

Bread, Stone, or Snake?

How globalization has complicated the Golden Rule

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Should you do to others what you would have them do to you?

In 1987 we spent two weeks of cultural orientation living in an empty hut in a Fulani village in Mali. Another missionary couple lived and worked on the other side of the village. Our Fulani neighbors brought us lunch every day--millet mush with sauce made from dried, powdered tree leaves. They were doing for us what every Fulani wants done for them when they visit another village. Three sets of neighbors daily sent us a large bowl--containing enough millet to feed five people. So we had food for 15 people and there were two of us to eat it. We didn't like the millet, but we didn't want them to know we didn't like it. We did for them what we would have wanted someone to do for us in America--if you bring a neighbor a gift of a casserole or pie, the neighbor should thank you, and return the dish empty and washed. So we put the millet into another container, washed the bowls, gave them back, and snuck the leftover millet to the other missionaries' hut at nighttime. There it was given to chickens or dumped down their outhouse.

In Fulani culture, what you are *supposed* to do is eat your fill of the gift food and promptly return the leftovers to show that you got enough. Returning an empty dish indicates that they didn't send enough. We watched with dismay as each day ever-increasing large bowls of millet were brought to us. The neighbors were doing for us what they would have wanted done to them. But it was making us more and more stressed. We found out afterwards that what we did with the leftovers was an atrocity in Fulani culture, and would have ruined our Christian witness if it had been discovered. But we were only doing what we would have wanted done for us--politely returning empty dishes.

This story is just one instance of the Golden Rule gone awry in a cross-cultural situation. And because of globalization, in the 21st century people of different cultures are coming into contact with one another all the time! So, we find ourselves in the tragic situation that ***we think what we are giving to others is bread, without realizing that we are actually giving a stone--or a snake.***

Listen to the following story and think about whether the food baskets given to an orphan in Botswana were really a good gift?

Botswana is Africa's wealthiest nation. There is free basic medical care for all citizens and, since 2002, free antiretroviral drugs for people with AIDS.

But the drugs came too late for Marwale's parents, who died more than three years ago.

Marwale's family is among the poorest in Otse, the town to which the family moved to stay with a grandmother after her father's death. The girls' grandmother is a tiny woman with a face deeply grooved by time and sun, child-sized hands and a taste for traditional sorghum beer. When she has money, she leaves early in the morning to begin drinking.

The grandmother's house, where Marwale and her younger sister Moetsi stayed - along with an older half-sister Phena and her young son - is a crumbling one-room concrete building without electricity or running water. Most of the food in the household comes from the food baskets that Marwale and Moetsi receive from the government. Marwale avoided being at home as much as possible. She left for school with other children from the neighborhood as the sun rose, dressed in her orange school uniform, and often didn't return until late at night...her best friends, she said, were the foreign volunteers. Sometimes she asked them if she could come and live with them. She said she didn't like to go home because her sister beat her, and her grandmother was often drunk.

In early 2004, Marwale's half sister, Phena, began fighting with the grandmother over custody for the children. She wanted to take the two girls away to her own father's home in Ramotswa, a nearby town on the border with South Africa: a rough city of about 20,000, with bars and slums and South African gangs. The fight went on for months.

There were meetings with the social worker, at the village council and among family members. In December, the girls went to Ramotswa for Christmas and didn't return when school began.

Brenda Fonteyn, a local woman who founded the orphan school with her husband, wanted the children to stay in Otse, where at least they get two hot meals each day and have staff at the orphan center to look after them. She had seen similar fights over other children and sometimes wonders if food packages for orphans are such a good idea. "The only thing that they're fighting for, as far as I can see, is the food basket," sighed Fonteyn, who tried to advocate on behalf of the children.

No normal person would *intentionally* cause harm in this situation. That's one of the lessons of Matthew 7:9-12. This passage was easy to apply in the context of first century Palestine. But the world has changed. Listen to the passage again:

"Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him? So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets."

But something as straightforward as giving food aid can go wrong. Was the case of Somalia giving bread, or a snake?

"Food aid depressed grain prices giving local farmers fewer incentives to farm. It became easier for them to trek to the refugee centers for their food rations. The young, armed with AK-47s, saw an opportunity. Relief supplies could be looted. Italian construction companies that were given lucrative contracts for projects in Somalia provided kickbacks to politicians in Rome and Mogadishu...

Somali president Siad Barre used this aid to purchase arms and military advisors for his armed forces, which declared war against their own people. "¹

The consensus of those who have studied Somalia is that aid in the 1980's and 1990's did more **harm** than good.

What about gifts to national Christians? Were these gifts bread, or a stone?

In Zaire², "Protestant church elders were given bicycles by courtesy of an American donor. They were to be used to facilitate their evangelistic work. The bicycles enhanced their status in the villages. However, they also stimulated some discontent among church members. Two women complained that an elder had refused to lend his bicycle to them so they could transport food for a forthcoming evangelistic meeting. The women blamed the man for using the bicycle for private business rather than evangelistic work.

However, sometimes such donations caused jealousy among members of different missions as they compared incoming goods. Some of the church elders who had received bicycles heard that the Swedish Pentecostal mission in Bukavu gave each of its pastors a car.

