

CHURCH OF THE HIGHLANDS

Study Guide

Golden Rule Relationships

Mark Pettus
January 11, 2026

Major Points

- 1 God designed us for relationship, but sin fractured that design by turning love inward toward self, making self the source instead of God.**
Romans 5:12
- 2 The Greatest Commandment and the Golden Rule provide the divine reordering for relationships — love God fully, then treat others the way you want to be treated.**
Matthew 7:12
- 3 Biblical empathy — seeking to understand others by pausing — is the essential first step, modeled by Jesus Himself who was tempted in every way yet did not sin.**
Hebrews 4:15
- 4 Jesus calls us beyond passive non-harm to proactive love — apologizing first, serving first, and going first even toward enemies.**
Luke 6:27-28
- 5 Living the Golden Rule is impossible through self-effort; it requires dependence on the resurrection power of the Holy Spirit working through us.**
Zechariah 4:6

Key Quotes

- “If we will put first things first, we'll get second things thrown in. But if we put second things first, we lose both first and second things.”*
at 3:36
- “Show me your friends and I'll show you your future.”*
at 6:33
- “Sin, instead of love being towards God and towards others, sin turns love inward towards ourself. And it leaves us self-centered, self-sufficient, self-protecting, self-promoting.”*
at 18:00
- “Those who can no longer listen to their brother will soon no longer be listening to God.”*
at 23:05
- “It will not be by might or by power, but by my spirit, says the Lord of hosts.”*
at 28:53

Discussion Questions

1. Pastor Pettus said 'when God is first, everything else finds its proper place.' What is one relationship in your life where you have been placing yourself at the center instead of God, and what would it look like to reorder that?
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2. Pastor Pettus shared a practical list of what 'pausing' looks like — listening before speaking, remembering our own need for grace, recognizing unseen burdens others carry. Which of these is hardest for you, and why do you think that is?
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3. Pastor Pettus described moving from reactive to proactive love — apologizing first, naming what we appreciate, pursuing clarity instead of ghosting. Which of these proactive steps feels most uncomfortable, and what specific relationship could you apply it to this week?
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4. Pastor Pettus quoted Dietrich Bonhoeffer: 'Those who can no longer listen to their brother will soon no longer be listening to God.' How does a breakdown in human relationships reflect a breakdown in our relationship with God?
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5. Pastor Pettus emphasized that living the Golden Rule requires the power of the Holy Spirit rather than willpower. What does daily dependence on the Holy Spirit actually look like in the middle of a difficult relational conflict?
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Word Studies

αγάπη agape

Greek

Unconditional, self-sacrificing love that seeks the highest good of another regardless of response or reciprocity. Distinguished from phileo (friendship love) and eros (romantic love), agape is the love God demonstrates toward humanity and the love Jesus commands His followers to extend to all people, including enemies.

Usage: 116 times

συμπαθέω sympatheo

Greek

To suffer with, to have compassion on, to empathize. Used in Hebrews 4:15 to describe Christ's ability to identify with human weakness through shared experience, not merely intellectual understanding. It implies entering into the emotional reality of another's condition.

Usage: 2 times

καρπός karpos

Greek

Fruit, produce, result. In Galatians 5:22 it describes the natural outgrowth of a life yielded to the Holy Spirit. The singular 'fruit' (not 'fruits') indicates these nine qualities form one unified character produced by the Spirit's work, not separate achievements earned individually.

Usage: 66 times

Cross References

Philippians 2:3-4

Paul echoes the Golden Rule principle by instructing believers to consider others as more significant than themselves and to look not only to their own interests but to the interests of others — the same self-to-other reorientation Pastor Pettus described.

Colossians 3:12-14

Lists the relational virtues God's people are to 'put on' — compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, forgiveness — culminating in love as the bond of perfection, directly paralleling the fruit of the Spirit and proactive love taught in this sermon.

Ephesians 4:31-32

Commands putting away bitterness, wrath, and anger, and instead being kind and forgiving as God in Christ forgave you — reinforcing the sermon's call to move from reactive self-protection to proactive grace-giving.

James 1:19-20

Instructs every person to be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger, directly supporting Pastor Pettus's emphasis on pausing and the principle that listening precedes wisdom.

2 Corinthians 5:18-19

Describes God reconciling the world to Himself through Christ and giving believers the ministry of reconciliation — grounding the sermon's call to proactive relational initiative in God's own reconciling action.

Further Reading

- **The Meaning of Marriage: Facing the Complexities of Commitment with the Wisdom of God**
by Timothy Keller
- **Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Christian Community**
by Dietrich Bonhoeffer
- **Everybody Always: Becoming Love in a World Full of Setbacks and Difficult People**
by Bob Goff

Scripture References

REFERENCE	TYPE	TIME	CONTEXT
Matthew 6:33	Read Aloud	1 : 25	<i>But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, ...</i>
Genesis 1:26	Read Aloud	16 : 00	<i>Then God said, Let us make man in our own image, a...</i>
Genesis 2:18	Read Aloud	16 : 15	<i>Then the Lord God said, It is not good that man sh...</i>
Romans 5:12	Read Aloud	17 : 00	<i>Therefore, just as sin entered the world through o...</i>
Matthew 22:37-40	Read Aloud	21 : 00	<i>Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with a...</i>
Matthew 7:12	Read Aloud	24 : 30	<i>So in everything, do to others what you would have...</i>
Hebrews 4:15	Read Aloud	26 : 00	<i>For we do not have a high priest who is unable to ...</i>
Luke 6:27-28	Read Aloud	29 : 15	<i>But to you who are listening, I say, love your ene...</i>
Romans 5:8	Read Aloud	30 : 00	<i>But God shows his love for us in this, while we we...</i>
Matthew 18:21-22	Read Aloud	31 : 20	<i>Peter came to Jesus and asked, Lord, how many time...</i>
Romans 8:11	Read Aloud	32 : 38	<i>And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the...</i>
Zechariah 4:6	Read Aloud	32 : 55	<i>Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit, says ...</i>
Galatians 5:22-23	Referenced	33 : 15	<i>But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, p...</i>
1 John 4:19	Referenced	33 : 40	<i>We love because he first loved us.</i>