1410 #4217.

²³ Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 1:74 #55.

²⁴ Muḥammad ibn ‘Alī ibn Daqīq al-‘Īd and Yahyā ibn Sharaf Nawawī, *Sharḥ al-Arba‘īn al-Nawawīyah* (Bayrūt: Mu’assasat al-Rayyān, 2003), 1:52.

²⁵ Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 8:10 #6011.

²⁶ Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 4:2000 #2586.

idea is that Muslims should have empathy for one another by sharing the burden of each other's pain, as stated in another tradition, "The believer feels pain for the people of faith, just as the body feels pain in its head."²⁷ Abū 'Abd Allāh al-Ḥalīmī (d. 1012) inferred the golden rule from this parable:

They should be like that, as one hand would not love but what the other loves, and one eye or one leg or one ear would not love but what the other loves. Likewise, he should not love for his Muslim brother but what he loves for himself.²⁸

Later commentators would develop this idea further. Ibn Daqīq draws upon the parable of the faith community in his commentary on the tradition of Anas, writing, "Some scholars said in this tradition is the understanding that the believer is with another believer like a single soul. Thus, he should love for him what he loves for himself, as if they were a single soul."²⁹ Ibn Ḥajar al-Haythamī (d. 1567) makes the same connection, saying that to love one another means "that he will be with him as one soul (*al-nafs al-wahīdah*)."³⁰

Yazīd ibn Asad, another one of the Prophet's (ṣ) companions, recalls that he said to him, "O Yazīd ibn Asad! Love for people what you love for yourself!"³¹ In a variant of this tradition, the Prophet (ṣ) asks him, "Do you love Paradise?" Yazīd says yes, so the Prophet replies, "Then love for your brother what you love for yourself."³² In yet another variant, Yazīd's grandson quotes the sermon of Prophet (ṣ) upon the pulpit, "Do not treat people but in the way you would love to be treated by them."³³

Failure to live up to the golden rule could result in dreadful consequences in the Hereafter, especially for Imams and authorities. Ma'qil ibn Yasār, while on his deathbed, recounted what he learned from the Prophet (ṣ), "No one is appointed over the affairs of the Muslims and then he does not strive for them or show them good will but that he will never enter Paradise with them."³⁴ In another wording, the Prophet said, "He does not protect them as he would protect himself and his family but that Allah will cast him into the fire of Hell."³⁵ In this regard, a Muslim leader must necessarily treat their followers as they would treat themselves and their own families, if such a terrible fate is to be avoided.

²⁷ Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad al-Imām Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal*, 37:517 #2287.

²⁸ Aḥmad ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Bayhaqī, *Shu'ab al-Īmān* (al-Riyāḍ: Maktabat al-Rushd lil-Nashr wal-Tawzī', 2003), 13:467 #10627.

²⁹ Ibn Daqīq, *Sharḥ al-Arba'īn al-Nawawīyah*, 1:64.

³⁰ Ibn Ḥajar al-Haythamī, *Al-Fath al-Mubīn bi-Sharḥ al-Arba'īn* (Jiddah: Dār al-Minhāj, 2008), 306.

³¹ Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad al-Imām Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal*, 27:217 #16656.

³² *Ibid.*, 27:216 #16655.

³³ Sulaymān ibn Aḥmad al-Ṭabarānī, *Al-Mu'jam al-Awsaṭ* (al-Qāhirah: Dār al-Ḥaramayn, 1995), 4:215 #4013.

³⁴ Aḥmad ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Bayhaqī, *Al-Sunan al-Kubrā* (Bayrūt: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyah, 2003), 9:70 #17901.

³⁵ Sulaymān ibn Aḥmad al-Ṭabarānī, *Al-Mu'jam al-Kabīr* (al-Qāhirah, al-Riyāḍ: Maktabat Ibn Taymīyah, Dār al-Ṣumay'ī, 1983), 20:218.