For Bira of the postcolonial era, the ultimate form of material wealth was a wooden or a concrete house with a tin roof. Such a commodity was primarily available to those who had been successful in gaining the sponsorship of a missionary. The wife of a Bira church elder told me that ownership of a house with a tin roof was a powerful motivating factor for a person to attempt to become a church elder. Church elders were not paid salaries, but each one was given a house.

A tug-of-war sometimes arose between the church elders and family servants as they competed for the best material goods. A Bira man who had worked for missionary pilots for over a decade was dismissed for suspected theft. The man told me he was not guilty, but said that a church elder had a grudge against him and had labeled him a thief. The grudge had to do with the man's purchase of a motorcycle from a departing pilot some years previously. The church elder had wanted the motorcycle for himself."

In each of these cases, the donor or the missionary intended to give good gifts. They did not understand what would happen as a result of their gift.

¹ **How Western Aid Helped Destroy Somalia** By George Ayittey

² **Begging as Resistance: Wealth and Christian Missionaries in Postcolonial Zaire** by Raija Warkentin

What can you do to make sure that you are giving bread and not a stone or a snake?

Do to others what you would want if you were in their culture.

And you won't know what they would want unless you learn about their culture.

Three ways to get out of the American cultural box and understand people across cultures:

1. Instead of "sharing your know-how;" be a learner.

In America we are educated to believe that our country is the best on earth. So when we see things that are different, we tend to assume that our way is superior. Visitors to West Africa last year made these comments: "Why don't they just build a corral to put the cattle in, and feed them—that would be much more efficient!" "I've seen it all over the world; in the Philippines; with the Natives in North America: They won't do it for themselves. If *WE* don't do it for them, they won't do it for themselves..."

But we should remember what God says about humility in James 3:13: "Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom."

The wise person of Proverbs is always welcoming input from others. It is the fool who thinks he already knows everything and needs no correction. If we avoid prideful feelings of superiority and maintain a humble, teachable attitude, we will be able to learn in context how to give bread and not give stones.

2. Instead of taking quick action; be careful what you do.

In American culture we approve of people who get things done. A year before the collapse of Enron, I was reading a management book that held up Enron as an example of a model corporation, accomplishing great things because they innovated and gave their employees plenty of freedom to act. In the American economy we know that businesses succeed by being aggressive and pro-active, and changing with the times. But in a cross-cultural situation, we should slow down--and follow Ephesians 5:15: "Be very careful, then, how you live--not as unwise but as wise."

Professor Thomas Weiss, writing about cases where relief aid did harm including Somalia, says that private aid organizations are becoming more careful about intervention. He says: "The watchword now is: 'Don't just do something. Stand there and think.'"

3. Realize that giving money is not the solution for every problem. The real need may be to give your effort.

In 2003 we found out that farmers in Mali were losing millions of dollars because of depressed world cotton prices, and we learned that it was mainly United States policies that were the cause of this. Basically what happened is that agro-businesses received government subsidies to grow cotton, which they then put on the market at a price below what it cost them to produce. We did some research and shared this with our supporters, and many people contacted their Congressmen. Against the objections of the farm lobby, President Bush and Congress are now removing the subsidies.

This is one example where prayer and advocacy--i.e. political action--are more needful than giving a donation. Here's another: when the Millennium Challenge Corporation began looking at irrigation work in our village area in Mali, the corrupt Office du Niger staff told us that they were going to get the funding, we prayed--and you prayed-- and one of our supporters contacted his Senator in Washington. This got the immediate attention of the Malian government, high officials drove out to Doungele to find us, and invited us to participate in designing the project. The proposal has been revised so that each family in ours and neighboring villages will get 15 acres, access to a new school and a new clinic, and access to fertilizer and seeds. The Office du Niger no longer has control over our area. The only way that this happened was that people took time--time to pray, and time to be advocates.

Let's review our three principles, because they apply in many situations, not just cross-cultural mission work. They apply at home as well. Do you think they can apply to parenting, for example?

- 1. Instead of "sharing your know-how;" be a learner.**
- 2. Instead of taking quick action; be careful what you do.**
- 3. Realize that giving money is not the solution for every problem. The real need may be to give your effort.**

Our culture, like every culture, has aspects that are "fallen", that lead us to sin--that's why the Scripture says "Do not be conformed to the world." Because our cultural values are not all Christian, we must continually compare what we are doing to Biblical principles. Are we mistakenly giving our children stones, assuming that it was bread, but we didn't take the time to make sure? Let's say parent X puts some pressure on their child to succeed in an activity. They believe this helps the child be motivated, so they are doing good--they are giving bread. But if the child interprets the pressure to mean that the parent is dissatisfied with them, and as a result the child feels insecure of the parent's love and acceptance, then the pressure to succeed could become a stone, or worse.

The modern world is complex. Unintended consequences happen every day to people who had the best of intentions. We can't take the golden rule and apply it according to our first impulse or good 'ol common sense. Rather, let's become learners; let's take the time to be careful and wise; let's make effort where effort is needed. May God continue to teach us how.