AN ETHIC OF LOVE AND FORGIVENESS

The Moral Dimensions of the Golden Rule

Joseph P. Hester, Th.M.,
DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to Rev. Bobby Petree and
My long time friend Don R. Killian
An Ethic of Love and Forgiveness

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FORWARD

I first met Dr. Joseph “Joe” P. Hester while I was serving as Senior Pastor at a two-point Charge in Catawba County, North Carolina. His wife Nancy was a member of one of the congregations and he became a member with her. During the time that I served this congregation, Dr. Hester was very faithful serving as a strong member of the Laity in various roles. He was a great resource for the church and helped me stay tuned-up educationally. I am honored to have this book dedicated to me along with Dr. Hester’s long-time friend, Don R. Killian.

Upon a deep reading of this book, I was able to align and relate to Dr. Hester’s perspectives. I have become burned out with the institution of the church. This is the reason I stepped down from serving as a Senior Pastor to return to Youth Ministry. The Youth are the “church” of today and without them there will be no “church” of tomorrow. Congregations are losing Millennial youth by the droves because our young people believe that spiritual living (as the Body of Christ) is brought forth by being in relationship and ministry with others; not just in engaging in such activities as bazaars, quilt raffles, etc. which have become the sacred cows for many churches. The institutional church seems to always be in “protective mode” as it tends to avoid the invasion of outsiders who believe and think differently.

Joe’s analysis of the Golden Rule and the Sermon on the Mount presents Jesus as the universal Logos (Divine Purpose of God). If we honestly look at how Jesus lived, we discover that he was always doing good and loving others through building relationships with people. The Bible teaches us to love God whole-
lifedly (my word) and to love one another because we all are God’s children. As I read this book, John Wesley’s teachings came to mind:

Do all the good you can,
By all the means you can,
In all the ways you can,
In all the places you can,
At all the times you can,
To all the people you can,
As long as ever you can.

In these simple words Wesley sums up the Golden Rule, the Greatest Commandment, and the Sermon on the Mount. His simplicity is startling. Bishop Reuben P. Job in his book, Three Simple Rules, shares Wesley’s ideas: “Do Good, Do No Harm, and Stay in Love with God.” These lessons can only be accomplished by developing a relationship with all humanity as God’s children, created equally in the spiritual image of God.

I have been in the institutional church all my life and have seen the good, the bad, and the ugly. Many congregations ask for pastors who are enthusiastic, uplifting, and go-getters only if they don’t challenge the people to think and move outside the four walls of their narrow beliefs. Many are happy to remain where they are with their sacred cows and traditions. God forbid we ask them to give up their bazaars, quilt raffles, food fundraisers to actually minister to those in their communities who are in need. The Millennials are looking beyond those sacred cows and traditions, and many are leaving the church. Where will we find the Millennials? They will be in ministry with the poor, marginalized, outcasts, homeless, misfits, ragamuffins, LGBTQ communities, and the like.

What I find hard to understand as a misfit ragamuffin myself is how our surrounding area has so many homeless people
with the majority of them being women with children. These women won’t go to Social Services for assistance because of the fear of losing their children. You will see them at the local soup kitchens, downtown homeless ministry on Sunday mornings, and at places where people are willing to help them and be in ministry with them just as Jesus did.

I want to offer a challenge to everyone who reads this book to become a God-bearer (Theotokos) in their life. Theotokos is what Mary, the mother of Jesus, was called because she literally and spiritually gave birth to Jesus, the Son of God in her life. We Protestants just don’t give Mary the devotion and respect she deserves. The forgiven and reconciled children of God are those willing to be the God-bearers they are called to be.

In Rob Bell’s book, Love Wins, he discusses an interview by Robert Schuller with Billy Graham back in 1997. Part of the dialogue is as follows:

Schuller: “Tell me; what you think is the future of Christianity?”

Graham: “Well, Christianity and being a true believer—you know, I think there’s the Body of Christ, which comes from all the Christian groups around the world, or outside the Christian groups. I think everybody that loves Christ, or knows Christ, whether they’re conscious of it or not, they’re members of the Body of Christ. And I don’t think that we’re going to see a great sweeping revival that will turn the whole world to Christ at any time. I think James answered that, the Apostle James in the first council in Jerusalem, when he said that God’s purpose for this age is to call out a people for His name. And that’s what God is doing today; He’s calling people out of the world for His name, whether they come from the Muslim world, or the Buddhist world, or the Christian world, or the non-believing world, they are members of the Body of Christ because they’ve been called
by God. They may not even know the name of Jesus, but they know in their heart that they need something that they don’t have, and they turn to the only light that they have, and I think that they are saved, and that they’re going to be with us in heaven.”

Schuller: “What, what I hear you saying is that it’s possible for Jesus Christ to come into human hearts and soul and life, even if they’ve been born in darkness and have never had exposure to the Bible. Is that a correct interpretation of what you’re saying?”

Graham: “Yes, it is, because I believe that. I’ve met people in various parts of the world in tribal situations who have never seen a Bible or heard about a Bible, and never heard of Jesus, but they’ve believed in their hearts that there was a God, and they’ve tried to live a life that was quite apart from the surrounding community in which they lived.” (http://www.thepathoftruth.com/false-teachers/billy-graham-fading.htm).

This view is uncommon today, even among some of Billy Graham’s family. Just as Joe says, it’s all about living in community and building relationships with others as we follow THE WAY set forth by Jesus. This WAY is a continuous journey for our lives. We are all traveling toward perfection with God in grace as we show empathy and love for others. This is what John meant by loving God. This is the more perfect Way for us to know and see God in our lives. I just know that this misfit ragamuffin isn’t in this world to please people but to follow THE WAY at all costs no matter what and the costs with family and friends are high!

Blessings to all of you
Pastor Bobby Petree
Following are excerpts from my writing on Spiritual Wisdom that undergird this writing:

**Relationships/Ethics**

A friend is “another I.”

An unselfish person is one who considers the needs of others on a par with his or her own needs and is willing to reconsider his or her motives and actions, especially those that interfere with or perhaps cause pain to another.

Character is dynamic; it lies at the core of our moral consciousness.

Character is shaped in our relationships with others.

Courage is needed to keep our compass pointed in a moral direction.

Egoism lifts the self above the obligatory behaviors required by our moral consciousness in a self-serving illusion of our importance.

Egoistical behavior can only be lessened when we fall away from selfish and self-consuming motives.

Ethics excites vision, reveals purpose, and moves us to action with its normative reminders to care for others, to serve, and to give.

Every relationship has value; thus, every relationship has consequences.

Expanding one’s natural moral intuition to include others is a challenge.
Fair-mindedness means that we live our lives as people of good will; that we work in positive ways for the betterment of others.

Hope is liberating; opens us to new ideas and people; and encourages us to live on the edge of moral possibility.

Hopefully, the seeds of what we have sown and now sow will be cultivated by others into a *rhaptein* of meaning.

Human understanding will always be partial and incomplete. Our responsibility is to embrace moral possibility and make an effort to complete our wisdom-seeking journey.

I am aware that I am controlled by unstable and limiting emotions and that I live in a cauldron of beliefs, demands from others, and the pressures of tradition and established doctrine. Encapsulation, like Plato’s cave, is a safe haven for those solidified in “their” truth; we must understand that “truth” is conceivably a mere reflection—shadows on the wall of our prison.

In time we learn that our lives are largely built on a scaffolding of relationships.

In the final analysis, to be ethical is to be able to and want to live a life of integrity and respect for all persons. To learn and love is to grow, to continue to give so that others may do the same.

It is what I leave behind, what I give to others that’s my eternity.

Life, all of life, is about relationships and relationships are built on a self-giving love for one another.

Living morally is the connective tissue of human life.

Looking through the rearview mirror of our lives we seldom see who we are, only where we’ve been and the old beliefs that have given us security.

Love, benevolence, and civility seem to keep unabashed self-interest at bay.
Meaning and value, like people, are malleable, fuzzy, and unpredictable. Moral and Spiritual newness comes by granting genuine legitimacy to those values that inspire a sense of connection and enable us to listen to others, and by allowing their voice to be heard.

Moral awareness and vision have social strength and communal capacity.

Moral behavior is always conditioned by our relationships and an internal awareness of the dignity of others.

Moral purpose dangles at our finger tips and only the courageously committed are able to see its importance and activate its “oughtness” into their lives.

Moral vision arises when we gaze at the horizon of human significance and perhaps peer over it into a possible moral future and there seek to implement respect, dignity, and care for others in our lives.

Morality is an expression of community.

Morality is drawn from our innate capacity to love one another.

Our humanity is created and re-created through our moral behaviors.

Positive relationships engender a sense of worth.

Reason, when coupled with experience and a commitment to reconsider our values and beliefs as new experiences accentuate our knowledge of human behavior, is important to ethical dialogue and civility.

Reassessing our values and foundational beliefs enables us to affirm that morality requires the sacrifice of selfish gain, which is necessary for both the common good and perhaps for the immediate good of those with whom we are associated.

Relationship-building is a powerful but fragile phenomenon, constantly changing and easily lost.
Relationships are the way we think; they connect life to life and are the foundations of God’s creative power. The purpose of morality is not only to maintain personal civility, but to support a more just and civil world.

Relationships are transformational as they help to frame and shape our interior self.

Relationships reveal our character.

Respect recognizes the intrinsic worth of others.

The ethical demand to take care of others is an unconditional imperative that cannot be superseded, rationalized, calculated, or strategically managed.

The examined life is fraught with many perils, but the unexamined life is an empty shell.

The urge to dignity and moral awareness is called “empathy.”

To be moral we must intentionally regard others as equal centers of sentient experience, who have a right to fulfill their dreams and follow their path through life.

Understanding the moral value of others, which perhaps comes from thinking of oneself as an “other,” fuels our moral vision.

Values are discovered and formulated within the fabric of human relationships.

We are challenged to till the fertile ground of human experience with an awareness of others and our role in their lives.

We are our choices.

We give birth to ourselves through our relationships with others.

We must strive to act consistently within the understanding of our moral vision.

Without some sense of morality, rights are left foundationless.
Faith

“And the Word became Flesh” means that the moral unity of word and deed is important.

“The Kingdom of God is within” reveals that God is the creative moral energy of our lives.

A surface faith and personal ethic are unable to probe the depths of Spiritual Wisdom.

As a salvation experience, Christian ethics is an internalized rebirth into a new way of life, one that recognizes others, as well as self, as equally important sentient beings who have a right to their faith, dreams, and ways of living as long as they do not hurt other human beings.

Because God’s action in us is spiritually and morally potent, we are confirmed by His grace and provided access to His Divine Wisdom.

Faith doesn’t mean leaving reasoning and the effort to be objective at the door.

Faith is a lived and present moral journey, the way that Jesus emphasized in his own living.

Faith is a pathway to completeness through the love we are able to give to others.

Faith is creative and dynamic, tied not to the past, but a stepping into a moral journey with others.

Faith is fluid and transformational. It welcomes change acknowledging that the world doesn’t have to be as it is.

Faith is our collaboration with the future.

Faith is the activity of the soul seeking Spiritual Wisdom and not a set of propositions about which we are told to believe.

Faith lifts us to the horizon of moral possibility.
Faith uplifts the creative imagination and envisions a future of loving relationships.

God as an internal moral awareness speaks to us through our relationships with others.

God enables relationship building.

God is always active and within this spiritual activity God’s identity as a universal moral consciousness is made known to us.

God’s love enlightens our knowledge. When we love each other as God loves us, God lives in us through His Spirit.

God’s nature is moral: when we love others, we are in fact making God known in the world. Being moral intentionally reveals the moral nature of all humanity.

It is within the connective tissue of living with others, imbued with God’s love for us and our positive response to others, where our Spiritual Wisdom is given birth.

Re-birthing is a commitment to live morally, to seek understanding through Spiritual Wisdom, and live into this responsibly.

Salvation doesn’t mean completeness; it is a journey of unification. We are never completed or finished spiritually. Salvation is an ongoing, unfinished, and inconsistent process of living the divinity implanted within us—and the Word became flesh.

Salvation entails moral vision, my rational capacity seeking moral wisdom in my interactions with others.

Salvation is a moral experience, a journey into Divinity.

Salvation is a search for and living into Spiritual Wisdom. It’s a journey, an experience initiated by a universal moral consciousness (God) of humanity’s moral importance.

The prescriptive force of God’s love is a living experience, a moral journey of faith and giving.
The problem with entrenched beliefs is that they encourage us to look into a mirror and see someone else.

To encounter the God of love is to let Spiritual Truth invade our lives and entails that morality is grounded in the Spiritual seeds of creation. Such truth claims us more so than us claiming it.

To faith is to participate in a moral re-birth, which should be continuous; it’s not a one and done deal.

To faith—meaning faith as a journey—is an ongoing activity of communication between us and God (as our moral consciousness) and cannot be kept in a box of someone else’s making.

To think that truth is absolute is to misunderstand its human origins. This is why persistent and honest dialogue is important.

We are re-born again and again in our relationship with God and others—it’s an ongoing process of Spiritual rejuvenation.

We have been caught up in a morass of “sameness” and the “unquestionable.” In this muddle, Spiritual Wisdom and the dialectical spirit languish, flopping aimlessly around in the backwaters of ancient beliefs and contemporary religious practices.

We should not try to live in God, but let God as Spirit, as a universal moral consciousness, live in and through us.
IN THE WAKE OF DISCUSSIONS about what is and what is not a sin; of sermons preached on the topic of heaven and hell; judgments being brought down on some by ministers and laypersons alike; and hearing my own young minister trying to unravel the idea of a Christian ethic only to be criticized for being too liberal or, for even being unbiblical, I decided to spend some time thinking about what is and what is not a Christian ethic. Hundreds of books have been written on this topic, but I wanted to do some original thinking and put into perspective the ethical message of Jesus, a message I consider the heart and soul of Christianity.

When talking with my Christian friends, I’ve had difficulty separating what they call “Christian Ethics” from other ethical sources, the laws and admonitions of the ancient Hebrews, or even words from our own American Constitution. For many, the teachings of Jesus about ethics are often reinterpreted through these sources, even Paul’s letters. Christian ethics has become issue-oriented and we hear this through someone seeking to condemn others for their sins and set themselves on the high plain of perfectibility. In this writing, issues are set in the background as I seek a foundation\(^1\) for Christian ethics that possibly many have neglected.

\(^1\) Moral Foundations Theory was created by a group of social and cultural psychologists to understand why morality varies so much across cultures yet still shows so many similarities and recurrent themes. In brief, the theory proposes that several innate and universally available psychological systems are the foundations of “intuitive ethics.” Each culture then constructs virtues, narratives, and institutions on top of these foundations, thereby creating the unique
I first turned to the Sermon on the Mount for the content of Jesus’ teaching. As I read and reread this Sermon it occurred to me that Jesus was reinterpreting the teachings of the Sadducees and Pharisees through his personal consciousness of God as love, compassionate, and forgiving. It’s not that he didn’t care about his religious heritage, but was seeking a wider, deeper, and more personal view than that allowed by Jewish religious authorities. This is quite similar to what is happening today: Christianity has become authority based and the authorities are church leaders and media ministers who color their interpreta-

moralities we see around the world, and conflicting within nations too. The five foundations for which we think the evidence is best are:

**Care/harm:** This foundation is related to our long evolution as mammals with attachment systems and an ability to feel (and dislike) the pain of others. It underlies virtues of kindness, gentleness, and nurturance.

**Fairness/cheating:** This foundation is related to the evolutionary process of reciprocal altruism. It generates ideas of justice, rights, and autonomy. [Note: In our original conception, Fairness included concerns about equality, which are more strongly endorsed by political liberals. However, as we reformulated the theory in 2011 based on new data, we emphasize proportionality, which is endorsed by everyone, but is more strongly endorsed by conservatives]

**Loyalty/betrayal:** This foundation is related to our long history as tribal creatures able to form shifting coalitions. It underlies virtues of patriotism and self-sacrifice for the group. It is active anytime people feel that it's "one for all, and all for one."

**Authority/subversion:** This foundation was shaped by our long primate history of hierarchical social interactions. It underlies virtues of leadership and followership, including deference to legitimate authority and respect for traditions.

**Sanctity/degradation:** This foundation was shaped by the psychology of disgust and contamination. It underlies religious notions of striving to live in an elevated, less carnal, nobler way. It underlies the widespread idea that the body is a temple which can be desecrated by immoral activities and contaminants (an idea not unique to religious traditions). See: [http://moralfoundations.org/](http://moralfoundations.org/).
tion of Scripture through the filter of their own opinions and understandings. We talk about our heritage, religious and otherwise, but tend to lump all the past into the same box pulling out that which confirms our biases and beliefs and using these to judge others. Jesus advanced a much more humane and ethical view as we read in Matthew 13:31-38 and Luke 10:25-27.²

Jesus provided a new understanding which became the New Covenant that Christians refer to as the linchpin of their faith. He didn’t deny the importance of the Temple (Mark 8:4) or rabbinical teaching; rather, he simply accentuated the principles he believed important in his Jewish culture. Rereading Matthew’s account, John’s interpretation of Jesus (John 1:1-12) as the unification of God’s Divine Purpose (Logos) and Spiritual Wisdom (Sophia), and James’ words on living one’s faith, Christian ethics is forever bound with the idea of salvation and the moral pathway lived by Jesus.³

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² See: Amy-Jill Levine, Short Stories by Jesus (New York: HarperCollins, 2004). Amy-Jill Levine is a Jewish scholar whose particular interest is Christian scripture. That’s reason enough to read her for those who hope to engage the New Testament perceptively. Since nearly every important character in the New Testament is Jewish, including Jesus and his mother, appreciating the intrinsic Jewish elements in these texts is enhanced by having a friendly insider offering you the back-story.


The ancients believed that Spiritual Wisdom represented a unification of God and Man, or as John said, “Word and Flesh.” This joining is an active moral capacity. We will never be flawless in this joining; our faith-journey will always be incomplete.

Sophia or spirit is of the feminine gender whereas Logos is of the masculine gender. Together the male and female are regenerative, life-giving. This is a strong and ancient metaphor found in both eastern and western cultures describing how apparently contrary forces are complementary, interconnected, and interdependent in the natural world, and how they give rise to each other as they interrelate and react. My interpretation is that the Spirit gives moral
Notwithstanding that the Golden Rule is expressed differently by Matthew in two places, by Luke and in the Letters of John, I focused in and began my inquiry. Seeking a fresh understanding I tried not to let the opinions of others or my own assumptions become a roadblock to my thinking. I had spent a life-time reading theology and moral philosophy; now was the time to think and rethink and come to my own conclusions about the ethical teachings of Jesus.

FOR THE PAST EIGHT YEARS I have been writing about my own religious foundations and how I had reached some of my conclusions. I defined my quest “A Search for Spiritual Wisdom, God’s Energy My Response.” I told my story through personal experiences molding these with readings and ideas developed over a lifetime of study and deep reflection. With the Golden Rule grabbing my attention, I began to dig deeply into the scriptures and unravel some of the Hebrew and Greek concepts, especially in John’s Gospel and Letters.

My interpretation of Jesus’ message may disturb the traditional Christian for it takes more than a cursory look at Scriptures to reveal first-century meanings and translate these meanings into the our world today. This being said, we must transpose Jesus’ message within the context of our own lives and re-contextualize these meanings to satisfy our personal faith. This is a difficult task for many are dependent on ministers and teachers to do this for them. Habitual ways of believing

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4 I began this writing in 2008 shortly after my first wife’s death. My goal was to come to grips with the crisis I had just undergone and my own spirituality. I have posted it on my webpage: http://www.josephchester.com.
handed down from generation to generation and ingrained in time and culture more often than not influences our faith.

I acknowledge God, a spiritual presence in my life, as an internal moral consciousness. Also, I am in agreement with John who talked about God as “unseen” but spiritually and morally experienced as universal “love.” This is intuitive, universal, and life-confirming. For John, at least, Jesus was the human personification of God’s Wisdom and love, or as John said, “The Word (God’s Divine Purpose and Wisdom) became flesh.”

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5 This observation by John, plus my own spiritual experience, led to the conclusion that salvation is more about living one’s faith pathway that what happens after death. See 1 John 1:4-17.

6 My interpretation of “logos” from Greek philosophy and John’s Gospel is somewhat different than traditional Christian interpretations. In John 1:1, I don’t think Jesus is identified as “the Word” at least not the only “Word” as God’s divine purpose extends to all creation. In verse three “the Word becomes flesh,” but this could be interpreted as not only Jesus’ flesh, but all human flesh consistent with Genesis 2:7: “And God formed Man, from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and Man became a living soul.” “Soul” is the Hebrew word “nephesh” or “spirit.” In John 1:12, John says that all of us have this capacity. It is evident that John is talking about Jesus as Messiah when he uses such Greek concepts as “Word” and “Light,” but the evangelist comes out in him when he turns to us and points out our own capacity and challenge to “become sons of God.”

John says, “In the beginning was the Word.” The “Word” is Logos in the Greek language and not special to John. Logos is derivative of légein—to choose, gather, speak, and compare. In ancient Stoic philosophy and in John, Logos is the active, material, rational principle of the universe identified with God. But logos is more; it is fundamentally “a verb disguised as a noun,” the active essence of humanity which includes all cognitive capacity including intuition, imagination, believing, hoping, and loving. Logos represents my rational capacity that enables my active communication and moral service to others. My speaking and doing reveal my moral essence. It enables my moral reasoning and behavior and, when joined with Sophia, my limited moral wisdom.

I don’t think of Sophia (the Wisdom of God) as did the ancient Hebrews or Greeks. For me it is a word signifying my understanding of morality as necessary for world and personal cohesion. Sophia represents the ideal that I strive to complete. Sophia informs my rational and intuitive propensities—the moral behavior that is needed in our social environment. Both wisdom and my cog-
“became” stands out as a journey of faith and living. John says in his Gospel (John 1:12) that we all have been given this capacity or responsibility.

**So, as we internalize Spiritual Wisdom, we recognize our oneness with all humanity and are compelled to treat others, not as an external other, but as we ourselves desire to be treated—an internal representation of ourselves. This lies at the heart of the Golden Rule.**

Focusing on faith as a becoming I began to unravel the idea of salvation, not as something that happens to us and is completed, but as a participatory adventure, an ongoing living pathway of compassionate love and forgiveness seeking completion in God’s (moral) wisdom. And this involves more than an institutionalized faith; it is a way of life that Jesus is talking about. This can be disturbing for it involves self-reflection, personal identity, and moral responsibility. Jesus said “I am the way,” and “follow me.” “The Way” signifies a way of life and not just a set of rules to follow. This begins as we respond positively to the universal moral energy that is, for me, God.

This entails Spiritual Wisdom or living one’s faith and not just passively waiting on God’s grace as evangelicals are apt to say. Living this message became my goal. Understanding that such a goal must be pursued and welcomed into my life gave me some relief. It is the moral energy of God working in the world. This moral energy is always pulling and tugging at me and always requires my positive response. Spiritual unification

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nitive capacity are intrinsic human behaviors that signify the reality of my “self” but not a self or soul independent of mind and body. They are a part of me, help define who I am, and are always evolving. My input-responsiveness remains flexible and adaptable and encourages my empathy and benevolence; it entails experience in the real world of people, but not perfectibility.
with God’s Spiritual Wisdom – the Word becoming flesh – is my (our) challenge as a Christian (John 1:12).

I was shaken by this understanding and looked to John for clarification. John identified God as love and I too had experienced God’s love. I understood that my awareness of God as love provides a positive moral awareness of others, the dignity of their humanity including their joy and pain. There is nothing absolute and pure about this; it is an experience of moral awareness. And there is meaning in this; I no longer was able to separate myself from others. Others are me and me, them. I found it unethical to keep othering others who are different than me. Humanity partakes of this eternal moral wisdom and binds us humans as a single family. Condemning and judging or praising and recognizing human effort were no longer important. Living the life of Spiritual Wisdom and understanding its conditions became my quest.

With some effort I continued to work in my small Methodist Church. I had served as Lay Leader and was now chairperson of the Pastor, Parish, and Relationship Committee. My wife and I began to work with Meals on Wheels and minister to those elderly people who were isolated from society. I also shared my theological views with my pastor and offered him my counsel.

**THE CHURCH IN ITS MANIFOLD MANIFESTATIONS HAS SET THE HORIZONS OF OUR BELIEF AND PRACTICES,** but I felt I needed to climb a little higher and peer over these **culturally entrenched horizons** to further my understanding of my faith and others. The boundaries of the self – our self-perception – are often fuzzy and malleable. I sought a much greater boundary for my own selfhood and the sheer quality of relationships which constitute who I am. I discovered that moral awareness and moral growth entail increasing my sensitivity to the needs
of others—moral sensitivity and trying to better the life of others challenge us daily.

I understood that the pathway I had entered will always be an incomplete odyssey and that my awareness of the needs of others continually needs sharpening. Salvation, I now understood, is a journey that is incomplete and foreboding. The pathway, hodos, is sometimes unclear. I would like to think it’s a clearly identifiable expressway, but sometimes it’s a wandering woodland path with unclear markings and indistinguishable dangers. People will disagree with our actions and views. Some will think us out of touch, misguided, or off target. We will be challenged. I had discovered that fixed beliefs, set in time and ingrained in tradition, often get in the way of understanding Jesus’ life and message. So, I took a deep breath and pushed on.

Salvation is like that: we feel secure in our faith and our beliefs are strong, but the death of a loved one, the loss of a job, or even personal illness causes us to pause and rethink: have I done enough; what is there left to do; and where will I get the energy? The energy we pursue is spiritual and practical as it gives life to our behavior and actions. It is dipped in our moral consciousness of God as love and necessitates kindness and consideration of others. This doesn’t mean setting ourselves on a hill and looking down in pity on others, and neither can we hide in the shadows of our mistakes. My “faith,” is the moving power of my life. Faith, lying static loses its power and moral significance.

7 Hodos is a Greek word meaning “road” or “pathway.” Thus, the Way we are challenged to follow does not yield to instant salvation but is a travelling experience. It is ongoing and doesn’t yield easily to perfection.

