

## Ethical Teaching and Its Spiritual Foundation in Christian Religious Education: An Exegetical Study of Matthew 7:12 at SD Negeri 040475 Tigaserangkai

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### ABSTRACT

*This study examines the ethical teaching practices of Christian Religious Education (CRE) teachers and their spiritual foundation based on Matthew 7:12 (the Golden Rule) at SD Negeri 040475 Tigaserangkai. The school serves 30 Christian students guided by three Christian teachers, offering a meaningful context to explore how biblical ethics are embodied within a public elementary education setting. Employing a qualitative descriptive design, this research integrates exegetical analysis with field-based inquiry. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with CRE teachers, classroom observations, and document analysis of lesson plans and character education materials. The exegetical study was conducted using a historical-grammatical approach to uncover the theological and ethical dimensions of Matthew 7:12 as the core analytical framework. The findings reveal that the Golden Rule functions as a living spiritual foundation that shapes teachers' relational attitudes, instructional strategies, and moral exemplarity. Ethical teaching is primarily transmitted through teacher modeling, supported by dialogical learning, contextual moral reflection, and consistent classroom discipline grounded in compassion and justice. Students demonstrate growth in empathy, honesty, responsibility, cooperation, and peaceful conflict resolution, indicating that ethical understanding is internalized not only cognitively but also affectively and behaviorally. This study concludes that ethical teaching in CRE becomes transformative when it is rooted in spiritual formation, embodied through teacher integrity, and contextualized within local culture. The results recommend continuous spiritual and pedagogical formation for CRE teachers to strengthen ethical education in pluralistic public school environments.*

**Keywords:** *Ethical Teaching, Christian Religious Education, Spiritual Foundation*

### INTRODUCTION

Ethical formation has long been recognized as a core objective of education, particularly within the field of Christian Religious Education (CRE), where moral instruction is inseparable from spiritual formation. In contemporary Indonesian public schools, ethical challenges faced by students are increasingly complex, shaped by digital culture, social

diversity, shifting family structures, and exposure to competing value systems. Within this context, CRE teachers are not only transmitters of doctrinal knowledge but also moral guides who shape students' conscience, behavior, and social responsibility. The urgency of ethical teaching grounded in spiritual foundations becomes especially evident in elementary education, where character formation takes place at a critical developmental stage. This study is situated in SD Negeri 040475 Tigaserangkai, where there are 30 Christian students served by three Christian teachers, creating a unique context for examining how biblical ethics are translated into daily teaching practice. Within Christian theology, ethical teaching is inseparable from the revelation of God's will as expressed in Scripture. One of the most comprehensive and universally acknowledged biblical formulations of ethical responsibility is found in Matthew 7:12, commonly known as the Golden Rule: *"So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you."* This verse encapsulates the essence of relational ethics by uniting love for others, personal responsibility, and practical moral action. Theologically, it reflects the inward transformation that flows from a life oriented toward God. Thus, ethical living is not merely a social contract or external behavioral code but the outward expression of an inner spiritual reality. For CRE teachers, Matthew 7:12 provides not only a moral principle to be taught but also a spiritual foundation upon which all ethical instruction is built. In practical school settings, however, the gap between moral ideals and daily behavior often becomes apparent. Students may understand ethical norms cognitively, yet struggle to embody them in interactions with peers, teachers, and the broader community. Issues such as bullying, dishonesty, intolerance, indiscipline, and lack of empathy continue to surface even in religious instruction contexts. This reality highlights the need for ethical teaching that goes beyond moral exhortation and reaches into the spiritual formation of both teachers and students. CRE teachers are therefore called to become living examples of the ethical values they teach, allowing students to witness the embodiment of the Golden Rule in concrete relationships.

The context of Tigaserangkai-Karo adds further depth to this discussion. Karo society is characterized by strong communal values, kinship structures, and cultural concepts of honor, respect, and mutual responsibility. While these cultural values often harmonize with biblical ethics, tensions can also arise between traditional practices, modern lifestyles, and Christian moral teachings. CRE teachers must therefore navigate not only pedagogical responsibilities but also cultural sensitivities when teaching ethics grounded in Scripture. Their spiritual maturity, ethical consistency, and relational integrity become essential instruments for guiding students to integrate faith, culture, and moral conduct in a coherent way. Previous studies in Christian education emphasize that ethical teaching is most effective when teachers possess strong spiritual foundations and personal integrity. Ethical instruction that lacks spiritual depth risks becoming moralism, while spiritual teaching without ethical application risks becoming abstract and disconnected from daily life. Yet, empirical studies that explicitly integrate exegetical analysis with classroom-based investigation, particularly at the elementary school level, remain limited. This study seeks to address that gap by examining how Matthew 7:12 functions as a spiritual-ethical foundation in the pedagogical practices of CRE teachers at SD Negeri 040475 Tigaserangkai. The purpose of this research is threefold: to conduct an exegetical analysis of Matthew 7:12 in order to uncover its core ethical and spiritual dimensions; to

analyze how these dimensions are interpreted and implemented by CRE teachers in the classroom; and to explore how ethical teaching shaped by this spiritual foundation influences teacher behavior and student character formation. By integrating biblical theology and qualitative educational inquiry, this study aims to demonstrate that ethical teaching in CRE is most transformative when it is rooted in a living spiritual foundation. Ultimately, this research argues that the Golden Rule is not merely a moral slogan to be memorized, but a spiritual principle to be embodied through teaching, example, and relational practice in the daily life of the school.