Abū Umāmah al-Bāhilī (d. 705) tells the story of a young man who came to the Prophet (ﷺ) to ask for permission to indulge in adulterous intercourse. The Prophet engages him in an imaginative role-reversal, asking a series of Socratic questions and appealing to the young man's conscience to convince him against it, "Would you like that for your mother? Would you like that for your sister?" The young man, naturally, expresses his disapproval had someone else committed adultery with the women of his household. The logical conclusion, as stated by the Prophet, is to consider the golden rule, "Then hate what God has hated, and love for your brother what you love for yourself."³⁶

Hatred for the sake of God is a fine line to walk, between righteous indignation and unjustified malice. At least some of the earliest Muslims adopted the familiar refrain: love the sinner, hate the sin. According to Mu'ādh ibn Anas, this is how the Prophet (ﷺ) defined hatred for the sake of God, "The best faith is to love for the sake of God, to hate for the sake of God, and to work your tongue in the remembrance of God." Mu'ādh said, "How is it done, O Messenger of God?" The Prophet said, "That you love for people what you love for yourself, hate for them what you hate for yourself, and to speak goodness or be silent."³⁷ The noble form of hatred is simply the inverse of the golden rule; if one sees another sinning, hatred should be for the evil deed because it harms its doer. At the same time, one loves good for the sinner by hoping for their repentance and divine forgiveness.

Ibrāhīm Ad'ham (d. 782) remembers during his travels that he overheard a pair of Muslim ascetics discussing the love of God amongst themselves. Intrigued, he interjects himself into the conversation to ask, "How can anyone have compassion for people who contradict their Beloved [God]?" The unnamed ascetic turns to him, saying:

They abhor their sinful deeds and have compassion for them, that by their preaching they might leave their deeds. They feel pity that their bodies might be burned in hellfire. The believer is not truly a believer until he is pleased for people to have what is pleasing to himself.³⁸

The commentator 'Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Rajab (d. 1393) corroborates this interpretation, which he ascribes to the righteous predecessors (*al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ*).³⁹ Hence, it not correct for a Muslim to carry malicious hatred in the sense of desiring to harm others. A believer ought to love for sinners to repent, to be guided, and to be forgiven. In this regard, the Prophet (ﷺ) admonished us,

³⁶ Bayhaqī, *Al-Sunan al-Kubrā*, 9:271 #18507.

³⁷ Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad al-Imām Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal*, 36:446 #22132.

³⁸ Aḥmad ibn 'Abd Allāh Abī Nu'aym al-Iṣbahānī, *Ḥilyat al-Awliyā' wa Ṭabaqāt al-Aṣfiyā'* (Miṣr: Maṭba'at al-Sa'ādah, 1974), 8:25.

³⁹ 'Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Aḥmad ibn Rajab, *Jāmi' al-'Ulūm wal-Ḥikam* (Bayrūt: Mu'assasat al-Risālah, 2001), 1:308.

“Do not hate each other, do not envy each other, do not turn away from each other, but rather be servants of God as brothers.”⁴⁰

Conclusion

The irreversible march of globalization is producing an urgent need for people of different backgrounds and beliefs to find common ground. As the world grows closer together, with it grows the imperative to recognize each other as members of one human family. The ethics of reciprocity – the golden rule – is the best conceptual vehicle to advance this necessary intercultural dialogue and cooperation.

Islam is one of the world’s great religions, with over one billion followers living on every continent and speaking hundreds of languages. If peace on earth is to be actualized, Islam and Muslims must be a partner in it. Muslims need an entry point for understanding non-Muslims, just as non-Muslims need a way to begin understanding Muslims. Islam’s golden rule can provide a bridge between these worlds.

It is not reasonable to expect that the golden rule by itself can solve all the conflicts of the modern world, but what it can do is activate the innate conscience of human beings in a process of collective, intercultural moral reasoning. By accepting at the outset the premise of human equality and the obligation of moral consistency, we can work together to develop the mutual understanding and respect needed for people of different beliefs to live together in harmony. The golden rule itself is not the answer per se, rather it is the right question at the start; it is the first step in a journey we must take together, the first conversation in a dialogue we must have.

Success comes from Allah, and Allah knows best.

⁴⁰ Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 8:19 #6065.