8 The Golden Rule marked the essence of Jesus’ teaching, his unification of Logos and Sophia. Jesus taught that being moral is a free and open responsiveness to others, one that compels our moral intentions. There will always be a tension between commitment and choice—between my internal logoi
My intrinsic consciousness of God’s love has lifted the burden of misunderstanding Jesus’ words from me. In it I have found both spiritual and physical strength, and I never forgotten that it is I who must respond and put legs on God’s Word. This is the message of James, Jesus’ brother, and involves the responsibility of choice. God’s grace is a free and atoning gift, but it must be re-gifted to have life and be a light for others. It is within this re-gifting where moral meaning and spiritual surplus are to be found. Jesus did this for us. What a challenge this is!

A PART OF MY QUEST HAS BEEN TO GIVE SPECIAL ATTENTION TO THE CONTENT, CONTEXT, AND LOGIC OF THE GOLDEN RULE. I believe that I have discovered something unique in this teaching, at least unique to me. Others may have discovered this long ago, but for me it was a fresh inspiration. Maybe it’s my age or my education, or perhaps it’s my moral consciousness (God) pulling me along; I don’t fully know, but and the eternal moral energy that is universal wisdom. In the traditional sense, it’s a reconciling journey between who I am and what I morally ought to be. It is a faith excursion of discovery and not a static lock-jawed belief in heaven or hell. Read again the Golden Rule. Jesus appealed to our narcissistic impulse by reminding us to love others as we love ourselves. John’s interpretation is poignant: God is love and in loving others, we in fact are honouring our consciousness of God as our moral consciousness.

Many Christians today accentuate the evil and corrupt nature of humanity, perhaps our innate narcissism, and our need of salvation—God’s grace and redemptive intervention. This is a Calvinistic and Evangelical interpretation. Yet, John’s Gospel never wavered in proclaiming the goodness of the image in which we have been created. Thus, I interpret “salvation” as an activity of joining of my inner core with the universal vision that we are all one people, a joining of my logoi with moral awareness (Logos/Sophia nexus). This will never occur perfectly and will never be completed; it is a faith journey seeking Spiritual Wisdom. It is this linkage that allows me to catch a glimpse of a universal moral vision. In this sense, salvation is a this-world event of moral living, of providing for others the moral awareness that we are all one people deserving of respect and fair treatment.
this excursion into the Golden Rule has been meaningful and exciting.

As a summary of Jesus’ teaching about faith-based ethics, I found even more than I expected in my study of the Golden Rule. I was first confused by Matthew Chapter 22:36-40, but found new understanding in the first letter of John (1 John 4). Taken together, a new understanding emerged that I call the “logic of the Golden Rule”\(^9\) and summarize as “An Ethic of Love and Forgiveness.” The complexities embodied in the Golden Rule demand our introspection and commitment to rid ourselves of our biases and discriminatory attitudes and behaviors. Much is ask of us and we are responsible for activating God’s love, forgiveness, and moral imperatives in our own lives.

I admit that I am trapped, encapsulated,\(^{10}\) by my culture which has provided the foundation of my education and the way I have come to order my world view. I first studied the social sciences the approach of which is both rational and scientific. I then spent six years in divinity school studying both the Bible and Christian theology. The assumptions of my divinity school education were based on belief—belief in God as Creator and lawgiver and belief in Jesus as a crucified and risen savior. Although my Biblical and theological studies were approached rationally, the aforementioned assumptions are indicative of an authoritarian approach in which the psychology of belief, sym-

\(^{9}\) The “logic of the Golden Rule” I summarize as “An Ethic of Love and Forgiveness.” This logic is one of equivalence: God is love, love of self, and love of neighbor are bound inferentially and experientially as they all are necessary and sufficient conditions for completing the intent of the Golden Rule.

\[
\begin{align*}
&([\text{loving God}] \text{ if and only if } [\text{loving others}]) \\
&([\text{God is love}] \text{ if and only if } [\text{loving}])
\end{align*}
\]

\(^{10}\) See: Joseph R. Royce, The encapsulated man (Van Nostrand Reinhold, January 1964).
bol, and myth were never discussed. Perhaps this is what caused me to pursue a doctorate in philosophy, but the approach was analytical coming from a scientific, rational, and logical interpretation of words and concepts to discover meaning and truth. No underlying essence, no human consciousness, and no intrinsic value was afforded to human life; only words have meaning and to suppose that there is some underlying and unperceived reality that “some” words represent is misleading. Language analysis, to discover the meanings of our words, became the goal, but for me this was a rather empty pursuit.

The conclusion of psychologist Joseph R. Royce is that we all remain encapsulated in whatever method we choose and perhaps should employ more than one method—the senses, reason, belief, or intuition—in our search for what we value and how we live our lives. In my writing about Spiritual Wisdom, as in this book, my attempt is to develop a new frame of reference, a way of understanding value, truth, and the intrinsic nature of human life. I admit of no priority with regard to truth; I too am not sure there is such a “thing.” Truth just may be an illusion, an empty gesture, so far removed from what we humans are aware that to speak of “truth” is nonsense. Perhaps when we speak of “truth” we’re writing a check we can never cash. Karl Jaspers said it better than I: “The best laid plans of men, at best, yielded only a ‘metaphor’ of the ultimate nature of things.” When viewing my faith through these eyes, perhaps a new metaphor is what I seek.

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11 This two-volume unpublished manuscript can be found on my webpage: josephphester.com.
INTRODUCTION

WHAT I WRITE IS SIMPLY NOT A REGURGITATION OF THE GOLDEN RULE. I do focus on the Golden Rule and the meaning given to it by Jesus and how it was reinterpreted by John and enhanced by Jesus’ brother James, but my writing also bears the stamp of my thinking about morality as a way of life to embrace and not simply of rules to follow. Of course, mine is just one more interpretation of Jesus’ teaching. There is no pretense in this for as we are surely aware, there were many Gospels, more than in our New Testament, and all of these represented how various Christian communities came to understand Jesus and his religious significance. Not all agreed, revealing their cultural differences.

In our time there is much confusion about this as politics, church teachings, and an assorted mingling of our values have overlapped and are constantly bumping into each other. The Renaissance and Christian Reformation with its liturgical emphasis accompanied by church music that reinforces this tradition tend to blur our vision as our values are often emotionally charged adding to our confusion and uncertainty.

Thinking about our beliefs and values is something we seldom do. In my writing about leadership, businessman H. Darrell Young always challenged me to begin with an organization’s

13 A retired Atlanta businessman with whom I coauthored the following: Leadership under construction; Scarecrow Press, 2004; Creating pathways for leadership development; Infinity Publishers, 2013; and “Building from within: Designing a values-based cultural template,” Journal of Values-Based Leadership: Volume 6, Iss.2 (2013) Summer/Fall 2013.
beliefs and how these are translated into values, values that define organizational purposes and the parameters of its mission. Deep thinking—comparing, contrasting, and evaluating our values—is difficult. Many would rather let their church, traditions, or politicians do their thinking for them. Most of us are not that complex but we do tend to sift our values through our beliefs and biases. We sometimes find it difficult to hold on to “ourselves,” especially when challenged by the events of our day or by some who assume they are in the right and we should follow them. Although insanely personal and perhaps subjective, Jesus’ words challenge us to activate our ethics in the public square. Given that beliefs are foundational, a Christian ethic, to be an ethic at all, requires public application and assessment.

My purpose is clear: to define Christian ethics based on the teachings of Jesus and his Biblical interpreters and give it legs for our day. This sounds straightforward enough, but in our day Christian ethics has become issue-oriented, perhaps defined more by how we feel and what we believe about certain people and events than by following the life Jesus envisioned. Today Christian ethics has also become “rule-following”—putting more emphasis on rights and duties, and cherry-picking scripture for rules that suit our biases—than embracing the holistic vision of Jesus. My interpretation will be interwoven with modern concepts that have emerged in the history of moral thinking. It is an interpretation, but one I hope meets modern-day needs.

THE FIRST CENTURY WAS A VIOLENT AND BRUTAL TIME in which the Jewish people were a conquered people and a time in which they were religiously divided. The Judean Jews and those in Israel disagreed about the authenticity of each other’s faith
and the way their religion was practiced. That which separated
the Judean Jewish community from those identified as Samaritans has a long history of war and theological differences. This
can be explored in many sources but I recommend Chapter Two – “The Good Samaritan”\textsuperscript{14} – in Amy-Jill Levine’s \textit{The Jewish An-
notated New Testament}. Religiously speaking it was a time of
values confusion with the Jewish priests and Pharisees telling
the people one thing, and men like Jesus providing a different,
albeit, spiritual interpretation of his faith.

Not unlike these first century Jews, we also hold and profess
many values that orient us to family, friends, church, political
parties, and social issues. We also disagree and argue, con-
demning those with a different interpretation of Scripture and
the way they practice their faith. We too are prone to let oth-
ers—ministers, religious institutions, political parties, and the
like—define our moral principles for us. Whether it’s the Su-
preme Court or the Constitution, we lean on the rights they de-
fine and interpret justice and morality by law and litigation.
Clearly, we must admit, not all our values are moral values; at
least moral as defined in the teachings of Jesus. We value home
and country, democracy, and our Constitutional rights. These
are important to us, but when we overlay these with the teach-
ings of Jesus their meanings become deeply moral and personal.

\textbf{AS CHRISTIANS, WE ASSUME THAT BELIEF} in the Bible is the
guidepost of our morals, but clarity and introspection are need-
ed. We value many things—our heritage and traditions, sports
teams, and the like. As in the church with its assortment of stat-

\textsuperscript{14} See: Amy-Jill Levine, \textit{The Jewish annotated New Testament} (New York: Oxf-
ord University Press, 2016).
ues, flags and banners, we use symbols to signify our most cherished values and emblazon these on hats and shirts. We honor our customs and proudly display emblems from our past forgetting that many of these have offensive meanings that are an anathema to others.

This point being made, we must separate Christian ethics from our other values\(^\text{15}\) and let the ethic of Jesus as expressed

\(^{15}\) Consider the following definitions:

**Values**
Values are the rules by which we make decisions about right and wrong, should and shouldn’t, good and bad. They also tell us which are more or less important, which is useful when we have to trade off meeting one value over another. Values are beliefs of a person or social group in which they have an emotional investment (either for or against something). Because we value many things, values show great diversity from person to person and group (society, culture) to group.

**Morals**
Morals have a greater social element than values and tend to have a very broad acceptance. Morals are far more about good and bad than other values. For example, you say that you value your clothes, your Iphone, and the neighborhood in which you live, but when you say you value your friends, parents, or even teachers, you have entered into moral group. It’s how you treat others where morality takes root and grows. Thus, morals go to the heart of our character, our way of life. Morals, more than values, reflect our integrity, responsibility to others, and accountability. We thus judge others more strongly on morals than values. A person can be described as immoral, yet there is no word for them not following values.

**Ethics**
You can have professional ethics, but you seldom hear about professional morals. Ethics tend to be codified into a formal system or set of rules which are explicitly adopted by a group of people. Thus you have medical ethics and business ethics, etc. Ethics are thus externally defined and adopted, while morals tend to be internally imposed on other people. Your school has perhaps posted a code of ethics for all students and employees to follow, but it is your attitudes, motivation, and willingness to treat these rules as important to the life-blood of the school and to treat the people there – your classmates and teachers – with respect and dignity that defines you as a person of character; as a moral person.
in the Golden Rule speak for itself. This will be difficult as our interpretations bear the stamp of our beliefs and biases. After all, Jesus wasn’t just recommending another ethical rule to follow, but a way of life to embrace. Some time ago many people wore little rubber bracelets with the letters WWJD (What Would Jesus Do?) printed on them. We should remember this and wear this around our hearts when assessing our most cherished values. Of course, being ethical is more than a symbolic display of our beliefs; it is the day-to-day sharing of our compassion and joy for living—the giving of self in positive relationships—that define our moral character.

Maybe we should engage in some deep thinking about our faith, especially about our personal experience of God. I began this inquiry by asking myself how I had experienced God in my life. The answer was long in coming and, at first, complicated. As my mind cleared, the answers came and their insights were startling. *Insight,*\(^{16}\) by its nature can shatter our fixed ideas and beliefs. Insight compels us to deep thinking and to shed the biases that limit our spiritual growth.

I turned to the New Testament for some answers, especially Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, John’s Gospel, and John’s letters. I made a commitment to read these with an open mind and let the words speak for themselves. I tried to put into the background of my thinking the books I had read and the sermons I had heard. The insights provided by this study led me in many directions, but I soon settled into evaluating and interpreting the Sermon on the Mount and John’s meaningful interpretations of loving God, loving others, and loving myself, and how each of these aspects of love are interconnected and integrated into Jesus’ teaching. I didn’t know it then, but I was beginning to un-

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ravel the logic of the Golden Rule. John said it directly and his statement is unmistakably clear: “No one has seen God at any time, but if we love one another, God is revealed in our human relationships.” Without a doubt, our God-consciousness lives in our relationships with others.

RELATIONSHIPS LIE AT THE HEART OF JESUS’ TEACHING.
Previously, I wrote in my narrative on Spiritual Wisdom:

In time we learn that our lives are largely built on a scaffolding of relationships. Understanding this takes many years as most of us learn this lesson late in life. Relationships—good and bad—create the web of our lives. Finding purpose in our web is difficult for much that happens to us is either incidental or accidental. Purpose is intentional and a difficult and foreboding task. When we discover our purpose we are able to maneuver through life in more productive ways.

Christian ethics I concluded is tied to my innate capacity to love, respect, and give dignity to others. It is saturated with empathy and giving, supporting others; forgiving, and understanding that it is God’s grace that is tugging at my heart in moral awareness. Without God’s grace, Spiritual Wisdom is diminished. It becomes a practical reciprocity, a commonsense ethic, prudent, but has little to do with loving, giving, or forgiving. For that matter, it has little to do with our experience of God. I would argue that reciprocity is not, in the truest sense, ethical

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17 I would argue that reciprocity is not, in the truest sense, ethical at all. It has a practical utility—you scratch my back and I’ll scratch your back—but in this bargain, that which is moral, built up from our cultural and intuitive habits, more often than not gives way to the practical, the reasonable, and that which is perceived to enhance our personal lives. Morality is not negotiable.
at all. Rather, it is based on calculating and bargaining—a mutual exchange of goodwill or favors.

Jesus makes the point in Luke 14:12-14 when he says, “When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.” This story is about compassion, care, and providing for the less fortunate. It is about a “pathway” of moral living. It is not about “you scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours.” Reciprocity is a secular value with moral overtones, but lacks the dimension of unselfish and self-giving behavior. Also, reciprocity lacks the dimension of faith which lies at the heart of Jesus’ teaching.

Jesus set forth a “pathway” (“I am the way...”)\(^{18}\) for us to follow—the Golden Rule. Christianity is therefore a faith-journey, a way to live our lives in moral wholeness. I understand this as the linchpin of my faith. It breathes life into my faith and gives it a dynamic quality; a voyage of moral living and forgiveness. It doesn’t lift me to perfection, only challenges my understanding and my living.

The Golden Rule, in Matthew’s version, was not stated as an authoritarian, obligatory law, but arose from Jesus’ existential and social experiences. Surely, he was challenged to identify the greatest law in Judaism and he responded that it was to love God, but this did not complete his answer—like it was to love

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\(^{18}\) The Greek word for “pathway” is “hodos” meaning road. Salvation in this sense is a traveling experience not easily completed and perhaps never finished.
one’s neighbor as one’s self, extending and redefining what it means to love God. John’s reinterpretation arises from the soil of human experience as he attempts to clarify the relationship of God “as love” to “loving others as one loves one’s self.” This implies understanding the integrity of self and others. We will see that John was digging deeply into the moral meaning of Jesus’ words.

John understood the social conditions in which he lived. He knew that moral development is a matter enlarging the variety and quality of relationships that comprise our lives. To paraphrase, John said that our faith in God is also our faith in humanity to give, care, and activate compassion for others. The dignity of human beings requires no argument. The word “moral” is appropriate here as it extends our Christian brotherhood from family to a much wider world. In John this is a wobbling point and admits of human contingencies—our mistakes as well as our compassion for others. Someone must step up; someone must decide to live by the Golden Rule. The moral life is created through our own actions; it is not a theoretical given or dependent on ancient or present-day laws. It is a lived experience.
CHAPTER ONE

TILLING OUR MORAL SOIL

DEMOCRACY AS A MORAL VISION is a thread common to us all. As Americans, this is perhaps the one value that defines who and why we are. Democracy, as conceived by our founding fathers, was not only a set of rules for governance, but a moral vision fueled by a commitment to equality, fairness, and individual/collective responsibility. We often take democracy for granted, but with the rise of terrorism in the 21st century this has proven unwise and impractical. Also, as our two major political parties have become more divisive, the ideal of democracy as a moral vision requires our constant attention.

Our history demonstrates that in 1789 democracy was never a one and done deal. Moral progress is an evolutionary process and Jefferson mentioned this when he noted that we may have to revise our Constitution every twenty or so years. For Jefferson, changing circumstances require values clarification and re-evaluation. For Christians, new birth and moral transformation also require appraisal. This should be an ongoing activity. Improvements in democracy have been made as Jefferson suggested that they should. Much is yet to be accomplished. We are challenged by world and personal circumstances to till our moral soil consistently and appropriately.

I am guided in this by my faith commitments. Unapologetically, I assert that my awareness of God as my moral conscious-
ness is natural and meaningful. It is an ongoing and incomplete experience that is unquestionable, only lived in moral awareness. This is an awareness that has evolved in me and reveals a rocky and uneven road to personal moral maturity. Even so, we must be morally vigilant, commit ourselves to personal and egalitarian improvement guided by the moral principles set down by Jesus.

So before we get too troubled about what we believe, whom we think is going to heaven and whom we condemn to hell, perhaps we should ask, “Are we reaching for the stars, or, like Jesus, are we tilling the fertile ground of human experience with the love that God is?” This is ground where we meet others, where God, as love, is experienced, and where moral awareness comes to fruition. This is why I acknowledge that God’s love provides a moral awareness of others, and that I am challenged to live in the love that God is. Although I am imperfect and my salvation (in this sense) will never be complete, I am challenged to allow God’s love to percolate in my life.

Consequently, we are challenged to examine our relationships with each other and therein discover the God (moral awareness) who is interactive, who understands, and provides wisdom and knowledge for living vigorous ethical lives. It is within this living that we will lift “our moral horizon,” the recognition and understanding of which is perhaps our greatest challenge. I have found that rising up to the level of my “perceived” horizon is both difficult and challenging. We should aim high for...

*Our moral consciousness (God) engages us in the here and now.*

*Our moral consciousness (God) is a persuasive force and a loving reality in the ongoing process of human creation.*
Our moral consciousness (God) is always becoming and his spiritual force and our creative power.

**THUS, I TURN TO THE GOLDEN RULE** as a guide for moral living. Some time ago I began unpacking the meaning of this teaching and its ethical suggestions. Purposefully, I decided not to reiterate the meanings others have given to this important passage of scripture. Like many of you, I consulted many religious and ethical writings, but in the end decided to examine the context provided by Matthew’s Gospel and the words attributed to Jesus. I discovered that John too had much to say about the Golden Rule. James, the brother of Jesus, provided his thoughts on living the Rule as well. Together, these Biblical writers have helped me unravel the logic of this Rule, a logic beginning with their and my experience of God as love. This is fundamental and levels our moral aptitude.

Luke also has his version of the Sermon on the Mount and other Biblical writers have provided insights for linking moral behavior to their God-experience. Using my understanding and knowledge of the Bible I sought a deeper meaning in the Golden Rule that I had not found elsewhere. This was an exploration in Christian ethics. I have tried to keep an open mind to what I might uncover seeking that which informs my moral consciousness of God and others.

My effort in this examination will surely be criticized given the history of Biblical criticism and theology, the history of moral philosophy, and how many in the church have interpreted Jesus’ words—it could not be otherwise. We all approach the Scriptures from personal points of view and these are difficult to set aside or peer over or around. Objectivity has been my goal in this regard, but I understand its impossibility. The dilemma of the theologian, philosopher, and scientist as truth-seekers is
that neither may see the universe as a whole from the black bottom of their nicely furrowed ruts but continue to proclaim their worldview anyhow and with considerable vigor.

This being said, I do not consider the Golden Rule as some abstract concept or “rule” in the philosophical or Old Testament sense. Rather, I interpret it in the context of my belief and faith. It is neither truth nor justification that I seek; only understanding, clarification, and moral direction. This may limit its use by those who interpret it as an ethic of reciprocity only, and confuse those who interpret Jesus’ teaching through the conduit of ancient Jewish customs, but it doesn’t diminish its ethical importance. Looking to the future rather than the past, we are challenged to make an effort to create lives of compassion and nurture and try as we must to make life a little better for others.

Jesus spoke of this when he joined loving neighbor with self-love and loving God, at first glance, an unusual combination. I found it interesting that John provided his interpretation of this idea and made it the center piece of his teaching. For John, the logic embodied in the Golden Rule makes no sense without experiencing God as love. As the literature focusing on this rule demonstrates, there is much to unpack in Jesus’ words and in his vision. Re-interpreting the words of ancient writers and in them finding contemporary meanings is the bane of modern Christians.

MY CONCERN IS HOW THE EVERYDAY CHRISTIAN INTERPRETS AND APPLIES CHRISTIAN ETHICS IN HIS OR HER LIFE. I am pragmatic on this account as for me the Golden Rule is also a tool for moral improvement. I don’t assume that Matthew is the only authority on Jesus. Mark, Luke, James, and John have much to say and I will call upon John especially for his in-
sightful interpretation of Jesus’ moral vision conceived as a “faith pathway”—a guide for daily living.

In this narrative I’ve tried to provide some historical background. Mentioned are several important philosophical interpretations of the Golden Rule, but for the most part, I’m tied to its Biblical logic—the logic of Jesus via Matthew’s arrangement of Jesus’ words. My effort is to simplify these complexities without using too much technical language, of either theology or philosophy. Understanding the various versions of the New Testament is difficult enough. Because most of us don’t read ancient or the common Greek of the New Testament, in this narrative I offer translations to clarify important passages.

Here is where my analysis gets tricky for one can never know exactly what Jesus said, the order of the words and perhaps his follow-up explanations. Jesus’ disciples were basically illiterate and passed his teachings on to others by word of mouth. Not all was remembered and later Gospel writers vary in their own accounts and interpretations. Yes, they were inspired men, but men none the less who remembered what they could and shared what they felt important for their day, a time much later than when Jesus lived. Surely, during his three-year ministry, Jesus said much more than what has been attributed to him or remembered and passed along in memory and word to be preserved in the Gospel stories. I can only surmise that the Gospel writers got at the heart of Jesus’ teachings, but we could have learned much more if we were privy to Jesus’ many private conversations. With this being said, I mainly reference

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19 Hellenistic Koiné is the common language used in the Christian New Testament and the Septuagint, the 3rd-century BC Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible.

Matthew’s arrangement of Jesus words and John’s interpretation. These are my primary sources for understanding the Rule’s meaning and importance.

**IT IS WITHIN THE LOGIC OF THE GOLDEN RULE** that we discover its foundational meaning, a meaning perhaps that has gone undetected as Matthew doesn’t provide a straightforward line of reasoning. Of course this wasn’t Matthew’s purpose as he gathered the stories of Jesus’ life and attached these to Mark’s simple narrative. Those who were closest to Jesus and heard him speak have provided invaluable insights shared in many New Testament books and letters.

Men like John and James have deepened our understanding of Jesus’ teaching and the insights discovered in his faith journey. In their writings we find that faith in God is inextricably tied to living the moral pathway exemplified by Jesus, and that the Golden Rule is perhaps a shorthand version of “THE WAY” set forth by Jesus for us to follow. Interpreted, the Golden Rule is “a rule of LOVE” and, parenthetically, “FORGIVENESS,” a life forged in the spiritual understanding of God as love. Understanding this is acknowledging that “love” is not just a feeling; rather, love is a choice, a decision about doing what is best for others and is clarified by what we desire for ourselves. Here, our human dignity is at stake for to be forgiven we must be willing to forgive others as well. Introspection is a great tool for understanding love and forgiveness and their importance in human relation-

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21 See footnote 18 above.

ship-building. Relationship-building, living a life of civility is the future we should seek. This is my hope.

We are passionate about what we believe and our passions often overrule our ability to think and reason objectively. Jesus knew that our values come from the inside and are often colored by our emotions, habits, and traditions. Intolerance is one of these emotions but so is empathy. Empathy is a natural feeling of understanding and compassion for others. It allows us to feel what they feel and to virtually stand where they stand. This is the intrinsic feeling made use of by Jesus when he said that we are to love others as we love ourselves.

**THE FAITH PATHWAY IS THE FOCUS OF THE GOLDEN RULE.** When Jesus said, “No one comes to the Father but by me,” he was identifying himself as the unification of God’s purpose and wisdom being made visible in the world. It is this unification we seek in our salvation experience. John speaks of this unification:

23 Empathy is built up by our familial, social, and cultural experiences. In the Golden Rule, understanding empathy is necessary for understanding the meaning of “loving others as we love ourselves.”

“Empathy is the foundation of all the other abilities that increasingly make people valuable as technology increases...We’ve seen that we are most fundamentally social beings—that we evolved into creatures that cannot survive or approach happiness or be productive without social relationships...Genuine empathy comprises two parts: discerning the thoughts and feelings of others, and responding appropriately.” Colvin, Geoff, Humans are underrated, what high achievers know that brilliant machines never will (New York: Portfolio/Penguin, 2015).