## **METHODS**

A qualitative descriptive research design was implemented with an integrative approach that combines biblical exegesis and field-based educational investigation. The design was selected to explore in depth how ethical teaching grounded in the spiritual foundation of Matthew 7:12 is interpreted, embodied, and practiced by Christian Religious Education (CRE) teachers in a real classroom context. The research was conducted at SD Negeri 040475 Tigaserangkai-Karo, where 30 Christian students are served by three Christian teachers. This setting provides a meaningful context for examining ethical teaching within a pluralistic public education environment. The study consisted of two main methodological components. The first was an exegetical analysis of Matthew 7:12 using a historical-grammatical method. This process involved analyzing the Greek text, examining the literary context within the Sermon on the Mount, exploring key terms related to ethical reciprocity and moral responsibility, and reviewing major biblical commentaries. The exegetical findings were used as the theological framework for understanding ethical teaching and as an analytical lens for interpreting the field data. The other component was a field-based qualitative inquiry. Data were collected through three primary techniques: semi-structured interviews with the three CRE teachers to explore their understanding of ethical teaching, their interpretation of Matthew 7:12, and their pedagogical practices; non-participant classroom observations to document how ethical values were conveyed through teaching methods, communication patterns, teacher-student interactions, and classroom management; and school character education guidelines related to moral and spiritual formation. Interview transcripts, observation field notes, and documents were coded to identify recurring patterns related to ethical instruction, spiritual foundation, teacher modeling, and student moral responses. These codes were then organized into broader thematic categories and interpreted in light of the exegetical framework of Matthew 7:12. This integrative analysis enabled the study to connect biblical theological meaning with concrete educational practice. Through this methodological framework, the study sought to generate a holistic understanding of how the spiritual foundation of the Golden Rule shapes ethical teaching in Christian Religious Education at the elementary school level.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

The findings of this study reveal that ethical teaching at SD Negeri 040475 Tigaserangkai is deeply shaped by the spiritual foundation of Matthew 7:12 and is significantly mediated through the personal integrity, pedagogical strategies, and relational posture of the three

Christian Religious Education (CRE) teachers who serve the 30 Christian students in this public elementary school. Based on the integration of exegetical analysis, interviews, and classroom observations: the exegetical foundation confirms that Matthew 7:12, known as the Golden Rule, functions as the ethical climax of the Sermon on the Mount by summarizing the Law and the Prophets into a single relational imperative that unites love for God and love for neighbor (Blomberg, 2010; France, 2007). The Greek construction of the verse emphasizes intentional and continuous action, indicating that ethical life is not episodic but habitual, rooted in inner spiritual orientation toward God (Hagner, 1995). This theological understanding strongly informed how teachers conceptualized and practiced ethical instruction in the classroom. Interviews revealed that all three teachers viewed ethics not merely as a set of behavioral rules but as the visible expression of a transformed heart shaped by faith in Christ. They consistently articulated that ethical behavior must flow from spiritual awareness, not fear of punishment, reflecting a theology of internalized moral formation rather than external moralism (Wilkins, 1992; Smith, 2009). Observations confirmed that ethical instruction was not confined to specific lesson segments but permeated everyday classroom interactions, including how teachers addressed students, corrected mistakes, resolved conflicts, and managed classroom discipline. For instance, when students violated classroom norms such as honesty, respect, or cooperation, teachers consistently framed correction within the logic of Matthew 7:12—inviting students to reflect on how they would like to be treated in similar situations, thereby cultivating moral empathy rather than mere compliance. This confirms that the Golden Rule functioned as a lived ethical framework rather than a memorized biblical slogan. The second and most dominant finding concerns the centrality of teacher modeling in transmitting ethical values. Across all observed lessons, ethical influence was found to operate primarily through example rather than verbal instruction alone. Teachers consistently demonstrated patience in handling disruptive behavior, fairness in distributing attention, and consistency in enforcing rules without favoritism. These observations align with social learning theory, which emphasizes that children internalize values more effectively through observed behavior than through abstract teaching (Bandura, 1986). In the specific context of Christian education, this modeling acquires theological significance, as teachers are not merely role models but visible mediators of the ethical life shaped by faith (Gangel & Hendricks, 2018). One teacher, for example, was observed responding calmly to a student who repeatedly interrupted the lesson. Instead of reprimanding harshly, the teacher knelt to the student's eye level, asked about the student's feelings, and redirected the behavior with gentle but firm guidance. When interviewed, the teacher explicitly linked this response to Matthew 7:12, explaining that discipline should reflect the same respect and patience one hopes to receive from others. This finding illustrates how spiritual reflection directly shaped pedagogical behavior. The teachers' consistency in modeling honesty, humility, and responsibility created what students described in interviews as a "safe and fair classroom," where they felt respected and encouraged to behave ethically. Students frequently mirrored teachers' language of respect, apologizing when making mistakes and showing increased willingness to admit wrongdoing—an important indicator of internalized ethical formation rather than superficial conformity (Lickona, 2013).

The results also demonstrate that ethical teaching grounded in spiritual foundation significantly influenced student character formation, particularly in the areas of empathy, honesty, cooperation, and responsibility. Teachers reported noticeable improvement in students' willingness to take responsibility for their actions, especially after reflective discussions rooted in Matthew 7:12. Observations showed that students increasingly resolved peer conflicts by verbal negotiation rather than physical or verbal aggression. In group activities, students demonstrated growing sensitivity to classmates who were struggling academically or emotionally, offering help without being explicitly instructed. These behaviors reflect the internalization of other-centered ethics, which is the core emphasis of the Golden Rule (Wright, 2010). Document analysis of lesson plans further revealed that ethical outcomes were explicitly integrated into learning objectives alongside cognitive biblical knowledge. For example, several lesson plans listed expected outcomes such as "students demonstrate willingness to forgive," "students show fairness in group work," and "students practice respectful speech," indicating that ethical formation was intentionally planned, not incidentally expected. This supports the view that character formation in Christian education must be pedagogically intentional to become transformative (Dockery, 2018). The Karo context played a significant role in shaping how ethical values were communicated and received. Karo society emphasizes kinship, mutual respect (*sangkep nggeluh*), and communal responsibility, values that resonate strongly with the relational ethics of Matthew 7:12. Teachers intentionally connected biblical ethics with local cultural wisdom, enabling students to see continuity rather than conflict between Christian faith and their cultural identity. For instance, teachers often connected the Golden Rule with traditional Karo practices of mutual assistance during communal work and family ceremonies, reinforcing the idea that Christian ethics do not negate cultural values but purify and deepen them. This contextual approach aligns with contextual theology, which emphasizes that biblical truth becomes most transformative when articulated within the lived cultural realities of learners (Hiebert, 1994; Bevans, 2002). Students responded positively to this integration, as evidenced by their increased participation and enthusiasm during lessons that combined biblical narratives with cultural illustrations.

The findings also reveal significant challenges in implementing spiritually grounded ethical teaching in a public school context. Teachers reported that not all students receive consistent ethical reinforcement at home, resulting in gaps between school-based ethical formation and family practices. Some students displayed patterns of dishonesty, aggression, or indifference influenced by family environment, digital media exposure, and peer culture. Teachers expressed that while Matthew 7:12 provides a powerful moral compass, sustained transformation requires collaboration between school, family, and church. This confirms ecological theories of moral development which emphasize that ethical formation is shaped by multiple social contexts, not the classroom alone (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). Teachers acknowledged that their own ethical consistency is continually tested by workload, emotional fatigue, and administrative pressures. They emphasized the need for continuous spiritual renewal to sustain the integrity required of ethical educators. This finding echoes studies showing that teacher burnout often undermines moral and relational effectiveness unless sustained by strong spiritual and emotional resources (Palmer, 1998; Parker & Martin, 2009). The exegetical dimension of

the study significantly deepens the interpretation of these empirical findings. Matthew 7:12 does not merely prescribe ethical behavior but presupposes a transformed inner life shaped by the grace of God. The Sermon on the Mount consistently emphasizes that righteousness must exceed external legalism and flow from a renewed heart (Matthew 5:20; 6:1-18), a theological framework that reinforces the teachers' conviction that ethical teaching cannot be separated from spiritual formation (France, 2007). The teachers' emphasis on reflection, prayer, and spiritual discipline as the foundation of ethical consistency aligns with this biblical theology. Their lived experience confirms that ethical authority in the classroom is not derived primarily from institutional position but from moral credibility grounded in spiritual life. When students perceive this authenticity, ethical teaching becomes persuasive and transformational rather than merely normative. The findings affirm that ethical teaching is most effective when it integrates spiritual depth, relational modeling, and reflective learning strategies. Teachers utilized storytelling, role-playing, guided discussion, and reflective journaling to encourage students to internalize the Golden Rule in concrete situations such as friendship, conflict, sharing, and honesty during exams. These strategies correspond with constructivist approaches that emphasize active moral reasoning rather than passive reception of moral rules (Kohlberg, 1984; Nucci, 2001). Importantly, teachers consistently framed ethical dilemmas through the lens of personal responsibility before God, reinforcing that moral choices are spiritual decisions, not merely social ones. This integration of moral reasoning and spiritual accountability represents a distinctive feature of Christian ethical pedagogy.