24 This can be interpreted in several different ways. My interpretation is that this statement signifies the WAY and directs us to the moral life. The Apostle John, when writing his letters, remembered these words and said the following (1 John 4:21): “And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister.”
In the beginning God created all things with meaning, purpose, and reason (by his Word, in the Greek, Logos). This Creator Spirit was imbued with a premeditated spiritual energy from which proceeds everything that exists. It is the way God acts in the world with meaning, reason, and purpose. This is a divine capacity (Logos) through which God created all life. Without this aptitude, nothing exists.—John 1:1-3 [translation my own]

Early on in his writing John sets the stage for what it means to be a Christian. He unpacks this by giving his interpretation of the Golden Rule. John wrote that Jesus’ challenge is our challenge:

“Yet to all accepted him, to those who believed his message, he challenged and gave them the capacity to follow their faith pathway.”—John 1:12 [translation my own].

When talking about the faith pathway, Jesus said, “No one comes to the Father except by me.” Some limit this reference to the cross and redemptive salvation, but there is also a moral explanation of this statement. Jesus seems to have had more in mind when he uttered these words: he was telling us how to live a Christian life by following the Way. The “Way” is a journey into salvation and as James, Jesus’ brother makes clear, it is about living the Christian life thoroughly and consistently.

James said, “Faith without works is dead.” and “By their works you will know them.” Herein James is encouraging our commitment to the Golden Rule, the WAY Jesus set down. It’s not that we earn our way into unification with God’s wisdom by our behaviors or even our beliefs; rather, we live our way into a moral awareness of God as love and are challenged to activate this love in our lives. It is our behavior as Christians that identifies this unification—living the moral life.
This is the Kingdom of God that is alive in us, the yeast and leaven of our lives (See: I Corinthians 5:7-8; Mark 4: 30-32; Matthew 13: 31-32; and Luke 13: 18-19). All of these are colorful metaphors for understanding the dynamic quality of our moral consciousness and the importance of living a moral life. In modern terms the WAY is about servant leadership and in Biblical terms the Pearl of Great price. These are stories of growth and commitment, of investing in others and divesting in our own egos, of recognizing our own autonomy, dignity, and moral worth, and, with moral purpose and integrity, extending these values to others. And like the mustard seed, is apt to grow anywhere. It is more than belief and prayer, although these are important. It is more than going to church and dropping a few dollars into the collection plate.

Rather, faith, as a verb, is the activity of maintaining a moral balance in one’s life, of activating Christian love through our behavior. Jesus words, “I am the way, the truth, and the life,” are poignant: it is this truth (not factual or propositional, but a way of life) when lived that breathes energy into our faith journey. This WAY is our salvation (moral salvation) and we are responsible for living it. It is not a free and atoning gift; rather, it is

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25 Jesus said that the Kingdom of God lies within and I take this to mean—using John’s interpretation—as the effort to unify our internal Logos with the wisdom (Sophia) of God.

26 This statement is completed by Jesus with the words, “No one comes to the father except by me.” This is the starting point of our religious freedom; not freedom from our passions or sins; not freedom from the authorities and laws to which we much obey; but our freedom to put faith in ourselves and seek a life we can help create. This is our hope and makes the point that “growth” in moral wisdom—not perfection or even reaching heaven at the end of our days—is our moral purpose. Hope is the ability to believe in a future that is morally superior to the past and surely Jesus did. Such hope is the condition of our growth.
a morally responsible way of living. Thus, my interpretation of “except by me” mainly focuses on following the moral pathway set out by Jesus.

**FAITH IS A LIVED AND PRESENT MORAL JOURNEY, the way** that Jesus emphasized in his own living. For too long the ethical teachings of Jesus have taken a backseat to the emphasis placed on salvation through belief. Assigning blame is useless, but it was the medieval church that redefined Christian “salvation” in terms of “instant salvation” based on belief and sold indulgences to assure its financial growth and control over a superstitious people. Because most of these people could neither read nor write, the interpretations of the church would hold and become a part of the living fabric of a growing Christendom greatly reinforced by the Protestant Reformation solidifying “belief in” through sacrament and church music.

Before Christianity became institutionalized, the earliest Christians (in the 2nd Century) called their faith “the way.” It is spiritual to its core and it doesn’t require the church, a minister, or some other mediator for its activation. The church as we know it was founded on the Jewish hierarchical model of Priests, Temple worship, and tithing. It was reinforced by the Roman imperial model of god-rulers with its regality and imposing ceremonies. The Hebrews had their Temple and Holy of Holies, and later Christians the Vatican and Pope. Today Protestants have their magnificent houses of worship and seminaries to train their ministers in the doctrines and beliefs that are to be followed by all adherents. All of this has distorted the message of Jesus. Jesus offered a faith pathway which is always active and interactive; personal and public, caring and forgiving.
We learn from the Old Testament that God created us as *living souls* (nephesh). This is a post-Moses idea that slowly evolved from Greek, Egyptian, and Persian sources. Some put their emphasis on “soul” in this statement; like James, I stress the importance of “living.” Living our faith is an ongoing process—our moral energy—never remaining the same, but active, interactive, and always in flux, indeterminate and sometimes perilous. Building positive relationships is the spiritual presence of God speaking through us. We are identified by our relationships and when our relationships are fertilized by God’s love, we are able to live in mutual caring and compassionate environments.

Again, the “Way” (*Hodos* or *Way* in Greek, means “road” or “path”) when united with “a spiritually-infused life,” becomes a faith journey. I find it strangely comforting that the Apostle Paul was on a pathway of persecution when he encountered the reality of God’s Spiritual Wisdom. He changed his course and began a new pathway that took Christianity from Jerusalem to Rome. His pathway was a traveling experience, a journey, as opposed to something that was instant. Consistently followed, the Way is continuous, seeking God’s wisdom and grace and unifying us in love for others.

We often speak of “faith” as “belief,” but this is a misunderstanding. “Belief” is a noun and refers to a set of doctrines and principles most Christians find in the Old and New Testaments. But “faith” is a verb; albeit, a verb disguised as a noun. Faith is transformational, a new-birth experience. It is ongoing and life-altering. Hence, “salvation” is a traveling experience, a process,

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27 Original Word: שׁוֹפֶת; Part of Speech: Noun Feminine; Transliteration: nephesh; Phonetic Spelling: (neh’-fesh); short definition: soul. Theashboard becomes a living being by God’s breathing שָׂרִי into the nostrils of its בָּשָׂר; of man. http://biblehub.com/hebrew/5315.htm
an activity of living the WAY.\textsuperscript{28} In the Sermon on the Mount the Way has been made clear. Its teachings define the Way as a spiritual journey; living life with moral consistency. This Way is about not walking on the other side of the road; rather, it is about thanking God for healing, about being spiritually prepared, about forgiveness, about loving enemies as much as friends, about going the extra mile, about caring for the poor, about doing and not just thinking, and about self-denial. These are the foundations of Christian ethics and they can be unsettling when applied to our lives.

Given this understanding, our moral care for others is identified by John as “loving God” and our loving God as “loving each other.” In logic this is called a \textit{tautology}, a fancy way of saying that they have the same meaning, the same truth-value. John leaves us a little confused when he identified “God as love.” Is this a description of a perfect actual being, a superhuman, or is John simply identifying a special, moral, relationship between people – love is God? If we choose the latter, God is not a concrete heavenly person; rather, God is our moral consciousness activated by our compassion and care for others. John wrote, \textit{God is love and when we love others we inextricably love God} (I John 4:12). As stated by Matthew, Jesus simply said that we are to love God and our neighbor as we love ourselves. There remains much to be extracted from this seemingly embellished pronouncement. I will say again and again that the simplicity of the Golden Rule lies in its insightfulness. It is this depth of insight I choose to explore.

\textsuperscript{28} I have given up on “belief” as an identifier of the Christian life for many Christians have cherrypicked the scriptures for beliefs that satisfy their own biases and others have succumbed to the institutionalized beliefs built up over the centuries by the church.
TO SPEAK IS TO COMMUNICATE IN ONE’S OWN LANGUAGE, CULTURE, BELIEFS, AND CONCEALED ASSUMPTIONS. It is the latter, when unrecognized, that becomes the source of frustration and distrust. Our tendency is to hide who we are and Face Book ourselves to others, providing only that which we desire them to know about us and perhaps gilding the lily in order to portray ourselves in a better light. We are all guilty of this. Introspection can be troubling.

In the Book of James (2:18), James says that we are known more by what we do than by what we say. There is a universal truth in his observation. I can say I love you but if this is not demonstrated by my behavior, then it’s a false claim. For James, the moral person is “finely responsible and richly aware.” But how is it possible to be finely responsible and richly aware in a secular/religious environment that defines “responsibility,” not in individual or even spiritual terms, but in institutional terms of “what rights I have constitutionally,” “what my church says,” or “what my political party tells me to do”? Is our experience of God mediated by some minister or media preacher, or is it direct and personal? Self-reflection is needed to unravel our confused and overlapping values. The blurred edges of our values remain a challenge and objectivity in this regard remains a precious commodity. In fact, what Jesus gives us, in human terms, is a precarious vision:

The Precarious Vision

I’ve searched for answers that support, reasons that explain the unrelenting mysteries of life;
The struggles to live and pressures to conform

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The good times, the bad—
Times of darkness and times of light
Life’s road is traveled with doubts and fear;
I ask, “Is there any hope for human perfection?”
To my children I claim to know,
But pretence has marked my every direction
Purpose unfinished, life incomplete
Rethinking and commitment seem worthy goals
Rediscovering what once was hidden;
An ardent obsession of an unpredictable soul
Assumptions gathered like a blanket they cover
a mind that queries, a voice that speaks;
Courage mustered, troops ready for battle,
Self-affirmation perhaps the goal I seek.
Inside these boundaries I struggle to find
a self authentic, a life of giving—
And there negate my precarious vision.

SELF-REFLECTION IS DIFFICULT AS SHEDDING OUR BIAS-ES IS NEVER EASY. They are ingrained in us by time and culture, but we have a choice and this choice is difficult and demanding. Group-think and being thought of as belonging to the in-crowd are important values in our lives. Desiring to fit-in, associating with popular and perhaps powerful individuals, and an unwillingness to speak out when the moral principles of Jesus are being violated are some of our biggest sins. We love to sing about “onward Christian soldiers,” but it’s a challenge to march in the voice and teachings of Jesus.

Our nation was founded on moral principles, but neither the church nor a governmental democracy can stand without deep-
ly committed moral members and citizens. Yet, our tendency is to jump on the band wagon of popular opinion and mask our opinions through the opinions of the majority rather than through reflective consideration. Perhaps some of us filter our beliefs through what we don’t like than through the positive moral voice of Jesus. *The tyranny of the majority can lead us in many unethical directions.*

Jesus saw this in the people of his day. Like many politicians and media preachers of our day, the Pharisees and other religious leaders were doing the “thinking” for them. Adherence to these interpretations was paramount, but Jesus provided a different WAY. His was a pathway of Spiritual Wisdom.

**AND WHO IS THIS JESUS?** John identified Jesus as *God’s Word* in the first verse of the first chapter of his gospel. We have mentioned that “Word” in Greek is “Logos” meaning “Divine Reason,” “Divine Wisdom,” or “Divine Purpose.” When Logos, Divine Purpose, became flesh in Jesus, John says that Jesus became the “Light” of God, the Messiah; a Light that never goes out. This Light illuminates our lives, even our shadows, and pulls us into itself. This is the energy of God at work in the world. This is the hidden yeast in our lives, the small mustard seed that can flourish even on rocky soil. With this I don’t identify the “Bible” as “God’s Word.” Rather, I reference John and his theological vision and identify the eternal Logos in Jesus as God’s Word.

In John’s Gospel “Light” is a powerful metaphor and for this reason I prefer to call Jesus the “White Light of God.”

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31 The electromagnetic spectrum is comprised of a variety of types of electromagnetic waves, each with different wavelengths or frequencies. For example,
has identified “white light” as a light that cannot be seen (as John says of God) but which allows all else to be seen with clarity. Within the white light of God’s wisdom and grace, forgiveness and care, we are able to understand our friends, family members, and work associates with moral insight and moral awareness. This is just another way of expressing what is meant by “God’s grace.” To let it shine on us is not enough; to let it shine through us is our challenge and responsibility. Again, this calls God’s concreteness into question and rather, through metaphor and simile, provides an image of “God” as a universal moral consciousness or awareness that enables us to see life in its moral wholeness.

How do we know this? John said that we experience God not as “out there” or “up there,” but inside ourselves, in our souls, and in our experience (moral consciousness) of God as love. Jesus said that the Kingdom of God is internal. In this sense Heaven is not a reward or an eternal place, but a con-

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x-rays, gamma rays, infrared radiation and ultraviolet radiation are examples of electromagnetic waves. Only a small portion of the spectrum of wavelengths can be seen by the human eye. This visible portion of the electromagnetic spectrum is called the visible spectrum. This shows the full spectrum of electromagnetic radiation and highlights the small part of the spectrum that can be called the visible spectrum.

White light is defined as the complete mixture of all of the wavelengths of the visible spectrum. This means that if I have beams of light of all of the colors of the rainbow and focus all of the colors onto a single spot, the combination of all of the colors will result in a beam of white light.

Spiritually speaking, “white light” is a metaphor for “God’s love,” especially manifest in Jesus. This love cannot be seen, only experienced and enables love to be spread to others. God’s love is the combination of all moral expressions—care, compassion, respect, and responsibility for others.

This is a second century interpretation of Jesus whereas earlier interpretations emphasized an “earthly kingdom” to be set up by a ruling Messiah. See: Bart Ehrman, The Gospels before Jesus.
scious *internal unification* of us and God—a real-world spiritual and moral experience. Once you have experienced God as love, your faith cannot be denied; it becomes the white light that guides and persuades you for the rest of your life. Understanding the Golden Rule as a moral white light lies at the heart of our Christian experience. John says, and I believe him, “the darkness cannot put it out.”

Yet, we all have a tendency to live in caves of unawareness fooling no one but ourselves. We seek the “moral light” but sometimes the “light” reveals the shadows in which we hide from others. It’s difficult to stand in the light when we have spent so many years building a false image of ourselves and of going along with what others say and how they live. We can be assured that Jesus was the Light of God, God’s Spiritual Wisdom personified. Our shadows require Jesus’ illumination. We are challenged by Jesus to step through the door of spiritual awareness and become a moral force in our world—“Knock,” says Jesus, and the door will be opened to a living pathway of moral awareness. The choice to open this door and step through it is ours to make.

We sometimes quote a Bible verse or two as a revealer of God’s Light or to convince others that we are walking in God’s truth, but that’s like striking a match in the dark as we often interpret these verses through our concealed assumptions, biases, and traditions—“we now see through a glass darkly…” The flickering flame soon goes out and we are left wondering what was being said or intentionally reinterpreted.

We are told that belief is important. Not only that, the church tells us what to believe. Thus we become institutionalized and dormant. On the other hand, Jesus’ Light can be a living filament in our lives. It is not quoting scripture but experiencing God’s Wisdom that changes our lives. Plowing deeply
into the meaning of the Golden Rule can turn our living in the shadows into living in the light and love required of us. This is our challenge and it demands our response. The Golden Rule is dead on arrival if we fail to respond positively to Jesus’ words, if we fail to recognize God as our moral consciousness—the God who is love, love that enables our loving others.

And I can hear your worries: “I can’t live that way all the time; I am imperfect; what’s the use?” You’re right of course; we can’t be morally perfect in all that we do and say. It’s not in our nature. But we can latch on to Jesus’ teaching and bring his Spiritual Wisdom into our lives. We can, with God’s energy and grace, self-correct along the way. Even the “truth” about which the church speaks is malleable and open to interpretation. We are challenged to experience the moral force of God’s wisdom and activate it in our lives. John points out that we have this capacity, that it is available to us (John 1:12). This is our challenge: God is revealed in our care for others and the dignity we give to them, in our empathy and compassion, of giving rather than always asking God for favors. Sometimes our prayers are so self-serving.

*Living the moral pathway of Jesus is living life as an open prayer for others.*

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33 Remembering the words of Nietzsche, “What then is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms -- in short, a sum of human relations, which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to a people: truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that is what they are; metaphors which are worn out and without sensuous power; coins which have lost their pictures and now matter only as metal, no longer as coins.” “There are no facts, only interpretations.” This comes from Nietzsche’s *Nachlass*, A. Danto translation.
Jesus said this in his Sermon on the Mount—“we are to love others as we love ourselves.” One should note that Jesus is quoting Leviticus:

“Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD” – Leviticus 19:18.

In Leviticus this was practical advice, one of more than 200 rules that separate the Jewish faith from others, but in Jesus, the advice is spiritual and moral, not meant to separate, but to identify the human family as one. Even so, climbing out of our caves of self-absorption remains difficult and foreboding. This is our daily challenge.

I BEGAN THIS NARRATIVE BY EXPLAINING MY “GOD-CONSCIOUSNESS” as an inner moral awareness that I believe is available to all human beings. Some people today claim that many people around the world are not Christian because they don’t use the same words when speaking about God. “God” is an English word, but the Greek is “Theos.” Well before the time of Jesus, the Old Testament was translated into Greek, a widespread international language of the time. The translators of this work, called the Septuagint, chose the Greek word Theos (God) to translate Elohim and El, and Kyrios (Lord) to translate both Adonai and Yahweh. Recent scholarship has shown that, although the New Testament was written in Greek, the main language that Jesus and his disciples spoke was undoubtedly Aramaic, an ancient regional language. The Aramaic word Abba appears three times in the New Testament (Mark 14:36, Romans 8:15, Galatians 4:6) and each time it is immediately translated as Pater for readers unfamiliar with Aramaic. It seems that when Jesus spoke of God as Father in Aramaic, he used the term
Abba. These cultural and language differences should not cause us concern. I believe my God-consciousness as a moral awareness of others is universal among human beings regardless of the language they speak or the religion to which they belong.

My words are inadequate here and I must speak gently and in images rather than in dichotomies and logical or illogical relations. Spiritual Wisdom is not a thing or a person, and I can’t suppose that my mind represents Spiritual Wisdom as a mirror represents my physical image. Spiritual Wisdom is not self-created, but discovered within our relationships, our relationship with God, the teachings of Jesus, and with others.

_Spiritual Wisdom is more process than thing;
It is the life-giving fluid of our moral selves._

That I engage in this process consistently and on a daily basis is my responsibility. One can be inspired but choose not to respond—God’s energy, my response.

I understand the universal nature of my moral consciousness as “God living within me and my social relationships.” That God is love tells me that my God consciousness is essentially moral, experienced most importantly, not in our therapeutic prayers—our God time as some say—but in our ordinary human relationships. Thus, relationships are a sacred trust. This moral consciousness is a burning filament that illuminates my life, my awareness of others, and moves me in prudence and wisdom.

And you ask, “How can I know this for sure without some authority telling me it is so? Experience is the answer of course. As humans we not only have the capacity to reason and use crit-

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34 With this I am in disagreement with Proverbs 8 that depicts “Wisdom” as a feminine goddess although I am intrigued by the male/female combination of Logos and Sophia.
ical thinking, which, from a moral perspective, seeks consistency in thought and behavior. We also have intuitive and imaginative capacities that illuminate our moral understanding. As we experience God’s love in our lives these capacities are necessary for building the best possible lives for ourselves within the community of our work, families, and social activities. Here is where our moral vision originates and takes flight as we discover the moral consciousness of God operating in our relationships and decision making. Moral Wisdom is spiritual, always seeking an adequate expression of agape love in personal and social activities. It is the foundation for our ethical standards for living in community. It is the embodiment of the Golden Rule, a Pearl of Great Price as embodied in Jesus; the WAY we are challenged to live.

Perhaps we should quit talking about human nature as it were a thing to get in touch with or know. There is no such thing as alienation from our essential humanity due to social pressures. There is only the shaping of ourselves into a human being by a process of socialization followed by self-individualization and self-creation by revolting – as did Jesus – against the authorities who tried unsuccessfully to make him into their own image. We can reshape ourselves as John said (John 1:12) because we have the capacity to rework the self-image foisted on us by the past into a new self-image; the one Jesus was talking about.

Moral growth in and through God’s love is the chief purpose of our faith journey. Paul, despite his other foibles, had this hope— the ability to believe that the future will be different from the past leading to a life of charitable relationships (1 Corinthians 13:13). This is our moral goal. This is what John meant when he talked about our choice to “become sons of God.” This is what Jesus meant when he said that we are to love others as
we love ourselves. My “self” is the active and purposeful interaction of my God-consciousness with others. The nexus of my moral consciousness is both a rational/intuitional and spiritual capacity of moral development. It is letting the Divine Logos (God’s intentional purpose) grow within us and then re-gifting this purpose to others understanding their autonomy, dignity, and integrity are not to be violated. This is the essence of Spiritual Wisdom. To a large degree, our salvation as a moral pathway is in our hands. The choice is ours to make.
A NEW COVENANT: THE MORAL PATHWAY

OUR UNDERSTANDING OF THE GOLDEN RULE and its applications in the modern world have changed over time. There are and will continue to be many interpretations of this rule. Perhaps this is the nature of “collective thinking,” especially thinking that has taken place over many hundreds of years. Suffice it to say, much has been written and more will be written about Christian ethics. Mine is not the final word. For me it has taken many years of thinking about “spiritual wisdom” to grasp the meaning of Jesus’ vision. Admittedly my understanding is only partial. We are challenged to remember that with its long history, representing a moral thoughtfulness that has ingrained itself in time and culture, the Golden Rule will be marked by individual, institutional, and enriching rationalizations. In this narrative I make no effort to explain them all, only to point out the long and continuous history of this moral prescription. This in no way diminishes its value, only enhances the depth and far-reaching influence of the wisdom it embodies. After all, we have been forewarned about “truth” by Frederick Nietzsche who
commented that all truth is interpretation. This in itself should cause us to pause: how do we interpret the teachings of Jesus and transcribe them into our 21st century lives?

From East to West, the differing understandings of this moral advice demonstrate both individual and social ethical judgments. This history, both inside and outside of Christianity, will cause agitation among devout Christians who consider the Bible as God’s flawless “Holy Word,” but we are dealing here with collective memories that were passed down for many decades before written as Gospels. Our interpretations are mostly based on the opinions and memories of others. Opinions notwithstanding, we cannot limit God’s message to our beliefs only or to others for that matter, or to a book. The life of the Spirit cannot be encased in dogmatic seclusion.

*Homogenized language and homogenized thought reinforce each other in a circular fashion even when the circle is small and personal.*

God, as our moral consciousness, has spoken and still speaks in the stirring breezes and rising storms of our lives. Our understanding is only partial like that of church doctrine or the many sermons we hear on Sunday mornings. Yet, considering the unlimited nature of love (or God as love/love as God), we are compelled to listen to others, even those who may not share our beliefs or opinions. Active listening is the voice of humanity linking us as one. It is the eternal voice of relationships where we understand God’s love is alive in us and others.

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Life is changing and has changed. The world we live in today was not the world of yesterday, and we will continue to adjust ourselves to life’s changing patterns. We live in a global universe that is in a continuous state of revision. Our world is a mutation of yesterday’s understandings, habits, and values. For example, the New Testament writers were well-versed in the Jewish Torah, the words of many of the prophets, and some of the writings that would eventually be included in the Old Testament canon. Their interpretation of Jesus’ teaching came through these sources. Also, Christianity, like Islam, is a religio-cultural mutation including the melting pot of the Middle East that was dominated by Greek, Persian, and Egyptian ideas. The New Testament is not fully understandable without this knowledge. Even as Jesus’ thoughts were being remembered and recorded, the Roman Empire was going through dramatic changes.

Today, within a world charged with evolutionary alteration, we acknowledge that culture, our society, is made up of connected and disconnected behaviors and ideas. The ideas from the past – even from Jesus’ day – are still with us and even now they more often than not overlap, interlace, and combine into emerging new configurations. They define who we are and what we believe. Change is challenging for it causes confusion, especially in our values.

The insights of physicist Fritjof Capra are significant. He says we are suffering from a crisis of perception, “It derives from the fact that most of us, and especially our large social institutions, subscribe to the concepts of an outdated worldview, a perception of reality inadequate for dealing with our overpopulated, globally interconnected world.” This worldview divides

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and separates us into religions, races, and cultures. Capra says, “Ultimately – as quantum physics [has] showed so dramatically – there are no parts at all. What we call a part is merely a pattern in an inseparable web of relationships.”

In Capra’s view we must begin to think holistically to meet the challenges change brings with it. Thinking holistically overcomes two conceptual problems that have plagued science for centuries and religion for that matter. First, the interdependence of the patterns and structures of life overcomes the traditional division between the organic and the inorganic, between the living and the nonliving, of Word and Flesh. And second, the interdependence of process and structure overcomes the Cartesian split between mind and matter. We are one in the process of becoming and experience God as our moral consciousness, in our oneness. As Capra noted in his book, An Uncommon Wisdom, “The material world is a network of relationships; a web of relations between various parts of a unified whole. ... Life is understood and exists through mutually consistent relationships; the consistency of this interrelatedness determines the structure of the entire web.” This was the message of the Golden Rule: the dignity you require for yourself, from a moral perspective, must also be provided for others. This is something you should respect and expect. It’s implicit in the teachings of Jesus.

But, you and I both will admit, understanding our evolving relationships and their importance for our lives is a challenge. We find meaning and wholeness in our relationships and they are diminished when we lose our moral connection to others. Jesus said we are to love others as we love ourselves; self-understanding is vital to relationship-building. Remembering the words of Capra, our moral consciousness unites us in a common humanity. And we must ask of ourselves and others, “Have we forsaken the ‘unity’ of life in our self-righteous bab-
bling and religious condemnations while giving only lip-service to the teachings of Jesus?"

Not only has our habitual way of doing things changed, but our sense of self, perhaps unknowingly, has also changed or is changing. Authentic change lies deeply within us. For this reason, keeping the Golden Rule as a guide for living is extremely important. It is a moral compass continually challenging and urging us; pointing to a life of love, compassion, and forgiveness, persuading us to make life better for us and others, even to those yet unborn.

Jesus met the challenges of his day head-on and then confronted them. He instilled doubts among the authorities whom he faced—about their spiritual self and about the theo-political society they wished to manipulate. As a moral teacher, Jesus helped ensure that the moral consciousness of his generation and those that followed would be morally different from that of the previous generation. He prescribed for the spiritual health of his generation a moral rule. His was a liberation theology—"You will know the truth and the truth will set you free."

**A FINE DISTINCTION OF THE GOLDEN RULE** that draws our attention is the advice *to love others as we love ourselves*. This is a revolutionary thought and a tough nut to crack. How do we love ourselves and do other people love themselves the way I love myself? What does all this mean? What does this have to do with loving my neighbor? The contingencies in this statement, their utter variety, cause a bit of doubt about Jesus. We are unsure of what he meant. The uncertainty of this statement causes some to limp away in suspicion and often disbelief. Introspection for many is just too darn distasteful. But, that the Golden Rule turns us inward—to the self—enhances rather than diminishes the rule’s moral meaning. This is perhaps a hint that
self-forgiveness lies at the core of our moral awareness. This is both an unsettling and practical truth.

What Jesus is asking of us is to examine our own self-respect—what we think about how we have lived our lives, what we desire from others, how we wish to be treated. When human life is considered in terms of respect and dignity, when we recognize this in ourselves, it is easier to transfer respect and dignity to others. Jesus is asking us to think about the totality of our lives and how we have lived in relation to others. It is within this framework, the scaffolding of integrity, that the Golden Rule takes its meaning.

And we must take care not to turn Jesus’ words into an ethic of reciprocity only—helping others expecting something in return—or one of Rational Ethical Egoism. Many interpret the Golden Rule in this way, especially those who advocate Rational Choice Theory as a method of decision making. With reciproc-

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38 As the difficulties with psychological egoism emerged, there were others who understood the positive value of self-interest and began to recommend a view that is commonly called “rational or practical ethical egoism.” This theory says that promoting our own greatest good is always in accordance with reason and morality. In 1776 Adam Smith had his own version of this: “by promoting our own good unimpeded by legal or self-imposed moral constraints to protect the welfare of others, would be the most efficient means of advancing the good of all persons—the common good.” Smith, Adam, An inquiry into the nature of causes of the wealth of nations (London: Methuen, 1950; [1776]; 6th edition).

39 Sociologists and political scientists have tried to build theories around the idea that all action is fundamentally “rational” in character and that people calculate the likely costs and benefits of any action before deciding what to do. This approach to theory is known as rational choice theory, and its application to social interaction takes the form of exchange theory. See also: S. L. Green, “Rational choice theory: An overview,” prepared for the Baylor University Faculty Development Seminar on Rational Choice Theory (May 2002). See the following: Becker (1976) “The Economic Approach to Human Behaviour,” in The Economic Approach to Human Behaviour (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press); Radnitzky and Bernholz (1987) Economic imperialism: The Economic Approach Applied Outside the Field Of Economics (New
ty, a small favor can produce a sense of obligation to a larger returned favor. The feeling of obligation allows an action to be reciprocated with another action. And although reciprocity is practical and borderline ethical, left alone in the outstretched arms of wheelers-dealers, it is more prudential (cautiously self-centered) than ethical. There is little that can be called “moral” in reciprocity as we will always be sifting our values through our bargaining power, negotiating this or that value rather than promoting a life of moral integrity. This may be the way of politics and business, but it fails in its moral power. Reciprocity, at its extreme end, is a disguised selfishness or even self-interest that makes everyone’s private interest the “highest court of appeal” when interests conflict.

Philosophers call this “egoism” and egoism fails as a moral theory. It provides no foundation for love and compassion or for dialogue with others. Ethical egoism dominated discussions of moral value in the second half of the 20th century revealing two major types: psychological egoism which asserts that no mat-

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40 Psychological Egoism is an explanatory theory to the effect that we naturally behave out of our own self-interest and so it scarcely needs to be promoted. That is, we can’t do otherwise. The argument is that evolution has built selfish or self-centered behavior into our DNA; it’s a part of our survival mechanism. This is also called “psychological determinism.” Robert Young writes, “Determinists maintain that there is a causal explanation for everything that happens in the universe, human behavior included. This seems to suggest that we do not freely choose to do anything, and this in turn appears to imply that we are not morally responsible for anything we do. Are ethics and determinism in-
ter what we do, we will always act to satisfy our own selfish interests. This is a view of those who posit a “selfish” gene as the origin of our selfish impulse. Our innate selfishness is thus considered a fact of our physical lives. The second type is called rational ethical egoism which maintains that we should always act to promote our self-designed goals and viewpoints. This is not a scientific or descriptive egoism as proposed by psychological egoism, but is an ethic that recommends self-centered behaviors as the best way to survive in a values-diverse world.

EGOISM LEADS TO A DISCUSSION OF RECIPROCITY

which was mentioned above and which I will touch on throughout this book as the golden rule is often interpreted as “an ethic of reciprocity.” This is a view I wish to debunk. We hear reciprocity being expressed everyday in the admonition, “What have you done for me lately.” Care needs to be taken for we often confuse “being moral” with making deals and going along with others just to be nice, friendly, and cooperative. One important ingredient of rationality is the willingness to reassess our value commitments. This means that sometimes we will have to compromise, but compromise does not mean giving up our moral values, it only means that we should listen to others and cooperate in finding the best, most prudent, moral action or direction to take.

When our hold on our most cherished moral values are loosened or put on the bargaining table, we lose control of our lives and are sometimes put in embarrassing positions. Moral


integrity is what defines us as Christians. Without it, we lose our identity and our connection with our consciousness of God as our moral compass. Thus, the Golden Rule cannot be limited to reciprocity or self-interest only. We do bargain; we do make deals; we do make concessions, but all of this should occur in the broadest area of what we think is “moral,” what we believe will make life more compassionate and what will decrease suffering among peoples close to us and around the world. To compromise is not to give up our moral points of view, to make a deal between what is decidedly moral and what is decidedly immoral.

Reciprocity is but one interpretation of the Golden Rule and captures only part of what Jesus meant when he said that we should love others as we love ourselves. Speaking from a purely rational point of view, Professor Kurt Baier explains.

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Professor Kurt Baier (1917-2010), a moral philosopher was German Jew who he fled to London from Vienna to escape Nazi persecution three months before his final legal examinations. Declared an 'enemy alien' at the outbreak of war, Baier was deported to Australia and interned at Hay Internment camp. Here he came in contact with and was inspired by academic German Jewish refugees who had been working at Cambridge University and the London School of Economics prior to the war. At the camp he formed a strong friendship with Fred Gruen, who later became one of Australia’s leading economists. In 1941 Baier was admitted to Melbourne University, where he majored in Philosophy. In the 1950s he joined the Philosophy Department at the Canberra University College (now the Australian National University) and it was here that he wrote The moral point of view (1955). He has published a number of other influential books on the subject of philosophy, including Defining morality without prejudice (1981) and The rational and the moral order: The social roots of reason and morality (1994)—National Portrait Gallery.
Throughout the history of philosophy, by far the most popular candidate for the position of the moral point of view has been self-interest. There are obvious parallels between these two standpoints. Both aim at the good. Both are rational. Both involve deliberation, the surveying and weighing of reasons. The adoption of either yields statements containing the word ‘ought.’ Both involve the notion of self-mastery and control over the desires. It is, moreover, plausible to hold that a person could not have a reason for doing anything whatsoever unless his behavior was designed to promote his own good. Hence, if morality is to have the support of reason, moral reasons must be self-interested, hence the point of view of morality and self-interest must be the same. On the other hand, it seems equally obvious that morality and self-interest are very frequently opposed. Morality often requires us to refrain from doing what self-interest recommends or to do what self-interest forbids. Hence morality and self-interest cannot be the same points of view.

Professor Baier’s explanation is clear: morality cannot rest on self-interest alone. Jesus understood this as he identified love of self and self-forgiveness as only a first step in clarifying our personal connection to a greater humanity. Love of self doesn’t comprise the totality of the Golden Rule; it is merely a first step of organizing our priorities and our view of others. There is a deep psychology lying at the foundation of this recommendation as it requires self-reflection.

We need to think about this carefully for it unearths a deep spiritual logic lying at the heart of the Golden Rule. It compels personal integrity and valuing the integrity of others. It is built on a foundation of empathy, compassion, and forgiveness. Jesus’ words, “You are to love others as you love yourself” can easily be rewritten as “You are to forgive others as you forgive yourselves.” Jesus is urging us to inspect and evaluate our own beliefs, values and behaviors and translate these into moral service for others. This is difficult and doesn’t get any easier as we
grow older. Self-inspection and self-forgiveness are the first steps we are to take in “loving our neighbors as ourselves.”

BEFORE WE MOVE AHEAD, A WORD NEEDS TO BE SAID ABOUT JUSTIFYING WHAT WE BELIEVE AND SAY. Justification implies giving reasons for, explaining, and validating our words and behaviors. “As we love ourselves” appears to be a justification for “loving others,” but it is not—we don’t justify loving others by first loving ourselves. “Loving others as we love ourselves” does not compel us to give reasons for our moral behaviors; it has no inferential or validating qualities. It is merely self-evident. It doesn’t make sense to say, “Nancy I love you” and then add, “Because I first love myself.” This doesn’t seem to be what Jesus had in mind. This phrase should not be thought of as a validation of my love for others.

Rather, Jesus is challenging our introspection and self-understanding. Jesus is reminding us to give serious consideration to how we love ourselves and, given our natural self-centeredness, discover how to extend this love to others. It is within this “how” that we become aware of love’s moral dimensions. Jesus is saying, “Look into your heart. How much do you love yourself? Can you forgive yourself for past indiscretions? Can you forgive others in the same manner? Look inside and find this out; after all, God has forgiven you.”

“Loving others as we love ourselves” ties the two commandments to love God and others in a universal bond. It is the “amazing grace” we sing about in church. It is the grace given by Jesus on the Cross when he asked God to forgive those who betrayed and persecuted him. And we are reminded by the Golden Rule that God’s grace is more than about instant salvation; it encompasses a way of life, a way of loving and forgiving. It requires commitment and is relationship dependent. As the Jewish
theologian Martin Buber\(^{44}\) reminds us, God (Thou, love) is our moral connection to others. It cannot be otherwise.

**A DEEPER, MORE PHILOSOPHICAL LOOK IS NECESSARY FOR UNDERSTANDING** Jesus’ advice to love ourselves as a first step to loving others. From a philosophical perspective this appears to be a view known as “psychological egoism.” Let’s take a break from our biblical discussion of Jesus’ teaching and see what secular philosophers can add to our understanding.

As the difficulties with psychological egoism emerged—the view that we are naturally selfish, born with a selfish gene—there were others who understood the positive value of self-interest and began to recommend a view that is commonly called “rational or practical ethical egoism.” This assumption says that promoting our own greatest good is always in accordance with reason and morality. In 1776 Adam Smith\(^{45}\) had his own version of this. He commented that by promoting our own good unimpeded by legal or self-imposed moral constraints to protect the welfare of others, would be the most efficient means of advancing the good of all persons—the common good.

In a similar fashion, Bishop Butler, a well-known religious philosopher\(^{46}\) of the eighteenth century, commented, “When we sit down in a cool hour, we can neither justify to ourselves this or any other pursuit till we are convinced that it will be for happiness [good].”

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\(^{44}\) See the following by Martin Buber: *I and Thou* (New York: Touchstones, 1971) and *Between man and man* (Routledge; 2 edition, May 5, 2002).

\(^{45}\) Adam Smith, *An inquiry into the nature of causes of the wealth of nations* (London: Methuen, 1950; [1776]; 6\(^{th}\) edition).

Both Smith and Butler took for granted our natural tendencies to take care of self first, but understood that society and community were dependent on our moral sentiments—our desire to serve and promote a greater good than just our own. Smith and Butler are not advocating following our inborn or natural selfishness as a way of life, but are recommending the following: *If my behavior is rational and aims at my own greatest good, then my behavior is right and good, e.g., moral; and looking after my own interests will best promote universal human welfare.*

Their conclusion is direct and simple—by promoting our own good we are indirectly promoting the good of others—all boats rise in a rising tide. Of course this implies understanding the importance of morality as the foundation of civility and community.  

Who could argue with this? Is this what Jesus was saying? Many questions remain: “How is “good” to be defined?” “Is this something subjective and personal or has our understanding of “good” evolved with cultural developments?” “Is ‘good’ more universal and widespread than some think?” “What has love of neighbor got to do with loving myself?”

Also, can we build an ethic on rational egoism, one that produces harmony and looks after the welfare of all people? What happens when my interest, my greatest good as perceived by me, conflicts with your greatest good, your interests, as perceived by you? How and by what means are conflicts of interest to be settled—by violence; by reason; and to what standards do

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we appeal? Do I acquiesce to my moral sentiments as Smith assumed?

Most ethicists would agree that a basic requirement of any ethic is that it must be capable of regulating social behavior and interpersonal conflicts of interest. Does a rational ethical egoism fail on this account? Give this some careful thought: rational ethical egoism may be just an incomplete moral theory, but it may well have some merits, so let’s not toss it away just yet.

Another view comes from Kurt Baier who suggests that being moral requires us to be impartial and that ethical principles should apply to all people equally. This is also a democratic ideal embedded in our Constitution. For example, Baier says that if killing my grandfather to gain my inheritance is in my own best interest, then the rational egoist would approve. But this is not in my grandfather’s best interest and it’s illegal. Thus, I have a moral dilemma that rational ethical egoism cannot resolve. Baier asks, “…should we accept [rational] ethical egoism and so reject ethical conflict regulation, or should we reject [rational] ethical egoism?” This is a far-out example, but he makes his point.

Baier’s also suggests that it’s sometimes contrary to reason to do what’s in our best interest and sometimes contrary to reason not to do it. Life can be complicated, revealing the distorted edges of religious and moral understanding. Children sometimes lie to their parents, cheat a little in school, or post on Facebook images that make them look good, but are not factual. These behaviors are contrary to reason, but when we get away with them, they give us a sense of satisfaction. Doing them over and over again may support a vision of ourselves, but how do we ethically justify such behavior? Is truth only that which most people agree on? Or, is there more? It’s little wonder why some ethicists have advanced theories or rights, justice, duty, and
moral rules to regulate human behavior. Selfishness is a fact of life and rational ethical egoism is a way we many times behave. In seeking a foundation for morals, we must ask if either of these views is adequate as an explanatory theory of human behavior or a foundation for ethics.

Both types of egoism – natural or rational – have uncovered an important characteristic of human behavior: *that we more often than not act out of self-interest and with self-centered motives*. Jesus was aware of this so he directed our attention first to our own attitudes, demeanor, and behaviors. But then he turned to others. Jesus did not say that love of self is a criterion for loving others, but he did indicate that HOW we love ourselves should be given some consideration as we try to figure out the best way to love others. Paradoxically, Jesus was recommending an unselfish ethic understood by how we *selfishly love ourselves.*

Thus, there is some irony in the Golden Rule. The nurture, care, and compassion found in Jesus’ ethic of love is not reciprocity nor is it calculated self-interest—a utilitarian value. Although it does possess a practical utility, the point made by Jesus

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48 I maintain that “unselfishness” does not deny benefits to the person who is giving care and compassion to another. Basically, unselfishness is a behavior that puts the other first and the needs of the care-giver second. This goes to motive; it is the intent of the care that is given that is in question. If the intent is selfish—say for some financial reward—then one can safely say that the action was not unselfish. There is still a debate going on in my own mind as to whether the Golden Rule is unselfish—you first, I’ll take care of my own needs later on—or partially self-centered as indicated by the phrase—“you are to love others as you love yourself.” A person cannot deny his or her natural propensity to love one’s self. I think Jesus knew this and was challenging our introspection. I don’t think Jesus meant that “we justify loving others by first loving ourselves.” The question is “How do you love yourself and can you transfer this love to others?” Of course this entails “forgiveness” as Matthew added the Lord’s Prayer to Jesus’ message. We are challenged to forgive ourselves for our own transgressions and also transfer this forgiveness to others—“as we love ourselves.”
is that examining our innate selfishness is merely a starting point of ethics recognizing the over-whelming power of self-love.

**INTERPRETED BY MATTHEW, JESUS INITIATED A NEW COVENANT** between God and the people of Israel which is summarized in the Golden Rule. We really don’t know who originated the Golden Rule. We know that it’s very old and found in religious expressions and secular forms throughout the world. The history of the Golden Rule points to its valued and collective quality. No one is suggesting that Jesus grew up in a cultural vacuum. Influences prevailed. Interpretations abounded. People disagreed on the significance and meaning of his life. Jesus was quite human and lived at the lower end of the economic scale. Jesus knew the value of family and community, of personal as well as collective welfare, of learning a craft and of beneficial contributing to the family and community. He was of the Jewish faith, a faith that governed his life, and he had listened to the Rabbis that were his teachers.

Over many hundreds of years the Jewish faith had been modified by war and captivity, and was in Jesus’ day undergoing Pharisaical change as well as political pressure by the Romans. Jesus’ genius was the ability to penetrate the teaching of Judaism and focus on its moral core. Jesus referred to his reinterpretation of Judaism as a “New Covenant” and often as “the Way,” which was adopted by later Christians to identify their faith. Christianity was called “the Way” up until the third century. In this context Jesus provided a simple moral pathway to follow, “love God and your neighbor as yourself.”

It is how and why Jesus tied these two commandments together that is important. The bonding of “Loving God and loving neighbor” strikes a moral cord; namely, that we are made for
truth and love, for humanity and humility. I say “humility” because humility reminds us of our foibles and imperfections, and our need for forgiveness and putting away our cultural and religious arrogance. The Golden Rule is a faith statement given legs in John’s first letter. John restated the Golden Rule in simple words (1 John 1:4):

No one has ever seen God. But if we love each other, God lives in us, and his love is brought to full expression in us.

In this relationship is revealed the “logic” of the Golden Rule. For the Christian, this is not only a moral prescription, but one tied to belief and faith. It challenges the inconsistency of our Christian living and urges us forward in moral awareness—an awareness and care for others that respects their humanity and dignity.

Although I believe the Golden Rule to be rational (in a spiritual sense), it is not a scientific fact that can be tested and verified or even justified by rational procedures. We can’t reduce our faith or morality to procedural or socio-biological conclusions only. The inclusion of “God” into our relationships appears to beg the question of rationality and verification for those seeking more scientific conclusions (deductions, inferences). Yet, even though recommended by Darwin and his twentieth century followers, the New Atheists, the Golden Rule remains

49 See the following: Robert Wright, The moral animal: Why we are, the way we are: The new science of evolutionary psychology (New York: Vintage; Reprint edition, August 29, 1995); Richard Dawkins, The Selfish gene (New York: Free Press; Reprint edition, August 24, 2010); and Sam Harris, The moral landscape: How science can determine human values (New York: Free Press; Reprint edition, September 13, 2011).

When explaining my moral vision, I have paused from time to time to talk about how the New Atheists have accounted for morality. I do this because the New Atheists have been highly influential in undercutting humanity’s intrinsic and moral nature. They have projected the property of value (selfishness) into our genetic structure which itself has none. They have provided
a learned way of living with our fellow humans. It is a prescription designed to heal our arrogance and unforgiving nature. It lifts us to a higher plane in which our moral vision is able to take flight and direct our lives. Our experience of God as love is an intuitive self-awareness and an awareness of the moral dignity of others always challenging us and pulling us in the direction of personal dignity and integrity.

And although I claim to be a religious pragmatist, understanding the practical utility of the Golden Rule, I don’t agree with all the claims pragmatists make. Pragmatists are tied to sensory experience for explanation and validation. They generally stick with language as a “tool” for unearthing meaning without committing themselves to that which is assumed or represented by their words. They deny the existence of an inner consciousness, the intrinsic, or the intuitive. Belief and faith they take as too whimsical to be of any rational use. Yet, when I read Darwin, the works of the New Atheists, and pragmatist Richard Rorty, I found them jumping from the physical to the social to the psychological. The New Atheists even said we have a “selfish gene,” but this is a conclusion their physical theory cannot and does not support. In tandem, they all recommend a version of the Golden Rule (of course divorced from the spiritual message inherent in the teachings of Jesus) as a way of improving self and social life in the future. As Charles Taylor⁵⁰ has re-

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minded us, this is a conclusion their own moral theories do not support, but they hold on to their atheism and their physicalism while recommending it anyway.

Because our experience of God is undetectable by science and is often capricious, subject to our emotions and biases, many say that it is useless as a moral guide. Maybe it is, but this experience is only a starting point for religious morality. I agree that we can't build a moral world on subjective and personal preferences only, especially when couched in many-fold religious views. Understanding this, we should use both reason and faith to guide us. Our dignity and character as Christians are at stake. Reason points us to moral consistency and we ought to be morally consistent, in thought as well as in action.

**IT IS A SPIRITUAL RELATIONSHIP THAT LIES AT THE HEART OF THE GOLDEN RULE.** Of course we find that the Golden Rule, especially when explained by John, is also rational and consistent, although innately spiritual. Consistency and rationality are not limited to or contained by the scientific method only. We should also understand that this is conditioned by our understanding of the association between God, us, and others, innately intrinsic and subjective, but also social as relationships lie at its core.

Thus, **subjectivity**\(^5\) lies at the core of a moral Christianity and of our relationships, society, and culture. Under the pres-

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\(^5\) It should be noted that **virtue ethicists** stress the importance of the “subjective” or “attitudinal” commitments necessary for building ethical communities. Since 1960, much of this development has been a product of an ongoing feminist movement, but not feminist only as many male ethicists have begun to stress the motives for being or not being ethical. Self-reflection is needed as you think about these two – male and female – aspects of ethics. How you feel inside has much to do with the way you behave with others.
sure to build a coherent moral point of view from the Bible, we are compelled to be rationally consistent and practical. We desire to be true to the teachings of Jesus and recognize that not all New Testament writers had this concern—especially Paul who came along after Jesus died and also died before the Gospels were written. This understanding will deeply enrich our moral convictions and the purposes of our moral communities.

Encapsulated as I am in a Christian world view, I started shaping the Golden Rule into a meaningful moral prescription, one that is universally applicable. I understood that as I was shaping this commandment, it was also shaping me. This understanding became a backdrop for my interaction with others, and it began to be more than that. Matthew and John’s words took on more depth, quality, and character. Their words became a part of my inner spiritual tissue. Although our capitalistic economic system begs for reciprocity, I made a personal commitment to live by the Golden Rule and not to be pressured by others to violate its central teachings.

Of course I haven’t been perfect in this, but when dealing with others it was foremost in my thoughts. As a rather self-contained person, I have listened when others spoke of their Christian faith, to sermons being preached, and in church park-

Many have argued that there is an innate subjectivism to morals—that a person will not be moral unless she or he feels committed to certain moral ideas and principles and is willing to live by them—all turns on personal commitment. Even the great German philosopher Immanuel Kant, wanting to secure morality in pure reason, realized that no rational moral theory can begin unless someone makes a concerted commitment to the dignity and worth of others. Such a commitment can’t be coerced and still be thought of as moral. Kant, Immanuel, *The metaphysics of morals* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964).

ing lots to those who whispered their disagreements with their minister’s interpretation of the Bible. I have also listened to the rantings of Biblical fundamentalists and to young people honestly trying to make “sense” of their faith in a value-confused and techno-centric world. Not one to react, I have just listened. For some who know me, they may doubt this, but I have reserved philosophical and theological debate for those who have the wherewithal to converse prudently.

The Golden Rule, when internally absorbed, awakened me to a God-consciousness that is immeasurable. And although the abyss of not knowing—of not fully understanding that which cannot be seen or heard physically—had bothered me in the past, this inner doubt no longer lingers or beleaguer my faith journey.

*What I have learned is that whatever preserves and enhances the life of another in the natural cycle of their life is good. Whatever is opposed to one’s physical and moral development is not good. My life orientation is that simple. This defines my religious pragmatism.*

As humans we all grieve, are lonely, and many times are uncertain about our lives. In our life-time we make friends and are prone to mistakes; we worry and are afraid of the future. We love and hate, accuse and condemn, and build families and friendships. We are morally inconsistent and imperfect creatures. Sometimes we sink into despair, but thankfully most of us bob right back up to the surface.

I’ve discovered that when we live in a mutually enhancing relationship with our families, friends and associates, we never need to be lonely or despair. Relationships are the key to the Golden Rule. This understanding has opened me to something that has been there all along: that life is a sacred trust and that truth, beauty, and goodness are not just words. They are gifts,
gifts I have received and that I must continually give to others. Informed by the Golden Rule, giving defines my salvational pathway and lies at the heart of servant leadership of which Jesus is a model.

MANY SECULAR ETHICISTS INTERPRET the Golden Rule as an “ethic of reciprocity” only. I keep coming back to this for it is a dominant ethic of our time. I believe there is more, much more. “God is love” and “loving others” are experiences inextricably bonded in Jesus’ teachings. Unraveling this connection has taken me far beyond reciprocity and has caused me to probe the meaning of “salvation” itself. Salvation has become, at least for me, definitive of a “this-world” moral experience, of listening, giving, caring for and loving others. After my death, if the love I have given to others lingers and is re-gifted and passed along, this is enough; this is my eternity.

53 I have written extensively about the moral foundations of servant leadership in the Journal of Values-Based Leadership. Of importance here is the following: “Building from within: Designing a values-based cultural template;” with Young, H. Darrell, Journal of Values-Based Leadership: Volume 6, Iss.2 (2013) Summer/Fall 2013. Also, see the following: “The moral foundations of ethical leadership,” with Killian, Don R. (2010), Journal of Values-Based Leadership: Vol. 3: Iss. 1, Article 5; Available at: http://scholar.valpo.edu /jvbl/vol3/iss1/5; “The Leader as moral agent: Praise, blame, and the artificial person,” with Killian, Don R. (2011, Journal of Values-Based Leadership: Vol. 4: Iss. 1, Article 8, Available at: http://scholar.valpo.edu/jvbl/vol4/iss1/8; “Value shifts: Redefining ‘leadership’ a narrative”, Journal of Values-Based Leadership: Volume 5, Issue 2, Summer/Fall 2012, Article available at: http://scholar.valpo.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1019&context=jvbl; "Values-Based leadership: A shift in attitude," Journal of Values-Based Leadership: Vol. 5: Iss. 1, Article Available at: http://scholar.valpo.edu/jvbl/vol5/iss1/5, 2012.
Salvation involves self-discovery as a first step in embracing others in what New Testament writers call “agapeic” connections. Herein we will unearth a faith pathway set down by Jesus. This also defines the “new-birth” that Christians talk about. New-birth adds moral depth and quality to one’s life. This is an important understanding and is linked to Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. This interpretation uncovers the moral spirit of Christianity as a way of life rather than just a set of beliefs. In the 3rd chapter of James, James writes:

Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such “wisdom” does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, and demonic. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.