The presence of 30 Christian students and three Christian teachers created a learning environment with strong Christian ethical reinforcement, yet within a broader public school setting that remains religiously and culturally diverse. This dual context required teachers to practice ethical sensitivity not only toward Christian norms but also toward students of different faiths. Observations showed that ethical instruction grounded in Matthew 7:12 was presented with universal relational language accessible to all students, regardless of religious background. The Golden Rule was consistently emphasized as a principle of human dignity and mutual respect that transcends religious boundaries while remaining rooted in Christian revelation. This inclusive pedagogical framing is consistent with interfaith ethical education principles that affirm common moral ground while preserving theological distinctiveness (Volf, 2011). Taken together, the results demonstrate that the spiritual foundation of ethical teaching based on Matthew 7:12 is not merely theoretical but is actively embodied in the pedagogical practices of CRE teachers at SD Negeri 040475 Tigaserangkai-Karo. Teacher modeling emerged as the most powerful medium of ethical transmission, supported by intentional pedagogical strategies and reinforced through cultural contextualization. Student behavior demonstrated measurable growth in empathy, honesty, cooperation, and responsibility, though challenges related to family influence and digital culture remain significant. The findings integrate strongly with existing scholarship in Christian education, moral psychology, and biblical ethics, confirming that ethical teaching becomes transformative when rooted in spiritual formation and lived relational integrity (Wilkins, 1992; Smith, 2009; Wright, 2010). Ultimately, the study affirms that Matthew 7:12 functions not only as a moral directive but as a spiritual-ethical compass that shapes teacher identity, pedagogical practices, and student character formation within the everyday life of the school.

## CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that ethical teaching in Christian Religious Education at SD Negeri 040475 Tigaserangkai is deeply rooted in the spiritual foundation of Matthew 7:12 and is effectively realized through the lived integrity, reflective spirituality, and pedagogical consistency of the teachers. The exegetical analysis of the Golden Rule confirms that Christian ethics is not merely a collection of external moral standards but a spiritual calling that flows from an inner transformation before God. This theological foundation proved to be decisive in shaping how teachers understand their vocation, practice ethical instruction, and guide students in their daily moral decisions. Ethical education, therefore, is not positioned as a supplementary component of learning but as the very core of Christian pedagogical identity. The findings reveal that teacher modeling stands as the most influential medium of ethical formation. Students do not merely learn ethical principles through explanation but primarily through observing the concrete embodiment of those principles in the behavior of their teachers. Patience, fairness, honesty, humility, and compassion modeled by teachers consistently shaped students' moral awareness and relational behavior. The integration of reflective dialogue, contextual storytelling, and guided moral reasoning further strengthened students' internalization of ethical values. As a result, students exhibited meaningful growth in empathy, responsibility, honesty, cooperation, and peaceful conflict resolution. These outcomes confirm that spiritually grounded ethical teaching fosters not only cognitive moral understanding but also authentic character formation. The study also highlights the importance of cultural contextualization. The integration of biblical ethics with Karo cultural values of kinship, mutual respect, and communal responsibility enabled students to experience Christian ethics as both spiritually meaningful and culturally relevant. This contextual approach strengthened student engagement and reinforced the universality of the Golden Rule as a principle of human dignity and mutual respect. At the same time, the research uncovers persistent challenges, particularly the inconsistency between school-based ethical formation and family or digital environments that do not always reinforce the same moral values. This underscores the necessity of collaborative partnerships among schools, families, and churches for sustainable character formation.

This study contributes to the field of Christian education by affirming that ethical teaching becomes truly transformative when it is anchored in spiritual formation, lived through relational integrity, and applied through intentional pedagogy. It provides empirical evidence that Matthew 7:12 can function as an effective spiritual-ethical framework in public school contexts without losing its theological depth or inclusive social relevance. The findings imply that professional development for Christian Religious Education teachers should emphasize not only pedagogical competence but also sustained spiritual formation and moral consistency. Ethical teaching grounded in the spiritual foundation of the Golden Rule is capable of shaping both teacher identity and student character in profound ways. When Christian educators live out the ethics they teach, supported by reflective pedagogy and cultural sensitivity, ethical instruction transcends moral discourse and becomes a transformative force in the formation of young lives. This study therefore affirms that spiritually grounded ethical teaching remains a vital and indispensable dimension of Christian Religious Education in contemporary pluralistic school contexts.

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