But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.

SHIFING RELIGIOUS CURRENTS DEFINE THE CULTURE OF THE FIRST CENTURY. The Jewish faith was given birth in the home of Abraham in present day Iraq; changed by contact with Egyptian monotheism; and again modified and set in writing during Babylonian captivity. We have a tendency to neglect the Zoroastrian religion which was perhaps the largest faith of the Middle East in Jesus’ time and located in Persia where the Torah of the Old Testament was written. It was Zoroaster who gave us the concept of Messiah that was written about in the OT Book of Isaiah. Cultural influences have a way of being pushed into the backwaters of belief and faith as some religious organizers believe they are reinventing the wheel. That Jesus was influ-
enced by rabbinical teaching and his own economic circumstances, and that the Old and New Testament writers were greatly influenced by their ideological culture, in no way diminishes the role Jesus played as the focal point of Christianity.

Generally, we can think of Jesus as a Jewish teacher, maybe an unofficial rabbi. We know little about his early years but most assume that he had knowledge of the Torah and the Nevi'im (Prophets) and some knowledge of later works such as Psalms that would later be included in the Old Testament Ketuvim or Writings, the final canonized part of the Old Testament. Canonization was completed seventy years or so after Jesus’ death, but the Writings had a long oral tradition passed along through rabbinical teachers. It is apparent that Jesus was familiar with these writings although the Torah was the focus of most Jewish attention during his lifetime.

During Jesus’ life time the two largest groups of Jews, the Judeans and Samaritans, disagreed about the details of their faith. The Samaritans thought of Judeans as inauthentic and the Judeans considered the Samaritans untouchable religious charlatans. This division provides a rich history of how different peoples interpret their faith. Jesus offered a simple moral teaching that reached across these human borders, a pathway to a more complete understanding of God and others, and of our collective moral responsibilities. The Parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10: 29-37 unearths the Golden Rule as a moral bridge between us and others and settles once and for all the question of “who” one’s neighbor is and “how” one’s neighbor is to be loved. It is neither an accident nor a coincidence that Jesus told this story. We can learn much from this parable, especially we Americans who have a somewhat violent multicultural history.
In 2016, Christianity is experiencing a crisis of great religious dimensions. Islam is suffering from an internal crisis as well. Many view Islam as the threat, and it could be. Not unlike Islam, our crisis is spiritual and multidimensional. Ministers throughout Christendom have created many boogey-men—homosexuals, communists, Muslims, etc.—but have failed to look within their own hearts and minds for the deficits they are experiencing in Spiritual Wisdom. They simply and unapologetically recommend the “new covenant,” as expressed by Jesus, to people like themselves. They quote scripture, praise and condemn, but do not understand that we all are controlled by unstable and limiting emotions and that we live in a cauldron of beliefs, demands from others, and the pressures of tradition and established doctrine. We all are trapped within our cultural cocoons, and encapsulation, like Plato’s cave, is a safe haven for those solidified in “their” truth. Experience has taught me that we must understand that “truth” is conceivably a mere reflection—shadows on the wall of our personal prisons.

This being said, the Golden Rule has withstood all these differences and shifting religious currents, and if we look closely, we discover that its applications and meanings have many times varied. Diverse religious leaders like the ancient Pharisees chose carefully what parts of their faith they wished to emphasize. They were strident in their approach. Christians still do this today. In Jesus’ day the Pharisees, in their quest for religious authority and dominance during the 1st Century, provided more

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55 Plato’s begins his theory of knowledge by reminding us that we are all trapped in our own caves of unawareness, biases, and assumptions. See: Republic (514a–520a).
rules than conscientiously could be followed. Some of these seem ridiculously unimportant, perhaps more cultural than spiritual. We see this in every religion. Today, those who believe that “the Bible says” and “God says” are equivalent notions have failed in their understanding of Biblical history and theology, as well as understanding the significance and limits of collective memory.

Yet, we continue to hold on to some of these ideas as sacred and think they are important to our faith. We believe that if they are in the Bible then they are a part of God’s Holy Word, absolute and unchangeable. We have been taught this; it is a part of our culture but more often than not ignores the fact that the Gospel writers disagreed on the interpretation of “Jesus.” They may not have known each other but it does seem that Matthew and Luke were familiar with the writing of Mark, although the purposes of their Gospels differ. Save it to say, in the minds of many, “the Bible says” is equivalent to “God says.” Those who hold this view are no different from other religious fundamentalists. Not so for Jesus as he was not convinced that the Pharisees were the only spokes-persons for God or the Torah the final authority—it gave his Jewish faith a new interpretation that became the foundation of Christianity. Before the Civil War, slavery was defended in just this way. Thinking the Bible supported slavery gave comfort to some—slavery was an ancient practice and in the Bible, therefore it must be condoned by God.

The context of the Golden Rule in Matthew’s Gospel should put us on notice that the “old covenant” of God with the ancient Jews had now been changed. Unearthing this idea, we are challenged to find its “logic”—raison d’être. We will find it in the

way Jesus lived his life and what he taught his disciples. God’s love for all people is the connective tissue of the Golden Rule. With Jesus our faith became more about living God’s Divine Purpose than following ancient rules. And we should understand that the Golden Rule really isn’t a rule in the strict sense of the word; it’s a statement of faith and faithful living. We learn from this teaching that faith is a gift that requires re-gifting to others without condemnation or criticism. Meaning and value, like people, are malleable, fuzzy, and unpredictable. Moral and Spiritual newness comes by granting genuine legitimacy to those values that inspire a sense of connection and enable us to listen to others, and by allowing their voice to be heard.

LIKE THE PHARISEES, WE CONTINUE IN OUR PURSUIT OF AN IDEAL CHRISTIANITY. But the ideal of a singular Christian ethic could be hopelessly lost as many Christians continue to scan the Bible for sins to condemn and prescriptions to follow that are inconsistent with the meanings embedded within Jesus’ teachings. Many turn back to the “old covenant” for their moral understanding; especially the rules entrenched in the Book of Leviticus. Interestingly, many seem to pick and choose their rules based on their own biases and misunderstandings. There is nothing new in this. That many of these rules were cultural, pragmatic, and designed to keep Jewish identity intact appears to be of no consequence to those who consider the Bible, all of it, as God’s Holy Word. That we seek to condemn more than elevate the horizon of our moral awareness has been an ongoing malady affecting Christian ethics in both the pew and pulpit. Jesus sought to correct this.

So, we are challenged to discover the deeper meanings embedded in the Golden Rule and the moral insights of Jesus. The-
se meanings are foundational to our faith. Within the Golden Rule there is conceivably a psychological message to be found: Why do we love some people and despise others? What is it that offends us and why? And what is it that brings us together or pulls us apart? Awareness of these questions and probing our own sensibilities lie at the heart of the Golden Rule as Jesus challenges our introspection with the admonition to “love others as we love ourselves.”

James had his finger along the seam of Jesus’ teaching and perhaps the psychology of our value-orientation when he wrote:

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. But someone will say, “You have faith; I have deeds.” Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds. You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder. You foolish person, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? ...As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.
A MESSAGE OF BENEVOLENCE AND FORGIVENESS

THERE IS A TIMELESS QUALITY TO THE GOLDEN RULE. Jesus was suggesting a new way of life when he quoted Leviticus 19:18, “Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD,” making the Golden Rule more than a moral norm or just another rule in the Jewish canon. As Jesus understood it, the Golden Rule was the center of God’s New Covenant.

From his beatitudes to his parables Jesus enriches and deepens this prescription until we understand that it was a part of his own moral fabric and was definitive of his moral integrity. That he was tuned into the needs of common people of his day, agapeic love became the centerpiece of his ministry.

It was the simplicity of Jesus’ teaching that attracted so many individuals. From his vision and teaching came what today is called “Christianity,” but a Christianity that has been bent and twisted by time and culture, especially as the church became institutionalized, capitalized, politicized, and burdened with the desire to grow in size and influence. Today there are hundreds of cultural and religious differences that fall under the mantle of “Christianity” as it continues to split, divide, and multiply select-
ing a few “set-in-stone” beliefs extracted from the Bible as definitive of its mission and culture.

As Houston Smith said, “From the majestic pontifical High Mass in St. Peter’s to the quiet simplicity of a Quaker meeting, from the intellectual sophistication of Saint Thomas Aquinas to the moving simplicity of spirituals such as ‘Lord, I want to be a Christian,’ from St. Paul’s in London, the parish Church of Great Britain, to Mother Teresa in the slums of Calcutta... all this is Christianity.”

Sadly, the honesty and sincerity of Jesus’ moral teachings would eventually be lost in the complexities of multiple Christian theologies and the political aberrations associated with the development of the institutional church. From St. Augustine to Martin Luther and to modern day TV evangelists, the thread is thin that identifies a singular Christian point of view. The moral teachings of Jesus have been lost as most evangelical Christians stress only the salvational aspects of Jesus, Jesus as Savior and Lord, leaning on the Apostle Paul for their interpretation of Jesus’ life. With this, the faith pathway (John 14:6: “I am the way...”) as exemplified by Jesus was been replaced by extravagant houses of worship, the cross and resurrection, and the immediacy of salvation based on “belief in” rather than “faith as a moral journey.” The desire for eternity coupled with the quest for power and money seem greater than and has overshadowed living in moral relationships with others.

The Apostle Paul, speaking in Corinth—where religion, both pagan and Christian was often based on ecstasy and the ability to speak in tongues and prophesy—had these words to say about love:

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57 Huston Cummings Smith is a religious studies scholar in the United States. His book, The World’s Religions, has sold over two million copies and remains a popular introduction to comparative religion.
1 If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. 2 If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. 3 If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

4 Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. 5 It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. 6 Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. 7 It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

8 Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. 9 For we know in part and we prophesy in part, 10 but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. 11 When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. 12 For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. 13 And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

THE GOLDEN RULE ACCENTUATES AN ETHIC OF LOVE AND FORGIVENESS. As a moral prescription the Golden Rule is behaviorally oriented revealing the logic of reciprocity, but as already mentioned, reciprocity survives only as a thinly disguised moral prescription living on the periphery of the Golden Rule. You can read many books that interpret the Golden Rule in this way. But reciprocity is a secular ethic and doesn’t reveal the spiritual message embedded in the moral nature of Jesus’ teachings. One has to go deeper and beyond the Sermon on the
Mount to the 22nd Chapter of Matthew and to the first letter of John to grasp its meaning.

“Loving others” is inextricably tied to “loving God” or “God as love.” One is caused to pause and wonder what these words share, what has one to do with the other; that is, why does Jesus link our moral behavior to our belief in and love of God and God’s love for us? Why did Jesus select these two commandments as definitive of his faith pathway and then recommend them to us?

In trying to answer this question, I have joined Jesus’ two commandments—to love God and to love others as we love ourselves—in an undeniable logic and to an ethic of forgiveness. That I interpret the Golden Rule in this way means that living the Golden Rule, not just “believing in it,” is the starting place of personal moral evaluation. This understanding requires deep self-introspection as we try to understand how we actually love ourselves. What is revealed in Jesus’ words is that we give birth to ourselves in our relationships with others. This is a moral “rebirth,” a this-world salvational experience.

Thus the Golden Rule is relationship oriented—an expression of community in the widest sense but also in a personal sense that is undeniable. What is it in our human nature that draws us to others or separates us? How we love ourselves and why we detest others requires deep reflection for it is within community where moral awareness is stimulated and moral meaning is to be found. That communities and nations have evolved from families and tribes should remind us that we are built for relationships. Relationships are often broken and nations have discriminated against their own citizens and have been warlike to others. This reveals a huge vacuum in moral awareness and the need for moral understanding.
I have mentioned that for Jesus, the journey into moral awareness was a “faith journey.” As we embrace this journey, the WAY, we will find that it is forward looking signifying hope as it discloses our spirituality as a multiversum of open possibilities. It recognizes no utopian perfectionism. It is giving and forgiving, a service of authenticating our moral consciousness. Its unifying thread is its suggestiveness, fertility, and forward-moving character as it is shaped in our relationships with others. Consequently, faith is resilient and is able to preserve the place of the creative and inquiring mind in its search for Spiritual Wisdom. It is a quickening source of life, a dynamic reason; reason in action.

STRAIGHT IS THE GATE AND NARROW IS THE WAY is a teaching that needs our attention. Jesus said,

“Strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it” is exampled by Jesus in the following: “It is as difficult for a rich man to enter into the Kingdom of Heaven as it is for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle.” Matthew 7: 13-14

This teaching is not based on dogmatic claims of a limited salvation for the minority, of belief in rather than following the WAY of Jesus; rather, it is based on the state of a person’s heart, one’s spirituality. That Jesus taught the Kingdom of Heaven (God) lies inside of us means that Heaven is an attitude or state

58 See: Hester, Joseph P. An ethic of hope (West Conshohocken, PA: Infinity Publishers, 2008). In this book I noted that “hope,” defined as an optimistic attitude of mind based on an expectation of positive outcomes related to events and circumstances in one’s life or the world at large, anchors Paul’s vision of Christianity as it stands between “faith” and “charity” (the moral life) expecting positive outcomes.
of mind that defines our character as one who is living a life of love and compassion.\footnote{I reached this conclusion thinking about Jesus’ words that “the Kingdom of Heaven lies within.” The scriptures are inconsistent on this point, but I concluded that if God is unseen and experienced as a moral consciousness, then perhaps, what we leave behind in this world for others to growth on is the heaven I should seek.} Thus, self-evaluation and introspection lie near the heart of the Golden Rule. It is in this inside person where love and forgiveness begin. Although this was a 2\textsuperscript{nd} century interpretation of Jesus’ teaching, and Jesus had not “returned” as some thought he would, it remains consistent with his moral teachings.

Jesus was drawing comparisons between the broad way and the narrow way: the broad way is the way of reciprocity, of physical desire, the desire to control and rule others, to possess power and riches, the living of an easy, comfortable and care-free life. The broad way avoids responsibility and spiritually profitable experiences.

The narrow way is the WAY Jesus lived his life as He walked the earth and displayed Divine Love for all to see never compromising his values or experience of God’s love. Jesus’ teaching challenges us to examine our biases – “as you love yourself” – and then prods us to open our hearts in love for others, to joining the moral pathway, breathing life and vitality into our lives.

Believing in the Golden Rule is inconsequential if we don’t live it. We must strive to act consistently within the understanding of our moral vision. This is difficult and demanding for becoming children of God is a pathway requiring effort, spiritual awareness, and forgiveness. This inner experience informs us that God is a universal and dynamic moral consciousness that lives within our associations with others and our challenge is to respond positively to this awareness. We can hold our hands
high in worship thanking God for his grace and forgiveness and we can turn our palms upward in prayer waiting for God's grace, but if we don’t respond to Jesus’ teaching by the way we live our lives, all is for naught.

IT IS IMPOSSIBLE FOR ME TO CLASSIFY, abstract, generalize, reduce to uniformities, deduce, calculate and summarize in rigid, timeless formula a positive statement of the Golden Rule.\(^{60}\) The Golden Rule cannot be formalized, laid down in a set of rules, or totally encapsulated in rigid belief. What passes from one culture to another requires interpretation, not regurgitation. Regurgitation is a backward flowing of ideas and beliefs. Looking back we can only see where we have been. Looking forward with hope, we see the possibilities of living the Christian life. Scanning the horizon of our biases and discriminatory behaviors, we are relieved from overfilling our lives with jealousy, hate, and condemnation by the simple words of Jesus: “Love your neighbors as you love yourselves.” We need to drive our emotions and behaviors manually, to think before we act or speak because manual driving is what defines our character.

Jesus tied his faith to the needs of humanity, all humanity, and knew that it is within the throes of daily living where God is to be experienced. He thus provided a guide, a Golden Rule, as a connective tissue between us, others, and God. The Jewish Philosopher Martin Buber\(^{61}\) understood this. As Buber pointed out, it is between man and man where God is encountered. Our ex-

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\(^{61}\) Martin Buber, *Between man and man* (New York: Routledge, 2nd edition, May 5, 2002). God as our moral consciousness is relationship based as is morality. The mystical nature of this relationship is spelled out by Buber in his book *I and Thou*. 
perience of God is thus a human, moral experience in which there is a natural fluidity and moral purpose that identifies our faith journey. And although personal and individual, our moral consciousness is also relational—it links us to the life of Jesus as the WAY we are to live with others. You will notice that Jesus offers no guarantees as to how others will respond to us. Life is open-ended, fluid, and many times uncertain. I have reached these conclusions:

Faith is creative and dynamic, tied not to the past, but a stepping into a moral journey with others.

Faith is fluid and transformational. It welcomes change acknowledging that the world doesn’t have to be as it is.

Faith is our collaboration with the future.

Faith is the activity of the soul seeking Spiritual Wisdom and not a set of propositions about which we are told to believe.

Faith is traveling a rocky road between me and others with God’s moral presence pulling my commitment forward.

Faith lifts us to the horizon of moral possibility.

Faith uplifts the creative imagination and envisions a future of loving relationships.

Faith, not religion is the starting point of ethics; religion is its conduit and symbolic expression.

Faith, which generates our hope for a more ethical world, enables us to leave self in the shadows and reach out to others. (1 Corinthians 13:13)

Many will differ with my thesis as the Golden Rule has been interpreted collectively – by the church and theologians – and individually, by each believer. Understanding it as a shorthand version of the WAY is a challenge as is living our faith pathway, but John made it clear that God is known only in our love for our fellow humans. This is often overlooked by evangelical Christians who continue pushing a “plan of salvation” while ignoring the moral dimensions of our faith with hearts full of
compassion and forgiveness. It is much easier to say I believe or sing about the “love of God” than to enjoin the moral pathway.

It is within the connective tissue of living with others, imbued with God’s love for us and our positive response to others, where Spiritual Wisdom is given birth.

*Spiritual Wisdom is our insightful and respectful connection with others.*

Jesus’ teachings were clear about this. For example, in John’s Gospel the parable of the Good Samaritan taught that we should love our neighbor, despite who our neighbor happens to be, and be respectful and tolerant of individual differences. Spiritual Wisdom provides a moral vision for the future and vision is important for it lifts the horizon of our lives in moral awareness. It’s revealed to us as a moral commitment to love one another. John was clear on this point. The Spiritual message embodied within Christian belief is a message of giving and serving.

**IN SUMMARY, THERE ARE THREE EXPERIENCES THAT LIE AT THE HEART OF JESUS’ TEACHING:** “loving God,” “loving others as we love ourselves,” and experiencing God “as love.” John made it clear that it is God’s love and grace – his moral energy – that enables our capacity for compassion and forgiveness. This capacity is noted by John when he pointed out that God’s Word, Divine Purpose, was embodied in flesh; not just the flesh of Jesus, but our flesh as well (John 1:12). We are responsible for responding to this gift. This lies at the heart of being a Christian. It is a salvational experience in a most meaningful, living sense.

The *Book of Hebrews* also made it clear to the Jewish Christians of the first century that Jesus had brought forth a “new
covenant” (Hebrews 11) and, in the Sermon on the Mount, the Golden Rule is the heart of this covenant. In this sermon Jesus teaches us both the WHYS and HOWS of living in relationship with others. That God is love fulfills this capacity within us.

We are daily challenged to allow moral wisdom to lead our thinking. Our internal relationship with God enables our understanding and moral completion. It is open-ended and flexible; communication based, and mutually oriented. John says that we have been given the capacity and responsibility to become morally aware and morally active (John 1:12), but this is our choice. We are therefore challenged to make a responsive commitment to activate the moral-consciousness that lies within us. It is through positive moral relationships that our identity and eternity are built.

*Herein lays our spiritual possibility.* It opens us to positive moral relationships with others. Consequently, Spiritual Wisdom is our unbending center, which is both normative and moral, and through which we translate the reality around us. Spiritual Wisdom entails our moral ought and prescribes a new way of life, a moral life of giving and serving. It qualifies us to “see” the dignity and importance of all life and respond appropriately. It is our universal “ought” that is both prescriptive and descriptive, informing our behavior, our values, with reason and intuitive power.

In my eight year odyssey of writing about spiritual wisdom, I reached the following conclusions some of which I listed at the beginning of this book:

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62 Spiritual possibility, ignoring the lifeless results of statistics that give us only averages and probabilities, opens life to endless opportunities for positive ethical relationships. Thus, “faith” is creative and dynamic, tied not to the past but “a stepping into a moral journey with others.” Faith is my collaboration with the future. Faith is dialogic and often dialectic. There is not an absolute or clearly articulated faith pathway; its complexities are demanding.
Spiritual Energy involves a change of perception—a new framework of moral consciousness.

Spiritual Energy is a becoming—it is learning to see others with empathy and compassion.

Spiritual Wisdom challenges us to examine our moral connections in terms of a moral unity.

Spiritual Wisdom comes as we break the chains that limit our thinking and extend our benevolence to others.

Spiritual Wisdom couples our emotional bent with our rational ability as interpreters of our beliefs and commitments.

Spiritual Wisdom enables us to grasp our moral purpose.

Spiritual Wisdom encourages us to balance our lives with practical moral skill.

Spiritual Wisdom invokes a moral *ought* in our lives.

Spiritual Wisdom is a gift of God’s energy, but it always requires our response.

Spiritual Wisdom is an interior relationship with God pushing exterior applications.

Spiritual Wisdom is difficult. We are never a finished product. Incompleteness is a part of our human nature.

Spiritual Wisdom is not an exclusive experience; it is shareable and this is where its meaning and purpose are found.

Spiritual Wisdom is tentative and uncertain, a pathway lit by a continual conversation with God.

Spiritual Wisdom is the moral core that persuades us. It is the moral activity of self in relationship with God and others.
Spiritual Wisdom is the motion of God within us, the calm wind of God’s spirit. It lies in the insight and the wisdom and skill to behave morally and uprightly in a world that has neglected a morally-based engagement with others.

Spiritual Wisdom is transformational; a life-time process.

Spiritual Wisdom leads to an understanding of the unity of all nature and all people, and the seminal equality of all things.

Spiritual Wisdom reveals that communication and cooperation are needed in a world clouded with moral conflict and a value’s recession.

Spiritual Wisdom seeks community and understanding.

Spiritual Wisdom threatens the dictatorship of the present.

Spiritual Wisdom understands the dignity and importance of all life and compels us to respond appropriately.

Spiritual Wisdom, as a moral white light, illuminates and brings into focus all that we are and hope to become. Stepping into the white light of moral consciousness illuminates our lives and lifts us from the darkness of our biases and unbending impressions of life.

Spirituality is the development of our moral consciousness in relationship to God’s purpose of love and benevolence.
THE GOLDEN RULE SECULAR AND RELIGIOUS

THE GOLDEN RULE LIES AT THE HEART OF JESUS’ TEACHING though its origins are unknown and formulations can be found in many Asian cultures. According to the Dalai Lama, “Every religion emphasizes human improvement, love, respect for others, sharing other people’s suffering. On these lines every religion had more or less the same viewpoint and the same goal.” The moral goal expressed by the Dalai Lama is an essential part of the Golden Rule, but for Jesus the meanings attached to human dignity, love, and respect cannot be dislodged from his faith journey – the WAY – a way of life lived with an inner consciousness of God as the embodiment of love itself.

For Jesus the Golden Rule is the Way of salvation.\(^\text{63}\) There is a certain rationale to this as interpreted by Matthew and even John. This rationale, logic if you will, will be explored in Chapter 5. Here I would like to touch on other formulations of the Golden Rule including philosophical and religious versions and make a few more comments about reciprocity as an ethical model. I will make an effort to distinguish these versions of the Golden

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\(^{63}\) I have mentioned earlier in this manuscript that salvation seems, to me, to be more of a way of life than something earned or given as a “heavenly” reward.
Rule from that of Jesus. This is a general discussion about which there is much philosophical literature. I do not maintain that the varieties of the Golden Rule are equivalent. Meanings embedded in time and cultures differ. That Christians find their faith in ancient writings, both the Old and New Testaments, means that we should try to discover the logic engraved in Jesus’ words. Care needs to be taken as not to read into the Golden Rule unintended meanings and consequences. This will be difficult for Christianity has a long history and many interpretations of it vary. Consider the following formulations of the Golden Rule:\(^64\)

**Baha’i Faith:**

*Ascribe not to any soul that which thou wouldst not have ascribed to thee, and say not that which thou dost not. Blessed is he who preferreth his brother before himself.* Baha’u’llah

*And if thine eyes be turned towards justice, choose thou for thy neighbour that which thou choosest for thyself.* Epistle to the Son of the Wolf

**Brahmanism:**

*This is the sum of Dharma [duty]: Do naught unto others which would cause you pain if done to you.*

**Buddhism:**

...*a state that is not pleasing or delightful to me, how could I inflict that upon another?* Samyutta Nikaya V. 353

*Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful.* Udana-Varga 5:18

**Christianity:**

\(^64\) See the following: [http://www.religious.tolerance.org/reciproc.htm](http://www.religious.tolerance.org/reciproc.htm).
Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them; for this is the law and the prophets. Matthew 7:12 KJV

And as ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise. Luke 6:31 KJV

...and don’t do what you hate. Gospel of Thomas 6

Confucianism:
Do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you.
Analects 15:23

Tse-kung asked, “Is there one word that can serve as a principle of conduct for life?” Confucius replied, “It is the word ‘shu’ – reciprocity. Do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire.” Doctrine of the Mean 13.3

Ancient Egyptian:
Do for one who may do for you, that you may cause him thus to do. The Tale of the Eloquent Peasant is perhaps the earliest version of the Ethic of Reciprocity.

Hinduism:
This is the sum duty: do not to others what would cause pain if done to you. Mahabharata 5:1517

Islam:
None of you [truly] believes until he wishes for his brother what he wishes for himself. Number 13 of Iman, “Al-Nawawi’s Forty Hadiths”

Jainism:
Therefore, neither does he [a sage] cause violence to others nor does he make others do so. Acarangasutra 5.101-2
In happiness and suffering, in joy and grief, we should regard all creatures as we regard our own self. Lord Mahavira, 24th Tirthankara

A man should wander about treating all creatures as he himself would be treated. Sutrakritanga 1.11.33

Judaism:

...thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. Leviticus 19:18

What is hateful to you, do not to your fellow man. This is the law: all the rest is commentary. Talmud, Shabat 31a

And what you hate, do not do to anyone. Tobit 4:1

Taoism:

Regard your neighbor’s gain as your gain, and your neighbor’s loss as your own loss. Tai Shang Kan Yin P’ien

To those who are good to me, I am good; to those who are not good to me, I am also good. Thus all get to be good.

Zoroastrianism:

That nature alone is good which refrains from doing to another whatsoever is not good for itself. Dadisten-I-dinik, 94, 5

Whatever is disagreeable to yourself do not do unto others. Shayast-na-Shayast 13:29

INSCRIBED IN RELIGIOUS FORMULA MANY OF THE ABOVE ETHICAL BLUEPRINTS are generally consistent with what philosophers have called “the moral point of view.”65 All of

65 Kurt Baier says, “Throughout the history of philosophy, by far the most popular candidate for the position of the moral point of view has been self-interest. There are obvious parallels between these two standpoints. Both aim at the good. Both are rational. Both involve deliberation, the surveying and
the above formulations of the Golden Rule, although they are expressed religiously, share in this consistency. Philosophers Kurt Baier and Kai Nielsen\textsuperscript{66} have provided some poignant insights; namely, that a universal morality cannot be based on the ethnocentricities of religion alone nor on personal beliefs lest morality becomes completely subjective. They have sought a common ethic based on rational principles rather than religious beliefs. Their purpose is to articulate an ethic that is culturally free, perhaps free also from any particular religious belief.\textsuperscript{67} This is conceivably impossible, but we need to give attention to what they say. It seems that the Golden Rule was adopted across many religions and cultures as a pragmatic ethic to fulfill the moral aims of the faith in which it was encased. There is some evidence that this is true. Variations of the Golden Rule have weighing of reasons. The adoption of either yields statements containing the word ‘ought.’ Both involve the notion of self-mastery and control over the desires. It is, moreover, plausible to hold that a person could not have a reason for doing anything whatsoever unless his behavior was designed to promote his own good. Hence, if morality is to have the support of reason, moral reasons must be self-interested, hence the point of view of morality and self-interest must be the same. On the other hand, it seems equally obvious that morality and self-interest are very frequently opposed. Morality often requires us to refrain from doing what self-interest recommends or to do what self-interest forbids. Hence morality and self-interest cannot be the same points of view.” Kurt Baier, \textit{The Moral point of view} (New York: Mcgraw-Hill College; Abridged edition, June 1965).

\textsuperscript{66} Kai Nielsen, \textit{Naturalism without foundations} (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books; 1\textsuperscript{st} Edition, August 1, 1996).

\textsuperscript{67} Joseph P. Hester & Don R. Killian, “The so-called ethnocentric fallacy,” \textit{The Southern Journal of Philosophy}, Vol. XIII, No. 3, 1975. In this article we argue that ethnocentrism or cultural prejudice is not a logical fallacy as some have assumed, but a cultural fact that is difficult to avoid. It should be pointed out that being totally “culture free” is impossible. “Reason” itself is a product of the European Enlightenment and as a method of garnering truth is not shared worldwide. Even in the West, postmodern philosophers are now questioning reasons’ assumptions. Also see: Richard Rorty, \textit{Philosophy and social hope} for a thorough discussion of this topic (New York: Penguin Books, 1999).
indeed been recognized across cultures as important and universal moral components of both faith and society. The purpose of these variations is to direct conduct in general with particular sub-rules of behavior later written into commandment and law.

Baier and Nielsen have commented that such an ideal moral view will function as a standard by which one’s everyday ethical decisions can be judged. This is conceivably what these differing formulations of the Golden Rule have in common, although the everyday rules attached to them reflect their particular views born in time and culture. It could not be otherwise. Both Baier and Nielsen seek a “rational” principle of moral behavior that can be recommended to everybody alike. They wish it to be culturally free and somewhat free from personal emotions and beliefs. Their reliance on reason as a standard of objectivity supersedes faith, belief, and the various intrinsic values attached to religion. The supremacy of reason is one by-product of the European Enlightenment and an assumption embraced by America’s founders in the United States Constitution. It’s little wonder that historians have pointed to the debate or struggle between faith and reason as characteristic of our modern era.

Notably, rational philosophers have difficulty with the intrinsic—the creative, emotional, sentimental, believing side of human cognitive ability. For this reason pragmatists have decried the dichotomy between the intrinsic and that which is contrived by our own making saying that both are simply cultural tools for understanding and dealing with life as it is experienced.

The intrinsic can’t easily be set to or conform to logical deduction or logical consistency. It is an aspect of human essentialism that many in science find implausible. I believe Jesus would have thought his own ethic rational, practical, and to have had a certain common sense nature about it, given the
religious environment in which he lived. That it shoulders the stamp of his faith and culture in no way diminishes its ethical importance nor are the foundations of the Golden Rule mentioned above unimportant.

I commented\textsuperscript{68} about the subjective or intrinsic nature of moral reasoning some 40 years ago as I noted the various personal commitments one must make to be moral and even rationally moral. Among these commitments are the following: the commitment to reason itself; the commitment to prudence—that is, to think of personal goals and the effects of one’s actions on others; a minimal commitment to the dignity and importance of humanity perhaps arising in the way we have been reared and educated; and finally, a commitment to rethinking or re-assessing our decisions in the light of our own purposes and goals and those of others. These are intrinsic and personal and undergird any commitment to being moral, especially moral in the sense of the Golden Rule. Morality cannot arise in a cultural or personal vacuum. Aristotle noted this many years before Jesus and stressed the importance of family and school in the development of character.

Continuing our discussion of faith and reason, on the rational side of the debate, Baier says, “Let it be granted, then, that principles of behavior can be recommended to everybody if they successfully promote the best possible life for everybody, and that the best possible life for everybody cannot be achieved in isolation but only in social contexts in which the pursuits of each impinge on the pursuits of others.” This seems common sense and pragmatic.

\textsuperscript{68} Joseph P. Hester, “Subjective commitment and the problem of moral objectivity, \textit{Journal of Philosophy and Phenomenological Research} Vol. XXXV, No. 4, June 1975. What many have ignored is that the choice to be rational is a “subjective” choice that lies outside the boundaries of logic.
Two things stand out in Baier’s view: (1) the promotion of the best possible life for everybody (how to define “best possible” is still debatable) and (2) the social nature of morality. Both Baier and Nielsen agree that the point of view of morality looks at the world from the point of view of everyone. To be moral is to recognize that others too, have a right to a worthwhile life. That is, the point of view of morality decry's prejudice and inequality. This I take as what Baier means by the “best possible for everybody.” If we limit Jesus’ formulation to ethics only, I think Jesus would agree. This was the message in the parable of the Good Samaritan and the many miracles attributed to him. From this perspective, Christians too have interpreted the Golden Rule as universal—for everybody alike—similar to that used by Baier and Nielsen. The difference is that for Christians the Golden Rule is God-dependent and is a statement of faith and belief. From a philosophical point of view, Baier and Nielsen think it a human, rational prescription that describes an important feature of the moral point of view.

SO FAR THE SECULARISTS AND JESUS ARE IN GENERAL AGREEMENT about ethics. Also the other formulations of the Golden Rule found in various ancient religions are close to the vision articulated by Jesus. The idea behind these views is “non-discrimination.” That is, the standard for morality and any ethical rule that follows from the moral point of view is that we are not to discriminate—moral rules are to applied to all in an equal manner; that is, if they are in fact moral rules.

We often say, “What’s good for the goose is good for the gander.” There is some truth in this old saying. Equality, fairness, and responsibility lie at the core of morality and, hence, of the Golden Rule. Universal equality and nondiscrimination are therefore necessary conditions of morality. In Jesus’ formula-
tion, found in both Matthew and John, this necessity holds, but is not sufficient to complete the Golden Rule from a religious or faith perspective. Something else is required, including understanding how we love ourselves. This connection is made by John by defining God “as love.” It is made by Matthew by including the commandment to “love God” as part of the binary nature of the Golden Rule.

**SELFISH IMPULSES OFTEN DEFINE OUR INTRINSIC NATURE.** By agreeing that morality is for everyone alike (universal) is designed to over-ride our selfish impulses. Jesus too was concerned with our innate self-centeredness. This is why he identifies “love of self” as a first step for loving others. We accept this generally noting that many people are pathological and have an abnormal view of themselves and others. There are exceptions to every general rule. But Jesus was encouraging introspection—“How do others wish to be treated?” and “How do I wish to be treated?” Sometimes the answers to these questions are difficult to understand. Unraveling their meaning is necessary for understanding Jesus’ message.

The assumption of Jesus as well modern moral philosophers is that normal rational persons are able to understand and weigh their behaviors by their effect on others. Without the ability to think and reason, the message of Jesus would have fallen on deaf ears. The point being made is to acknowledge

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69 To love others as we love ourselves does not elicit a justification for loving others, but challenges us to figure out how we love ourselves and then extend this same love to others. This extension is sometimes called “empathy.” Empathy marks a way of life, a moral way of life we are challenged to understand. It entails recognizing our own autonomy, dignity, and integrity and then identifying and honoring the dignity, autonomy, and integrity of others.

70 Anyone interested in the philosophical study of ethics should read *A companion to ethics* edited by Peter Singer (New York: Blackwell, 1995).
that we all live in community and decisions between and among people often clash. We are required or at least asked to think about our words and actions. A careful examination of our own motives and feelings is required to discover the nuances of self-love and then apply “love of self” to “loving others.” This examination unites us with all humanity and makes “love of neighbor,” in the words of Jesus, universally sound.

Nielsen comments that whether or not you are moral or immoral depends “on the sort of person you are” revealing the intrinsic and perhaps whimsical nature of morality. This was what Jesus was talking about when he challenged us to love others as we love ourselves. The meaning of this directive needs unpacking.

*Character is important and Nielsen is struggling with our intrinsic nature, a nature that is often illogical and self-possessed; a nature that is often defined by our beliefs and values. So he says, “...fundamental moral principles cannot correctly be said to be true or false independently of the attitudes of at least some people.”

After all, Nielsen asks, “Are not all people partly egoist (selfish) and partly other-regarding (moral) in their behavior?” Think about this for a moment and you can see that “reason” doesn’t always work smoothly. Seldom is our moral highway unencumbered and smooth. It’s more about how we deal with the rough patches that occur from time to time, than attending prayer meetings, church socials, and contributing to church bazaars. Also, there is much in our lives that is subjective, prejudiced, slanted, and disingenuous. “To reason” requires a commitment by someone and this is almost always personal and subjective. It’s so easy to attend church and just listen. Thinking about and living the words of Jesus is difficult. Entrenched beliefs many times block our willingness to use reason—especially when
looking at the history and development of the New Testament—and thus causes a tunnel vision not easily overcome. It accentuates our misunderstandings and our biases.

In the 18th Century, Immanuel Kant could perhaps agree with Nielsen on this point.\textsuperscript{71} Kant, wanting to secure morality in pure reason, realized that no purely logical moral theory can begin unless someone makes a concerted commitment to the dignity and worth of others. If I interpret Kant correctly, he is saying that reason, in this regard, is never “pure” even when mathematically and logically based. Also, reason can’t produce moral commitment; such a commitment will always be subjective and intrinsic. It is this “isness” about who we are, about our character, which lies in the background of Kant’s ethic. Thus, Kant “blinks” in his commitment to “pure reason.” Life has a natural ifiness about it. Jesus too understood this as he turned our attention to introspection: loving others as we love ourselves.

Secular philosophers believe, and so did Jesus, that we have a practical responsibility to support our moral claims with reason. Our rational self provides the means for this to happen. It is our rational, sensing, imagining, intuitive self that informs us of the world around us. The response and validation of our behavior is our hands. And this is not something we should do to achieve our religious goals or for some other reciprocal cause. Rather, in the words of Kant, this is doing what is good for its own sake in deciding what kind of person we are to be. This is why Jesus encouraged us to look inside and examine our selfish

\textsuperscript{71} Nielsen and Kant both agreed that the intrinsic or reflexive examination of attitudes and motives is where moral commitment begins. Thus, we are challenged to strike a delicate balance between the intrinsic and the reflective or rational decisions that we make. See: Kant, Immanuel, \textit{Critique of pure reason} (Seattle: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, October 10, 2013).
motives, to treat others as we demand to be treated, to examine our character and, hence, moral purposes.

LIKE KANT, NIELSEN DEVELOPS A HUMANISTIC RATIONAL ETHICS and insightfully mentions that “morality doesn’t presuppose religion; religion presupposes morality.” Think about this for a minute. This is an interesting observation and I believe it’s consistent with the teachings of Jesus. “Christianity,” as an institutionalized set of beliefs and practices – a religion – presupposes or takes for granted our experience of and awareness of God and the truth in Jesus’ teaching. In this sense our spirituality can exist without (organized) religion, but religion cannot exist without our spirituality. This is one of the most insightful teachings I have discovered in modern moral philosophy. It corresponds beautifully with the teachings of Jesus. Our faith comes before church. Our moral awareness of others, our intrinsic spiritual health, and our commitment to follow the pathway Jesus set before us are the essence of our faith. The spirit speaks, enlivens, and moves us in moral awareness. Some ministers don’t get this. With their capitalistic motives to “build” large congregations and houses of worship, they have forgotten about the spiritual health of their congregations. Again I reference the parable of the Good Samaritan as a focal point in Jesus’ teaching.

The Golden Rule links our consciousness of God as love to loving and caring for our fellow humans. Jesus doesn’t rely on

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72 In this instance religion is considered that which is organized and institutionalized. All religions make certain assumptions (called beliefs) and the assumption or belief that lies at the heart of Christianity is “God is love.” Again I am asserting the primacy of personal faith and moral commitment—the reflexive self over the reflective self; the existential self over the institutionalized self.
his Jewish faith alone to express the Golden Rule. He embodied the wisdom of God and applied it consistently in his relationships with others. In Leviticus the Golden Rule is just one among many other rules the Hebrew people are told to follow. With Jesus, this is the linchpin of his faith. He develops this idea in his teaching, healing, and parables. For Jesus, the Golden Rule is not secured and justified by quoting scripture, but in the experience and awareness of God in loving others, in treating them, as Baier would say, “...as equally important centers of craving, impulses, desires, needs, aims, and aspirations; as people with ends of their own, all of which are entitled to be attained.”

Practically speaking, Baier and Nielsen are probably right about NOT anchoring ethics in institutionalized religious belief. Belief is such a fickled commodity and when belief becomes entrenched in a person it tends to suck the life out of faith as a journey toward completeness. An obstruction many religious people place in front of their ethic is “God” as an “idea,” a God who is a “cultural construct” defined and redefined by the church and its doctrines. This is not the God who is a conscious moral experience. Many have applied to God various superhuman characteristics that we don’t hear in the words of Jesus. For Jesus, as well as John especially, “God is love,” and our experience of God’s love informs our moral consciousness and behavior. Even Paul, with his dramatic experience of God and limited interpretation of Jesus’ life, was able to express the core of Christian faith in three simple words: faith, hope, and love. He understood and knew that the greatest of these is love for love embodies the other two: love of others is the core of our faith and anchors our hope in moral possibility.

WE NEED TO RETURN AGAIN TO THE IDEA RECIPROCITY.
I keep pounding on this for many have interpreted the Golden
Rule as a reciprocating ethic, saying that it only states that we are to treat other people as we would wish to be treated ourselves. But hidden in the idea of “reciprocity” is “a-what’s-in-it-for-me-motive.” Those who espouse an ethic of reciprocity have translated the admonition to “love others as we love ourselves” into an ethic of self-interest (rational ethical egoism). A faith based on self-interest has no moral concern for others, only a concern with personal eternity and avoiding the fires of hell. So, if you’re a Christian and your reasons for being moral are either getting into heaven or just doing what the Bible says, you have avoided Jesus’ admonition to “love others as you love yourself.”

Jesus’ motive was clear: loving others is the way we love God and parenthetically, the way God loves us. The phrase “as we love ourselves” doesn’t point to “reasons” for loving others, for this entails a reciprocal ethic. Rather, Jesus is talking about “how” we love ourselves. And this “how” requires introspection and deep reflection, examining conscious and unconscious motives and being willing to forgive. In Chapter Six the Golden Rule will be more fully explained as an ethic of forgiveness.

From a strictly moral perspective an ethic of reciprocity suggests a general orientation toward others, an outlook for understanding our relations with them. At the least, we should not impact others negatively, treating their interests as secondary or unimportant. Yet, it fails our God consciousness when we limit the Golden Rule to reciprocal behavior only. The role of reciprocity in the everyday affairs of our lives diminishes the meaning and impact of the Golden Rule—of serving others and giving with no strings attached, or forgiving when we have been hurt and neglected. The meaning of the Golden Rule as reciprocity only settles itself into the give-and-take of asking and granting favors, arm twisting, and false promises. This is reflected in our many prayers asking God for favors, his grace, under-
standing that if I go to church, tithe, and treat others decently I too will gain, in the end, eternal life.

I admit that when we connect the Golden Rule to loving God we can’t be sure of its entire meaning. There are some blurred edges surrounding the Golden Rule that need our clarification. Because people vary in their beliefs and religious ideas, a broad sweep through its many formulations yields a variety of interpretations. Many Eastern religions stress philosophy of life over theological concepts; Western religions often do the opposite. Non-theistic ethical and philosophic systems, like Humanism and Ethical Culture, also exhibit a wide range of beliefs. However, there is near unanimity of opinion among almost all religions, ethical systems, and philosophies on one topic: that each person should treat others with dignity and respect. When we understand this, we must acknowledge the world-wide impact of the Golden Rule.

A result is the idea that every person shares certain inherent human rights defined by their humanity. Democracy was founded on this idea. People are individually very different; they come in different sizes, colors, and shapes; various sexual orientations and gender identities, different degrees of ability, etc. They follow many religious and economic systems, speak many languages, and follow many different cultures. Also, there is a growing consensus around the world that all humans should be considered equal in importance and that all should enjoy basic

73 Humanism is an outlook or system of thought attaching prime importance to human rather than divine or supernatural matters. Humanist beliefs stress the potential value and goodness of human beings, emphasize common human needs, and seek solely rational ways of solving human problems. Ethical Culture, a humanist movement, is premised on the idea that honoring and living in accordance with ethical principles is central to what it takes to live meaningful and fulfilling lives, and to creating a world that is good for all. Practitioners of Ethical Culture focus on supporting one another in becoming better people, and on doing good in the world.
human rights. In itself, this expands the meaning of the Golden Rule and seems an assumption displayed in Jesus’ teaching. With its prevailing influence, perhaps lying behind the belief in “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” is the influence of the Golden Rule.

In some cultures the Golden Rule assumed existing peer-conventions for interacting with clan-members, neighbors, co-workers, friends and siblings. Only when this rule was made a centerpiece of social interaction for Jesus and his followers did it become a more radical message, crossing class, clan and tribal boundaries within Judaism, thus expanding its moral value. The rule in Jesus’ teaching is applied to outcasts and those below one’s station—the poor, lepers, Samaritans, and certain heathens. Also, in Jesus’ teaching the rule takes on a spiritual meaning as it is inextricably tied to belief in God as love.

**EMBEDDED WITHIN THE VARIOUS VERSIONS OF THE GOLDEN RULE** is its corollary, the so-called “silver rule”\(^{74}\) that focuses on restraint and no-harm: “Do nothing to others you would not have done to you.” A certain legalism is hidden in these words as “do not” follows its proactive “do unto” prescription. Here there is a benevolent spirit as the rule advises against unsavory intents and projects. Here again “love your neighbor as yourself” comes into play as Jesus understood that our motives, our intentions to behave in one way or another are important. Both Nielsen and Kant stressed this as they observed that to be moral depends on what kind of person you are committed to be. Compassion and forgiveness were not always a part of this rule in other ancient cultures, but Jesus made them so.

\(^{74}\) See: [http://www.iep.utm.edu/goldrule/](http://www.iep.utm.edu/goldrule/).
In many cultures, the “others” in “do unto others” was interpreted as “relevant others”—my family and friends, work associates and members of my church—which made the rule much easier to follow. With this, the ethic of reciprocity was given legs to stand on. This is found today in many Christian circles as people of different ethnic, sexual, and religious cultures are often condemned and considered culturally inferior or atheists. Interpretations vary, even among devout Christians many have yet to unlock the logic in Jesus’ teaching. Yet, in the past, for the Golden rule to have become so pervasive across historical epochs and cultures suggests a growing suspicion of class and ethnic distinctions—challenging these as inhuman and artificial classifications. This trend dovetails nicely with the rule’s challenge to selfishness at the personal level and fits nicely into some 20th century definitions of the “moral point of view.” The rule’s philosophical recasting as a universal principle qualifies most of its versions as a moral theory. Developing a moral theory was not Jesus’ intention. His life and his teaching were models for moral living and it is moral living that is important.

The silver component of the Golden Rule merely bids that we do no harm by mistreating others—not treating them the way we would not wish to be treated. There is a general moral consensus in any society on what constitutes harms and mistreatments, wrongs and injustices. The silver rule is mostly educative in this context, helping us understand why we expect certain behaviors from each other: “How does it feel” when others violate our expectations? If the Golden Rule is designed for small-group interaction, where face-to-face relations dominate, a failure to reciprocate in kind will be noticed. It cannot be hidden as in anonymous, institutionally-mediated cooperation at a distance. There is a legitimate reciprocal nature to the Golden Rule, but this should not obscure how it was intended by Jesus.
“AGAPE” OR “TO LOVE OTHERS UNCONDITIONALLY” APPEARS TO DOMINATE JESUS’ ETHIC AND NOT RECIPROCITY. A likely path of connecting *agape* with the Golden Rule is to consider how we ideally wish to be treated by others. Wouldn’t we prefer mutual love to mere respect or toleration? But though we might wish to be treated with care and compassion, we might not wish to reciprocate in kind. Feelings of reciprocity are natural to us, but Jesus challenges us to put these feelings in the background and enter a relationship with God who will help us identify our *agapeic* intentions.

*Agapeistic love* is not interested in race, gender, or sexual orientation. Its bestowal is not based on anything in particular about the person, only that they are a person. For Jesus and the Golden Rule, *agape* defines our humanity and relationships with others. *Agape*—coupled with fairness, equality, and nondiscrimination—*completes the necessary and sufficient conditions of the Golden Rule*. This sufficiently qualifies others to be loved.

And *agape* doesn’t come from a selfinterested desire to be love or get something in return. It comes from a natural feeling of *empathy* to care for others; it is the good luring us with its goodness. The same is true for self-regard. We love ourselves because we are lovable and valuable, like anyone else. The soul within us is lovable whether we happen to like ourselves or not. This is the nature of *agape* the crown jewel of which is our ability to forgive as we have been forgiven—to forgive ourselves and others.

The most obvious ethical implication of *agape* is that it is *not* socially discriminating. We do not love people because they are attractive, or hold compatible views, or work in a profession we respect. Are they friend, stranger, or opponent? It doesn’t matter. Most surprising, we are challenged to not only love only those closest to us or in a special relationship with us, but all
others. This is terribly difficult and exposes the “narrow way” to which Jesus often referred.

From a secular and rational perspective, we understand the Golden Rule as a standard way of behaving, “Always act so that you treat any other person, in any context, the way that you would rationally prefer and expressively choose to be treated in that context.” Immanuel Kant’s over-arching perspective captures this idea: “Never treat someone in a way that would not draw their consent.” Notice that “the standard way” among philosophers is simply to claim that “the way that you would rationally prefer” means consent or reasonable preference without sufficient argument or justification. Underlying this notion in Kant, and parenthetically in Jesus, is the recognition of our essential humanity or humanness from which comes the moral concept of “humaneness” the standards of which are care, compassion, dignity, kindness, consideration, understanding, sympathy, and tolerance.

From a practical perspective, the Golden Rule focuses on good ways to ideally achieve good ends:

*Love the good with your whole mind, your whole heart and your whole strength, and then you will love your neighbor as yourself, and also treat her/him as you’d wish to be treated by her/him.*

This commitment ideally leads to the embodiment of the spirit of the Rule. No doubt, as we mature in our social relationships, we are challenged to polish our personal mirror, our mirror of self-interest. It is the mirror of self-interest and self-love that the Rule challenges us to reconsider. Widening this mirror to see not only ourselves, but others, continually lifts the horizon of our moral veracity.
CHAPTER FIVE

AS YOU LOVE YOURSELF

A DISTURBING PHRASE ENCASED IN THE GOLDEN RULE
is “as you love yourself.” I pause in my dissertatum about the
Golden Rule to talk more about the “self” and to give some
meaning to this phrase. Not being a psychologist, my purpose is
to clarify what is meant by the “moral self” only. This I think was
the intention of Jesus. I was compelled to read more about
“self” and “introspection” and put in modern words what I be-
lieve Jesus meant when he said, “You are to love others as you
love yourself.” I have to admit that Jesus’ words in Matthew
were puzzling and caused in me some deep reflection.

So, being duly frustrated, for clarification I turned to a line
of reasoning developed by Charles Taylor in his book The Ethics
of Authenticity. For Taylor “authenticity” is a “moral ideal”
which he further explicated in Sources of Self the Making of
Modern Identity, a book I highly recommend to the interested
reader. I think Taylor’s explanations more fully explain why Je-
sus turned to self-reflection as a condition for morality. Self-
discovery was important for Jesus, but we should be aware that
in the act of self-discovery and self-creation our individual nar-
cissism often pits us against the rules of society and potentially
to what we recognize as morality. In modern words, Jesus’ con-
cern was how to lift the veil of narcissism that often blocks our
participation with others with an attitude of dignity and respect. This theme lies at its core of the Parable of the Good Samaritan.

**TAYLOR DEFINES AN “ETHIC OF AUTHENTICITY”** as an ethic that broadens the horizon of our moral concern and behavior. He says, emphatically that everyone has a right to develop their own form of life ground in what they think is important. But, this centering on the self, this unabashed individualism, often shuts out “the greater issues or concerns that transcend the self, be they religious, political or historical. As a consequence, life is narrowed and flattened.”

An ethic of authenticity lifts and broadens our moral horizons; it is not self-negating, but other-including. The understanding of this ethic will illuminate and deepen the meaning of Jesus’ words “to love others as we love ourselves” as it points us “towards a more self-responsible form of life.” It engages our self-reflection and moves us to a life “beyond self” to a common consciousness of what it means to be human. For Taylor, and I believe for Jesus, this is a “moral ideal” we are challenged to live into. As Taylor says, “A better or higher mode of life would be where ‘better’ and ‘higher’ are defined not in terms of what we happen to desire or need, but offer a standard of what we ought to desire.” Jesus was not talking about our “rights” under Roman law or under the religious laws of Judaism. Rather, he was talking about a way of life, a moral way of life.

For Taylor authenticity is derived from our human connections, our relationships, and it is in this dialogical setting of human life that we are bound together and morally obligated to give equal recognition and equal value to others—in the words of Jesus, “To love others as we love ourselves.” Not all agree with this, but from our shared values we are able to generate
moral principles as guidelines for human behavior such as the following:

1) We should strive to be people of good character.
2) We should care for one another.
3) We should always treat others with dignity and appreciation.
4) We ought not to discriminate against others but value their individual rights and personal dignity.
5) All humans have the same inalienable rights; namely, the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.
6) We ought to always try to understand the views of others and be more tolerant of human diversity and differences.

THE CHALLENGES TO THE MORAL IDEAL OF AUTHENTICITY ARE MANY. SOME DISAGREE WITH THIS MORAL IDEAL. Consider the following:

(1) The first challenge is individualism. We who live in a democracy consider ourselves “free” to pursue any lifestyle we choose. We learn from the media, from our parents, and from our friends that we have a right to choose our values for ourselves. Everyone has his or her own values. In our democratic society this is a given, but due to the fact that we must cooperate with others to get along in life, we should give some thought to how our values are shaped by others and how they shape our children, friends, and work associates. We have been told that there is a moral force to self-fulfillment, and in some ways it is. We are compelled to be true to ourselves. Consistency in this is a matter of personal integrity.

Jesus seemed to sense this asked “How do you love yourself?” “Can you love others in this same way?” Jesus wasn’t saying that all values are personal and perhaps self-generated. He
was saying, “Yes, your values are personal and you have a right to your own personal development, when he coupled “loving self” with “loving others” he was also directing us to an ethic beyond individualism, beyond egoism, and beyond the self to a standard of what we ought to desire as necessary for living in community.

Self-understanding is important. So is individualism and self-recognition. But these values, if they’re all we live by, can turn us so deeply inward that we lose a sense of the importance of human connection, of the purposes of communal living. Jesus turned us outward, not away from self, but to a way of joining with others in a higher moral purpose. Taylor comments,

This loss of purpose was linked to a narrowing. People lost the broader vision because they focused on their individual lives. Democratic equality, says Tocqueville, draws the individual towards himself. ... In other words, the dark side of individualism is a centering on the self, which both flattens and narrows our lives, makes them poorer in meaning, and less concerned with others or society.

(2) The second reason some disagree with Taylor’s “moral ideal” is today’s domination of “instrumental reason.”

75 Someone displays instrumentally rationality insofar as s/he adopts suitable means to her/his ends. But how should “rationality” be understood? Here it is important to distinguish between two things that the casually phrased question, “What would it be rational for an agent to do or intend?” could mean:

1. By doing or intending what would the agent make her/him responses (i.e., her attitudes and actions) cohere with one another? Call the answer, stipulatively, what it would be rationally coherent for the agent to do or intend.

2. What does the agent have reason, or ought s/he, to do or intend? This is the question that an agent characteristically asks when she is deliberating about what to do or intend, or when someone else is advising her/him what to do or intend. (Note that claims about reasons are weaker than claims about “oughts”. One could have a reason to do something without it being the case that one ought to do it, as when the reason is outweighed by competing reasons. However, it is generally thought that if one ought to do something, then
(practical) reasoning formed the backbone of utilitarian and pragmatic philosophy\textsuperscript{76} and has dominated American life for more than a century. Some remember the principle articulated by John Dewey known as “the greatest good for the greatest number.” This is a kind of reasoning we draw on when we begin to calculate the best (however we define “best”) application of a means to a given end. Fundamentally, it is a measure of success and success in American society is considered a moral attribute.

On the other hand, instrumental reasoning or practical rationality appears to threaten the authority of the moral in our lives. It seems possible that acting morally on some occasion might not be a suitable means to a person’s ends. If so, then according to this thesis, it would not be irrational for a person to refuse to act morally on such an occasion. Instrumental or practical reasoning reinforces the reciprocal nature of our relations with others asking, “What have you done for me lately?” or “You do this for me and I will return the favor.” Reciprocity always asks, “How will this choice benefit me?” not “How will it benefit us?”

From the point of view of morality we can ask, “Are other people only the ‘raw material’ or ‘instruments’ for our projects, for our self-fulfillment. This idea cuts against the grain of Kant’s ideal that we should treat others not as means to our own ends, but as ends in themselves. It violates not only the dignity of

\textsuperscript{76} Both Utilitarians and Pragmatists protest that they are eminently reasonable & empirical & scientific, involving no assumptions of mystical or magical thinking (i.e. “intuitions”)—yet they almost certainly clearly do. See: http://forums.philosophyforums.com/threads/pragmatism-vs-utilitarianism-28246.html.
others, but our dignity and integrity as well. This also is a nega-
tion of the Golden Rule that urges us to love others completely
and unarguably as we love ourselves.

Instrumental reasoning seems to have taken over our lives
in terms of efficiency, cost-benefit analysis, or increased test
scores as a measure of educational progress. We often forget
that in the workplace or in the classroom the worker, the pa-
tient, and the student are to be treated as a whole person with
a life story, and not, as Taylor said, “The locus of a technical
problem.”

(3) There is a third reason Taylor mentions why people in gen-
eral have rejected “the moral ideal.” This reason is more diffi-
cult to define for it lurks in the shadows of our lives and appears
so natural. What Taylor is talking about is the political/social
culture in which we live. Taylor says,

*It is that the institutions and structures of industrial-
technological society severely restrict our choices, that they
force societies as well as individuals to give a weight to instru-
mental [prudent/practical] reason that in serious moral deliber-
ation we would never do and which may even be highly destruc-
tive.*

Did you listen to the political debates of 2016? Scientists tell
us we have a thinning ozone layer and it is in part our own fault.
But to correct this problem will cost money, a change of life-
style, and a loss of some freedoms (to go on doing those things
that pollute the environment). Life patterns will have to be
changed; even our driving, eating, and garbage disposal habits.
And we don’t like change. We don’t want to be bothered and
some politicians are saying that “some” scientists disagree that
our environment is in danger. Who are we to believe? We usu-
ally go along the easiest road taking the path that best defines
what we want to do rather than what we ought to do. Individu-
alism, what we call "our freedom of choice," takes over our lives and dominates our decisions. And it’s a fact that many of us prefer to stay enclosed in our own hearts and enjoy the satisfactions of private life and let the politicians do the thinking for us just so long as they the government protects us, sustains the economy in which we participate, and keeps our lives basically as they are.

WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED IS THAT RELATIONSHIPS DEFINE THE IDEAL OF AUTHENTICITY more than anything else as relationships direct our attention to how people ought to live together. Jesus turned to individualism to offer some view on how we should live—to turn individualism into self-exploration and self-discovery as among the most important forms of self-fulfillment. Charles Taylor says,

This view reflects the continuation in modern culture of a trend that is now centuries old and that places the centre of gravity of the good life not in some higher sphere but in what I want to call 'ordinary life,' that is, the life of production and the family, of work and love. Yet it also reflects something else that is important here: the acknowledgement that our identity requires recognition by others. ... But the importance of recognition has been modified and intensified [in modern times] by the understanding of identity emerging with the ideal of authenticity. ... My own identity crucially depends on my dialogical relations with others.

In the Golden Rule, Self-confirmation and self-discovery (as you love yourself) find their meaning in relationships (loving others). Jesus was far ahead of his day in saying, “You are to love others as you love yourself.” His too was an ethic of authenticity, first recognizing the importance of the universal recognition of our human differences (religious, cultural, racial,
sexual, economic, etc.) and second, the importance of the identity-forming love relationships between people. “Loving others as you love yourself” carries this meaning. It recognizes the equal value of different ways of being human.

Of course, just because we’re different can’t by itself be the foundation of equal value. Taylor comments, “If men and women are equal, it is not because they are different.” Rather, it’s because we all share a common property or complimentary properties which are of value. Thus, we are identified as people with common properties, capable of love, memory, human communication, and of sharing a common consciousness. Hence arises our individuality and dignity as persons of value and the value of relationships that are the cornerstone of our lives.

Thus, an Ethic of Authenticity concerns the manner of our actions as well as the content of our actions—how we conduct ourselves and the basic values that drive our lives. We are individuals and the way (manner) we live is peculiar to ourselves. Don’t confuse your freedom to be who you are with how you live with others. You may be a Muslim or a Jew; a Republican or Democrat and this is your self-referentiality involving your beliefs, family, and larger culture. This is unavoidable, but don’t confuse your “right” to your beliefs with how you behave with others.

Your beliefs are your self-orientation; how you conduct your life in your larger relationships represent your moral-orientation. So, if you say, “What’s right for me may not be right for you,” remember you are only referring to things you believe are of value and espousing an ethic of personal fulfillment. But when these are reconsidered – our contact and relationships with others at home, work, even at church – we are challenged to realize a higher and fuller mode of authenticity that lifts us
from the shallow water of self love to the deeper waters of “love for others.”

Taylor reminds us in his Sources of the Self, that morality is concerned with not only with what we ought to do, but is also the affirmation of our ordinary lives, not merely what we ought to do or have a right to do, but what it is good to be. Given this moral orientation, Jesus is asking us not to try to calculate the greatest good for the greatest number in an impersonal ethical calculus, but to give consideration to who we are and how we live with others – our relationships – what it is good to be. It is in the deep soil of our relationships that we are able to unearth the roots of respect for life and integrity and thereby lift and broaden the moral horizon or our self and others.
THE LOGIC OF THE GOLDEN RULE

WHAT DOES THE GOLDEN RULE ASK OF US? Returning to the Sermon on the Mount, the Golden Rule can be interpreted as a summary of Jesus’ teaching. During this sermon Jesus tells us what our commitment to God and to love others ask of us. Studying Matthew 5-7, one can easily see that Jesus is teaching us how to live as human beings. Examining Jesus’ words we discover the HOW’S as well as the WHY’S of the Golden Rule.

The Beatitudes – Matthew 5:3-12

First, Jesus blesses those who are already following the commandment to love God and others. They are not braggarts, but meek and poor in spirit. They actively mourn the loss of loved ones and are merciful as they seek righteousness. This makes them pure in heart. And that’s not all: they are peacemakers and although persecuted, they should rejoice and be thankful for their connection to God and their friends. They are known by their compassion and empathy, how they live their lives. Jesus calls them “the salt of the earth” and a “light” for the world to see God’s love living and active in the world. He says:
Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.
Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.
Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.
Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.
Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.
Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.
You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet.
You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden.
Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house.
In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

Jesus continues his teaching about HOW to live a moral life. He stresses the importance of obeying certain laws, laws which the Jewish people were indeed familiar. These include avoiding anger; not to murder; to reconcile our differences as preparation for worship; and to pay our debts. He goes on to say that we should avoid lust and adultery, divorce, bearing false witness
against another person, to avoid retaliation for misdeeds done to you and perhaps to go overboard in building relationships with others. Jesus continues by telling us that we are to love our enemies and provide for the needy among us. This is not to be done in a boastful manner. In like manner Jesus says that we should pray authentically as a private act of worship.

Jesus then pauses and offers what has come to be called “The Lord’s Prayer.” This is a prayer of thanksgiving and of seeking God’s support. A strong emphasis is put on forgiveness: Jesus says, “For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.” This strong emphasis on forgiveness is a message through which the Golden Rule is to be interpreted.

Jesus then talks about fasting and more importantly, about making God a priority in one’s life: “No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money. With this Jesus says that we should not be anxious, but accept God as a moral guide in our lives. He concludes: “Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.”

Perhaps a summary of Jesus’ teaching is found in his discussion of judging others. Jesus says,

Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you. Why do you see the speck that is in your brother’s eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when there is the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother’s eye.
Next, Jesus talks about our responsibility of responding to God’s moral energy in our lives. He says:

*Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and it will be opened to you; for everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!*  

These teachings, set in the context of the first century Jewish faith, are generally transferable to our day and time. They are practical and ethical, linked to God and our human relationships. With this being said, Jesus summarizes his teaching with the first version of the Golden Rule:

*So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.*

**MANY HAVE TRANSLATED THIS RULE AS “THE LAW OF RECIPROCITY.”** Clearly we can see that built into the Golden Rule are reciprocal relationships. But to say that it is *reciprocal only* is misleading. Perhaps this is why later on Jesus gave a much fuller statement of the Golden Rule when asked by one who had expertise in Jewish law: “Master, which is the great commandment in the law?” Jesus gives his answer which is provided by Matthew 22:37-39:

> 37 And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with your entire mind.  
> 38 This is the great and first commandment.  
> 39 And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”
Jesus did not outpace his Jewish teaching, but chose carefully what he believed important. He pulled from Deuteronomy 10:12:

“And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God ask of you but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in obedience to him, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul.”

The Apostle John, when writing his letters, remembered these words and said the following (1 John 4:21):

“And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister.”

It is this more complete version of the Golden Rule to which we now turn.

**THE LOGIC OF THE GOLDEN RULE REVEALS AN EXPERIENCE OF FAITH.** The most common version of the Golden Rule expressed by Jesus is in his Sermon on the Mount and recorded in Matthew’s Gospel. Here we find morality and ethics tied to belief in God. Logic is revealed in this rule, especially when we combine Matthew’s version with John’s interpretation in his letters. In this chapter are some technical logical ideas. These are unavoidable and will be used and explained clearly as the logic of the Golden Rule is revealed. Some phrases used in Mathew’s version need to be explained. At first glance they seem out of place, contradictory, and misleading.

Consider Matthew’s narrative:

Matthew 22:36-4077

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77 At first glance these two statements seemed contradictory or at least inconsistent when included in Matthew’s version of the Golden Rule. John, in his first letter, clarifies this misapprehension and provides a logical version of the Golden Rule.
Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?

Jesus replied: Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with your entire mind.
This is the first and greatest commandment.

And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself.

All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.

Let’s break this down:

1) Jesus is asked a question the answer to which goes to the heart of his faith, the Jewish faith.
2) He replied with two answers: “We are to love God” and “We are to love our fellow humans.”
3) He says that the first commandment is the greatest but also says that the second, “to love one’s fellow humans,” is LIKE IT. Does this mean that “loving God” and “loving neighbor” have the same meaning? If the commandment to love God is the GREATEST, how do we interpret “LIKE IT”?
4) Two problems are revealed: The first is one of meaning: “What does “LIKE IT” mean, and the second, “How do we interpret ‘GREATEST’ if ‘LIKE IT’ means ‘the same’ as the first commandment?”

LET’S TAKE A LOOK AT SOME “POSSIBLE” INTERPRETATIONS of Matthew’s version of the Golden Rule. First, “Like it” can mean “similar to” or “approximating.” This is a “weak sense of identity” leaving the first commandment, “the greatest” – to love God – intact. This can be interpreted in the following way:

“You are to love God and then look inside to discover what kind of love this is and make use of it in loving your fellow humans.”

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But, the commandment throws us another curve ball: “We are to love others as we love ourselves.” This seems to weaken the idea that “loving others” and “loving God” have the same meaning, or are alike.

Second, we can interpret “LIKE IT” to mean “the same as” or “identical to.” This is “the strong sense of ‘like it’.” Christians have interpreted God’s love for humankind as “agape love” meaning “complete love,” “love with no strings attached,” or “love given without demanding anything in return,” differing with the idea of “reciprocity.” This meaning is embodied in the idea of God’s grace and forgiveness, given to us even when it is undeserving.

That we are to love others as God loves us is a stretch for most people, so let’s take a closer look. Two interpretations capture the meaning of “agape”: “unselfish love” and “selfless love.”

Unselfish love doesn’t deny benefits to the one giving the love. There will be benefits, but getting something tangible out of unselfish love is not love’s primary motive.

Unselfish love puts the person being loved or cared for first and the needs of the giver second. On the other hand, selfless love, uncommon among human beings, is putting the recipient of care and love above self-needs.

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78 A love that puts others first with no consideration for self is a selfless love. This is a very rare kind of love and has been documented but lacks the practicality or realism of an effective morality. Jesus did not recommend “selfless” love; rather, his approach was closer to rational ethical egoism that puts self-considerations first and others second. One could argue that Jesus was recommending unselfish love that puts others ahead of personal needs and concerns, but the phrase “as you love yourself” seems to favor a more self-centered love of examining personal needs and the way we take care of ourselves and then transferring this attitude (empathy) to others.
These two meanings – *unselfish love and selfless love* – appear to color the meanings of “greatest” and “like it” in Matthew’s account. Could be, but there could be more. Jesus may have had something more practical and human in mind. Consider Luke’s rendering of Jesus’ commandment in his 6th Chapter, verses 27-31:

“But 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 abuse you. To one who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also, and from one who takes away your cloak do not withhold your tunic either. Give to everyone who begs from you, and from one who takes away your goods do not demand them back. And as you wish that others would do to you, do so to them.

Luke’s translation of Jesus’ words does not have the force of a commandment and *nothing is said* in this context about loving God. This appears as practical moral advice although a little extreme by modern day standards, especially about “turning the other cheek,” “giving to anyone who begs of you” and “not demanding from a thief what the thief has stolen.” The intent of these words seems to be “caring for” and “serving humankind,” of “not causing harm” to others—the so-called “silver rule.” Luke differs somewhat from Matthew. Perhaps Luke thought of Jesus giving practical moral advice, but his words don’t have the force or intention of Matthew’s version. Perhaps Luke is giving levelheaded advice during a time when the Jewish people were under Roman rule. To understand the Golden Rule in Luke, we should consider its context and refer to both Matthew and John for a more developed spiritual meaning.

**IS THERE ANY “LOGIC” OR INFERENTIAL CAPACITY INCORPORATEED WITHIN THE GOLDEN RULE** in Matthew’s
Gospel? Putting Luke aside, let’s examine this possibility. First, we must define some key words:

**Logical equivalence** is a type of relationship between two statements or sentences that translates verbally into “if and only if.” Applied to the Golden Rule, this reads: “We love God if and only if we love our neighbor as we love ourselves” and “We love our neighbor as we love ourselves if and only if we love God.” Is this what “LIKE IT” means? A problem remains as Jesus identified the First Commandment – to love God – as the GREATER of the two.

A **tautology** is a formula which is “always true” because the subject and predicate of the formula mean exactly the same thing. To say that “love of neighbor” and “love of God” is a tautology seems a little odd. Is Jesus saying they have the same meaning? We have already questioned their similarity, weak and strong. What more can be said? Let’s dig a little deeper.

A believer’s experience of loving others and loving God seem to have different meanings which call into question Jesus’ words: “The second is LIKE IT.” We are tied to our senses and can physically interact with our neighbors. We are able to experience our neighbors’ behavior and emotions all of which temper the love or care we have for them in negative or positive ways. On the other hand, God cannot be seen, and believers don’t experience God’s emotions or behavior like they experience those of their friends and neighbors. Thus, loving an unseen God and loving a seen neighbor are different—one is physical and the other spiritual. When these differences are exposed, what then does “LIKE IT” mean?

Another thing that colors a believer’s love of both neighbor and God is the requirement “to love my neighbor as I love myself.” Does this mean by implication that I should love God as I
love myself; that is, if the second commandment is LIKE the first commandment? “Love of God” and “love of neighbor” seem to have different meanings and it is unclear what Jesus is saying by using the directive, “as I love myself.” The question of whether the two components of the Golden Rule mean the same leaves the believer in a vague area. The differences in meaning may be more than the believer can overcome as he or she seeks a clear explanation.

In John’s letters we discover another interpretation of the golden Rule that may bring some clarity to our discussion. John will help clear up Matthew’s version including the phrases “the greatest,” “Like it,” and the directive “to love others as we love ourselves.” John’s version more clearly explains WHY the two commandments to love God and to love others are equally important and perhaps have a uniform meaning. Perhaps we are searching for meaning in the words “LIKE IT,” and we are looking in the wrong place for an answer. Conceivably, it’s not that these two commandments have the same meaning, or are logically equivalent, but that they are equally important—one does not hold without the other. They are necessary and sufficient conditions for living the Christian moral life. But in John it seems as if “loving ones neighbor” is logically equivalent to “loving God” (have the same meaning). Let’s explore John’s version.

I John 1:11-17

Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has seen God at any time; if we love one another, God abides in us, and His love is perfected in us. By this we know that we abide in Him and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit. Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. We have come to know and have believed the love which God has for us. God is love, and the one who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. By this,
love is perfected with us, so that we may have confidence in the
day of judgment; because as He is, so also are we in this world....

There are some important components to John’s Golden Rule:

1) We ought to love others because God loves us.
2) God is unseen but lives in us as a moral Spirit.
3) By definition, God is love.
4) God’s love is made known by the care and forgiveness we
give to others.

John seems to have unraveled some of the mystery of the
Golden Rule and has given it both spiritual and moral legs. In
Matthew’s Gospel we are told that loving God is the greatest
commandment. John answers the question WHY: because God
loves us. This is not merely a reciprocating love – I’ll bargain
with God and love because I’ll get the reward of heaven. Rather,
this is a fulfillment of our created capacity:

But as many as received Him, to them He gave the capacity to
become children of God, even to those who believe in His name,
who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of
the will of man, but of God. John 1:12-13

CONTAINED IN THE GOLDEN RULE THERE IS A MORAL
OUGHT—religiously interpreted by Matthew and John—that
defines our humanity. This MORAL OUGHT is that we are obli-
gated to love our fellow human beings. Matthew adds “as we
love ourselves,” but the believer or ethicist should not be de-

79 In the history of moral thinking the word “ought” signifies a moral obliga-
tion; that we ought or should behave morally. “Ought” implies the prescriptive
nature of morality. It doesn’t describe what we are doing, but “suggests” what
we should be doing.
tered by this advice. This advice is designed to make one stop and think: “How do I love myself?

_God’s love is the standard by which we are to love others, and practically speaking, we are challenged to adjust our own self-love to God’s love for us and our love for each other._

Self-love is not the standard for loving others. John explains that God’s love for us is the standard and examining this standard we uncover the meaning of love and forgiveness in Jesus’ teaching. The Golden Rule and especially John’s interpretation, reveals what Jesus believed to be humanity’s intrinsic spiritual nature:

_God created us out of love and his love for us is made complete by how we love or treat/care for each other._

This is the essence of the Golden Rule.

**RETURNING TO WHAT SOME HAVE CALLED THE “SILVER RULE,”** there is a negative focus on personal restraint and doing no-harm to others: “Do nothing to others you would not have done to you.” This is a negative recasting in the traditional “Do not” framework of some religious commandments. There is a benevolent spirit in this as the rule advises against unsavory intents and projects, emphasizing our motives as well as our actions. For the Golden rule to have become so pervasive across historical epochs and cultures suggests a growing suspicion of class and ethnic distinctions—challenging ethnocentrism.\(^8^0\) This trend dovetails nicely with the rule’s challenge to selfishness at the personal level and fits nicely into Kant’s moral philosophy,

\(^8^0\) Ethnocentrism is the belief in the inherent superiority of one’s own ethnic group or culture; a tendency to view alien groups or cultures from the perspective of one’s own.
as well as into some 20th century definitions of the “moral point of view.” The rule’s philosophical recasting as a universal principle qualifies most of its versions as a moral theory. This was not Jesus’ purpose.

**THE LOGIC OF EQUIVALENCE IS REVEALED BY JOHN THAT COMPLETES THE MEANING OF THE GOLDEN RULE.**

“Equivalence” explained: If any two statements are joined by the phrase “if and only if”, the result is a compound proposition called *equivalence* and sometimes indicated by the words “necessary and sufficient.”

Equivalence means “correspondence,” “sameness,” or “equally.” Thus, in John and parenthetically in Matthew, “loving others is a necessary and sufficient condition for loving God”—they are equally important. The second commandment – to love our neighbors as ourselves – is necessary for the first commandment to be fulfilled – to love God. Accordingly, the first and second commandments are equivalent having, in John, the same meaning. Interpreted, John collapses Matthew’s word “GREATEST” and applies it to both commandments helping one understand Matthew’s words “LIKE IT.”

Given this examination, the Golden Rule can be read:

[loving God] if and only if [loving others].”

Thus, “loving others” is a necessary and sufficient condition for “loving God. To say that you love God and hate your neighbor becomes a contradiction and this contradiction is hidden in the logic of the Golden Rule. This also provides the meaning of “LIKE IT” in Matthew’s Gospel. It should be further noted that by as-

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81 Material Equivalence, also called material implication specifies the relation between two propositions such that the second is not false when the first is true. In a material equivalence there is a relation between two propositions such that they are either, both true or both false.
serting the equivalence of these two commandments, one can’t be true and the other false.

One can add another statement to this equation, one given to us by John that completes the logic of the Golden Rule. Consider:

\[
\text{[(loving God) if and only if (loving others)]}
\]

if and only if (God is love)

This can be read as...

*It is necessary that ‘God is love’ for ‘loving others’ to have the same meaning and truth as ‘loving God’*

By adding “God is love,” John clears up “how loving neighbor” and “loving God” are expressing the same meaning. Expressed in this way, the Golden Rule confirms Christianity as a moral religion:

*God is love is a necessary and sufficient condition for our being loved by God, for our loving others, and for our loving ourselves.*

For Jesus, this involves personal experience and living a life of care and compassion, responsibility, and forgiveness. It means honoring the dignity and integrity of others, their humanity and our own. This is the essence of Golden Rule:

- Faith is a salvation journey and the pathway is difficult.
- This teaching is simple: it’s how we live that reveals our connection to God.
- Jesus said, “I am the way.” The Golden Rule is about following the WAY.
- John says (John 1:12) that we all have this capacity and responsibility.
- This capacity is revealed in the Golden Rule: “to love others as we love ourselves.
AN ETHIC OF FORGIVENESS

LYING AT THE HEART OF THE GOLDEN RULE ARE FORGIVENESS, EMPATHY, AND RESPECT. This is revealed in a prayer that is called “The Lord’s Prayer” and written in Matthew 6:9-13. Luke also provides a similar version in Chapter 11:2-4. Matthew’s version reads as follows:

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

In 1662 The Book of Common Prayer\(^\text{82}\) gave us the version that is widely used today:

Our Father, which art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come; thy will be done, in earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive them that trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.

We learn from the Sermon on the Mount and especially from the Golden Rule that our faith journey is saturated with

\(^{82}\) The Book of Common Prayer is the short title of a number of related prayer books used in the Anglican Communion, as well as by the Continuing Anglican, “Anglican realignment” and other Anglican churches.
the idea of forgiveness. Forgiveness is a message that lies near the heart of Jesus’ teaching. Understanding what Jesus meant about “forgiveness” is important. A practical morality will be difficult to maintain without it. Reading the Bible we can’t find a more poignant statement of forgiveness than Jesus’ last words, “Father forgive them....”

The Golden Rule and the Sermon on the Mount put forgiveness at the center of Christian ethics, of loving God, self, and others. If I interpret John correctly, because God is love and gives his love to us unconditionally through his grace and forgiveness, God’s loving energy requires that we respond by giving love and forgiveness to others and ourselves. My interpretation of Christian ethics and the Golden Rule, including the hows of loving in Matthew and Luke, points to forgiveness as its moral core. Let’s take a deeper look at what this means.

Jesus says in Matthew 6:14-15,

*For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.*

This is one of the most important teachings of Jesus about loving others and loving oneself. And in the Lord’s Prayer we have these words that again focus our attention on forgiveness:

*And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.*

We can now see the connection between the first commandment and the second for as we receive love, we are asked to forgive self and others. No one is perfect. We stand in need of God’s grace. A vital part of this grace is learning to live a life of forgiveness.
THE BODY OF RESEARCH ON FORGIVENESS IS GROWING with hundreds of studies and dozens of books. We know as did Jesus that “forgiving self or loving self in a forgiving manner” enhances our own well-being. One can easily understand why Jesus made this an essential part of the Golden Rule. Forgiveness is “a shift in thinking.” It involves our rational as well as our spiritual state of mind. We aren’t naturally forgiving, but forgiving and understanding the value of forgiveness in building relationships are important ingredients in a faith-saturated ethic.

As Christians we often talk about “re-birth” as a faith and salvational experience. “Re-birth” is usually cast as a noun, an event that is one and done. But “re-birth,” like “faith,” is a verb disguised as a noun, thus, re-birthing (faith) is an active and living presence of a universal moral consciousness in our lives. It is a continuous process of understanding and forgiving.

Forgiving is growth in moral awareness. It provides balance, harmony, and order in our lives. Experience has taught me that there is no way of reaching or even peering over my moral horizon to a greater moral future without an attitude of forgiveness. And there are no assurances. Living ethically is difficult and shares in the contingencies of life. No one is perfect. I am not perfect. Our faith journey is deeply rooted in this reality. Living a spiritually infused moral life is thus open-ended, a journey of love and commitment; a journey of connecting with the moral wisdom and vision of Jesus; a journey of forgiving and seeking forgiveness; and a journey of mistakes and restarts. Life is like that. It could not be otherwise.

Forgiveness represents a shift in thinking asking one to recognize his or her own misdeeds toward others and seek forgiveness and then transfer this forgiveness to those who have done misdeeds against one’s person.
Forgiveness and living the Golden Rule are the moral behaviors of Spiritual Wisdom. We don’t always live up to or into these behaviors, but we must continue to respond to God’s energy at work in our lives. *Faith* is grounded in the spirit of empathy and forgiveness, of giving and loving without asking or even expecting anything in return (Agapeic love). Thus, faith is definitive our re-birthing experiences—a continuous living of the Golden Rule. Our experience of God is a moral reality, the Spiritual Wisdom that guides our lives. Thus, deep and abiding faith has a moral and living dimension, a quality grounded in moral community—*koinonia*.84

We experience God’s grace not only in terms of salvation, but as a universal moral consciousness—God is love and when we love our neighbor’s we are sharing God’s love and forgiveness. This sharing is interactive, relational, and self-referential. *Faith* is a *living into* this moral vision. Faith arises from the heart, presupposes a relationship, and wants to add love and forgiveness to complete this unity, intimacy, and closeness. God’s Spiritual Energy participates in us through our compassion and forgiveness. It is the connective tissue of the spiritual and moral life. God’s moral presence is always pulling our moral commitments toward others.

The Golden Rule is thus “a rule of LOVE” and, parenthetically, “FORGIVENESS.” Understanding this is acknowledging that “love” is not just a feeling; rather love is a choice, a decision about doing what is best for others. This implies moral and personal integrity and moral consistency. Commitment, consistency, and integrity are the keys to our faith journey. Jesus

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84 Koinonia’s primary meaning is “fellowship, sharing in common, communion.” The first occurrence of koinonia is Acts 2:42: Koinonia (koy NO nyah) is a transliterated form of the Greek word, κοινωνία, which means communion, joint participation; the share which one has in anything, participation, a gift jointly contributed, a collection, a contribution, etc.
stood this as he identified love of self and self-forgiveness as a first step in clarifying our personal connection to a greater humanity.

Practically speaking, forgiveness is directed toward someone who has wronged you, and is a decision to let go of the desire for revenge and ill-will toward that person. Sometimes when a loved one dies, those close to this loved one suffer a feeling of guilt, guilt for just surviving or being alive. This is a natural feeling and in time, for the emotionally and mentally healthy, is put away. Forgiveness is involved in this process as a natural resolution of the grief process, which is the necessary acknowledgment of pain and loss. Self-love as self-forgiveness is the first step we make as we activate God’s love in our relationships—we are to love others as we love ourselves.

THE MAYO CLINIC85 SAYS THAT RESEARCHERS ARE VERY CLEAR ABOUT WHAT FORGIVENESS IS NOT:

Forgiveness is not the same as reconciliation. Forgiveness is one person’s inner response to another’s perceived injustice. Reconciliation is two people coming together in mutual respect. Reconciliation requires both parties working together. Forgiveness is something that is entirely up to you. Although reconciliation may follow forgiveness, it is possible to forgive without re-establishing or continuing the relationship. The person you forgive may be deceased or no longer part of your life. You may also choose not to reconcile, perhaps because you have no reason to believe that a relationship with the other person is healthy for you.

Forgiveness is not forgetting. “Forgive and forget” seem to go together. However, the process of forgiving involves acknowledging to yourself the wrong that was done to you, reflecting on it, and deciding how you want to think about it. Focusing on forgetting a wrong might lead to denying or suppressing feelings about it, which is not the same as forgiveness. Forgiveness has taken place when you can remember the wrong that was done without feeling resentment or a desire to pursue revenge. Sometimes, after we get to this point, we may forget about some of the wrongs people have done to us. But we don’t have to forget in order to forgive.

Forgiveness is not condoning or excusing. Forgiveness does not minimize, justify, or excuse the wrong that was done. Forgiveness also does not mean denying the harm and the feelings that the injustice produced. And forgiveness does not mean putting yourself in a position to be harmed again. You can forgive someone and still take healthy steps to protect yourself, including choosing not to reconcile.

Forgiveness is not justice. It is certainly easier to forgive someone who sincerely apologizes and makes amends. However, justice—which may include acknowledgment of the wrong, apologies, punishment, restitution, or compensation—is separate from forgiveness. You may pursue your rights for justice with or without forgiving someone. And if justice is denied, you can still choose whether or not to forgive.

Forgiveness: Letting go of grudges and bitterness. When someone you care about hurts you, you can hold on to anger, resentment and thoughts of revenge—or embrace forgiveness and move forward. Nearly everyone has been hurt by the actions or words of another. Perhaps your mother criticized your parenting skills, your colleague sabotaged a project or your...
partner had an affair. These wounds can leave you with lasting feelings of anger, bitterness or even vengeance. But if you don't practice forgiveness, you might be the one who pays most dearly. By embracing forgiveness, you can also embrace peace, hope, gratitude and joy. Consider how forgiveness can lead you down the path of physical, emotional and spiritual well-being.

THERE ARE MANY PERSONAL AND SOCIAL BENEFITS TO FORGIVENESS. Generally, forgiveness is a decision to let go of resentment and thoughts of revenge. The acts that hurt or offend you might always remain a part of your life, but forgiveness can lessen their grip on you and help you focus on other, more positive parts of your life. Forgiveness can even lead to feelings of understanding, empathy and compassion for the one who hurt you.

Forgiveness doesn't mean that you deny the other person's responsibility for hurting you, and it doesn't minimize or justify the wrong. You can forgive the person without excusing the act. Forgiveness brings a kind of peace that helps you go on with life.

Letting go of grudges and bitterness can make way for happiness, health and peace. Forgiveness can lead to:

- Healthier relationships
- Greater spiritual and psychological well-being
- Less anxiety, stress and hostility
- Lower blood pressure
- Fewer symptoms of depression
- Stronger immune system
- Improved heart health
- Higher self-esteem
BUT FORGIVENESS CAN BE CHALLENGING, especially if the person who's hurt you doesn't admit wrong or doesn't speak of his or her sorrow. If you find yourself stuck:

- Consider the situation from the other person's point of view.
- Ask yourself why he or she would behave in such a way. Perhaps you would have reacted similarly if you faced the same situation.
- Reflect on times you've hurt others and on those who've forgiven you.
- Write in a journal, pray or use guided meditation — or talk with a person you've found to be wise and compassionate, such as a spiritual leader, a mental health provider, or an impartial loved one or friend.
- Be aware that forgiveness is a process and even small hurts may need to be revisited and forgiven over and over again.

JESUS DIRECTED OUR ATTENTION TO SELF-REFLECTION AND THEN TO THE IMPORTANCE OF EMPATHY. The first step is to honestly assess and acknowledge the wrongs you've done and how those wrongs have affected others and, at the same time, avoid judging yourself too harshly. You're human, and you'll make mistakes.

If you're truly sorry for something you've said or done, consider admitting it to those you've harmed. Speak of your sincere sorrow or regret, and specifically ask for forgiveness—without making excuses.

Remember, however, you can't force someone to forgive you. Others need to move to forgiveness in their own time. Whatever the outcome, one should commit to treating others with compassion, empathy, respect, and forgiveness.
A FINAL WORD

In this short narrative I’ve made an effort to unravel the meaning of the Golden Rule—its internal logic and how in Jesus’ words it is innately tied to our consciousness or awareness of God as an inner moral experience. My interpretation is far removed from those who seek instant salvation through belief and neglect living their lives as Jesus taught. Salvation for me is a process in which God’s Spiritual Wisdom is taken into our lives and we begin to make positive life changes based on Jesus’ teaching.

Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote in 1949:86

What is eternal and important is often hidden from a man by an impenetrable veil. He knows there’s something under there, but he cannot see it. The veil reflects the daylight.

I think Wittgenstein’s insight is significant for Christians or for any moral person for that matter. Sometimes we enclose ourselves in a veil of beliefs so tightly coiled that the daylight of truth and of meaning never gets through to us. We see and hear, but don’t want to see and hear; our motives are self-seeking and belief-oriented, so set in stone that our moral growth becomes impossible.

86 Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) was arguably the most influential philosopher of the twentieth century. He was born in Vienna, but studied and practiced philosophy in Great Britain. He was a professor of philosophy at the University of Cambridge from 1939 until 1947. He worked in—and transformed—the fields of logic, the philosophy of mathematics, the philosophy of mind, and the philosophy of language. Culture and value, a collection of Wittgenstein’s notes, was published by the University of Chicago Press in 1984. This collection of Wittgenstein’s “remarks” written over a time period of forty years was first published as “Vermischte Bemerkungen” in the original German in 1977. These remarks are taken from his private manuscripts and diaries, which were finally translated into English in 1980.
This is a theo-philosophical dialogue as my language often reveals my beliefs and that which I think sacred. About this I make no apologies. All truth is beset with interpretation and all reason with our passion for one idea, one belief, or another. Many will disagree with my interpretation of the Golden Rule. Please do, but also give my words some serious consideration. Consider this narrative a conversation in which I urge you to discover your own moral awareness—your God consciousness and live this consciousness and bring it alive in your relationships with others.
EPILOGUE

THE CROOKED TIMBER OF HUMANITY

THERE IS LITTLE THAT IS UNIFORM AND STRUCTURED ABOUT AN INQUIRING MIND. Also, within our structure of beliefs—religious, political, philosophical, etc.—there is much that falls into the well of the unexamined. For many, the values they hold remain a convoluted mixed bag of cultural and personal judgments. Immanuel Kant commented in a moment of insight, “Out of the crooked timber of humanity, no straight thing was ever made.” If by “straight thing” Kant meant “a consistent moral point of view,” then Isaiah Berlin’s interpretation is insightful: “To force people into the neat uniforms demanded by dogmatically believed-in schemes [moral or otherwise] is almost always the road to inhumanity. We can do only what we can, but that we must do against difficulties.” Certainly, the idea of what is and what is not moral needs our attention.

To be moral – to adhere to and live by moral principles – reveals an uneven history. We have built moral principles into

87 If by “straight thing” Kant meant “a consistent moral point of view,” then Isaiah Berlin’s interpretation is insightful. This hints at the blurred edges of morality.

law and constitution, into faith and church polity, and into our businesses. These efforts are indicators that being moral or ethical may not be a natural disposition, but one that is prized and to which one must give her or his attention. These moral pathways reveal our perception of the importance of living ethically and our commitment to principles of moral behavior. Naturally, our moral timber is crooked and this exposes the difficulties of this endeavor.

Like all human experience, our moral awareness is not a fixed target, but most certainly changes as our understanding of our physical world and our relationships change. We share a commonality that enables communication, trade, the making of treaties, and constitutions, even if this commonality has grown unevenly in different cultures. This commonality represents our moral consciousness or “moral compass.” In America this moral consciousness includes the right to life, liberty, and the individual pursuit of a happy and fulfilling life. And although we may point our moral compass toward these goals, our compass doesn’t always reveal the hills, swamps, and rough terrain that lie in our path. Courage is needed to keep our compass pointed in a positive moral direction, to uplift the horizon of our moral awareness.

Identifying the moral is a challenge, but I have discovered that we give birth to our essential moral selves in our relationships with one another.

HUMAN CONNECTION LIES AT THE CORE of our moral consciousness. This is revealed by Jesus in the Golden Rule. For the Christian, it is his or her experience of God as love that leads to this conclusion. I think John, more than any other interpreter of Jesus’ message understood this and made it clear to his lis-
teners. And although this possibility lies before us, the choice to activate God’s presence in our lives is ours to make.

It follows that relationships and relationship building define the parameters of morality. This will always be a tenuous bracketing for what is and what is not “a moral relationship” requires unrelenting attention and clarification. Thus, relationships are the reasons for being moral in the first place. For Christians, relationships must be God-infused. This conclusion was reached by Jesus as the lens through which the Christian should view his or her neighbor. I appeal to the Sermon on the Mount for this conclusion and Jesus’ parables, especially “The Good Samaritan.” Some may disagree, but relationships hover at the center of families, businesses, schools, and churches. Awareness of their importance is a moral awareness. We have the capacity (εξουσια—power of choice; John 1:12) to understand this as expressed by John. How we respond to this awareness and set in motion this capacity defines us as Christians.

When relationships are broken distrust sets in and the fibers of moral integrity are frayed.

It would be helpful if we possessed a “God’s Eye” view of our behavioral patterns, if we could see the future of our decision making, but we can’t. Patience, wisdom, and commitment to human integrity, and constant dialogue with others are required to value who we are and how our actions affect others. This was the pattern of Jesus’ life. Those who refuse to do this block their own moral sensitivities by lifting themselves to a higher moral ground than those with whom they live/work or

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89 Relationships are the way we think; they connect life to life and are the foundations of God’s creative power. The purpose of morality is not only to maintain personal civility, but to support a more just and civil world. Relationships are the reasons for being moral in the first place; relationships reveal our character. See: Preliminary Comments at the beginning of this book.
with whom they disagree. If the church is a moral community, then it has the responsibility of galvanizing its membership around a philosophy of love and not condemnation; of welcoming and serving the community of which it is a part.

Jesus reacted to the lack of this vision among the Pharisees and Sadducees of his day. Like them, our natural propensity is to promote our views and goals as morally superior to those of others. This behavior is relationship destructive and morally corrosive. We are told by ministers to pray about this and Jesus set the example for this. This is important, but there is more. Seeking forgiveness for our personal transgressions is a first step, but this is not all there is to being a Christian.

“Prayer” is an activity, not just of talking with God and asking for favors, for forgiveness, or miracles, but a way of life. Prayer is the way we communicate our faith, a way we live it. Late in his life, when asked by a nurse if he ever prayed, Professor Horace Williams at the University of North Carolina said, “No, my life has been a prayer.”90 This is what grabbed me. Living one’s faith as a prayer is an ideal to which we should aspired.

We are not just to live in God and parade our piousness around our work and churches, but let God live through us—through love, compassion, empathy, and forgiveness. The words of John are important and I believe, more than any other Gospel writer, that his interpretation of the message of Jesus — the Gospel — adds depth and insight to the Golden Rule.

IN THIS SMALL BOOK I HAVE TRIED TO EXPLAIN, perhaps deconstruct, the differences between secular and Christian eth-

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ics by excavating the meaning of “the Golden Rule.” I have shown that this ethical prescription is not limited to Christians as secular philosophers as many other religions have latched on to, reinterpreted and applied it in their ethical theories.

Many of these different formulations of the Golden Rule express an ethic not tied to belief in God as love and thus have missed the intent of Jesus’ message.

Read it for yourself; we cannot loosen the Golden Rule from our faith as it anchors us in God’s love for all humanity. Without the love and grace of God, the meaning of the Golden Rule and the other teachings of Jesus are squandered and betrayed.

In time we learn that our lives are largely built on a scaffolding of relationships. Understanding this takes many years as most of us learn this lesson late in life. Relationships—good and bad—create the web of our lives. Finding purpose in our web is difficult for much that happens to us is either incidental or accidental. Purpose is intentional and a difficult and foreboding task. When we discover our purpose we are able to maneuver through life in more productive ways.

Saying all of this, I have no utopian dreams of a perfect world or a perfect heaven nor do I think I can find my values within me only, within my cognitive or spiritual nature. An exclusive and personal morality is lifeless and amoral. My values have been discovered and formulated within the fabric of human relationships, within the social dimensions of human living and not in some abstract universe of ideas or beliefs, or in the pages of an ancient book only and its various religious interpretations. Don’t judge me as a religious skeptic, but I am skeptical about institutionalized religion as I am about the assumptions of any overarching theory or practice such as science or even capitalistic democracy. I am a rather self-contained person who listens to others but is not easily persuaded by their rhetoric.
Doubt and skepticism can be productive. Experience informs me of the need for Spiritual Wisdom.

My matter-of-factness encourages me to lift my moral awareness to a horizon beyond what I daily see. Reaching this horizon has proven difficult, thus, I substitute moral possibility for the lifeless probabilities of logic and social principles that are assumed as rational. Although the physical and social sciences have faith in mathematics (logic/statistics) as a mirror of nature, this is a conviction that is sorely lacking when it comes to studying the inner-workings of our essential humanity, including morality and faith. The so-called purely rational ignores our ethical impulse as intrinsically intentional. Reason wants to reduce our values to facts, generalizations, and explanations, or the nonsensical products of belief, faith, and sentimentality. The practical benefits of reason and science are obvious, but their assumptions about the inner workings of human nature are dubious.

Some even say that our values are predictable within our genetic structure, but this hypothesis, like many other neo-Darwinian conclusions, lacks verification, the hallmark of the scientific method. I have analyzed the arguments of Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and Darwin and found their logic to be flawed with many assumptions and metaphysical speculations. One example is their talk about our having a “selfish gene” as if our genetic structure possesses this human, social quality within its DNA. This is an assumption based on Darwin’s “survival of the fittest” theory but is blatantly a non sequitur (a conclusion or statement that does not logically follow from the previous argument or statement).

I do encourage the use of reason and critical thinking as tools but do not assume that either is a mirror of the self or of nature. Like reason, morality may not be our natural disposition.
Darwin hinted at this by claiming that nature is values neutral. Dawkins then posited “selfishness” as an innate genetic value violating his own physical theory. Morality, like reason, is a learned behavior and may in the future be found in our genetic makeup, who knows for sure. Darwin himself was not completely sure of this as no scientific evidence was or has been produced to secure his conclusions.

In my studied opinion, morality is an expression of a sense of community based on the imagined possibility of dialectical conversation in which moral awareness is stimulated and moral meaning is to be found. As a person of faith, this is my God-consciousness which is a metaphor for explaining morality’s universal dimensions.

I ACKNOWLEDGE THAT MY VIEWS ARE TINGED WITH THE LANGUAGE OF METAPHOR as a means of explanation. The scientific view of “rational man” has failed to uncover the inner-workings of belief and faith, leaving behind our individuality as their Darwinian explanations treat “man” austerely as a physical being harnessed generally to the laws of cause and effect, itself a speculative assumption tinged with the language of metaphor and metaphysics.

Scientific knowledge is not exhausted by empirical knowledge as the empirical and innate remain a disingenuous dualism. Science has also become speculative, especially among

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91 See The broken image by Floyd Matson. This book provides an introduction to advances in thought and science throughout history and the significance of such movements to our time. Although first published in 1964, the value of its information is not impacted by date. The presentation does not secure itself to an era, rather it provides an overview with an incredible amount of perspectives included. As a scholarly source for inquiring minds it serves just as well to provide additional references as it does initial provocation.
the New Atheists, but is better understood as a set of investigatory tools rather than a mirror of the natural world. That scientific explanation mirrors all reality is an assumed, unjustified assumption. Our social reality and our inner reality have yet to yield to the microscope of scientific investigation. The best the social sciences can do is to produce statistical models and generalities about who, what, and why we are.

My knowledge and interactions with others inform my moral consciousness and channel my moral energy. Thus, to understand me you must understand my vision of a moral humanity. And it is no more than a vision, as it is compelled by moral understanding. It is a vision I have tried to walk, but the swamps, hills, and rocky paths of life can counter-act our hopes and dreams. My vision will always be checked by life’s realities. If you attend to the logic or illogic of my discourse only you will miss the horizon of this vision. I try not to convince you by rational arguments. Look to yourself, your intrinsic nature, for this knowledge.

Neither is my morality a theoretical given, religious or Biblical, nor a disingenuous assumption; it is through personal encounters—family, friendships, working relationships, etc.—where it is illuminated and distilled. It is built on relationships

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92 Royce, Joseph, The encapsulated man (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1964)- A vital exploration of modern man's search for meaning, this book represents Royce's views as to: (1) why 'specialization' is a profoundly serious problem in today's world, (2) why we must remove some cobwebs in our thinking on this matter, and (3) why we must seriously entertain the idea of developing 'generalists' as well as 'specialists.' It is a multi-disciplinary effort to view the nature of reality in toto, rather than by piecemeal effort, and to focus on a world view in terms of the problem rather than from the point of view of a discipline. Special consideration is given to problems of epistemology, the 20th century malady of meaninglessness, existentialism, logical positivism, the psychology of cognition, perception, meaning, value, and personality, and the reality significance of the symbol and the myth.
the inductive qualities of which speak to my experiences. And when I speak of my moral consciousness or moral awareness, I am not inferring a causal link (in the scientific sense) between my private awareness and the public experiences of charity and compassion. Choices have to be made by each of us and we are known most completely by our choices. Uncertainty, not causality, marks my faith journey. On the other hand, my moral awareness is not hermeneutically sealed off from that of others. Rather, it is shareable and can be improved upon in active conversation the dialectic (the art of investigating or discussing the truth of opinions) of which moves the conversation forward and shuns religious encapsulation.

I admit of no ontology of morals,93 that there is some underlying reality, an essence or embodied soul in morals to discover. Our physical natures yield no values. It is within our social interactions that we discover moral awareness. And when I speak of God as my moral consciousness I am not referencing a being or an absolute and unchangeable substance/essence of such a being. Rather, I am giving service in the vernacular of my culture to something I consider sacred, of ultimate worth. Any reference to my “God-consciousness” as my “universal moral awareness” is to be considered methodological and metaphorical rather than an observational-theoretical distinction. John said it best, “No one has seen God.” My awareness of God is an intrinsic experience. I cannot observe God or my moral consciousness; God as a universal moral awareness speaks to me internally through my relationships with others.

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93 Ontology is the philosophical study of the nature of being, becoming, existence, or reality, as well as the basic categories of being and their relations. Thus, “morality” is not a “thing” in the ontological sense, but an activity, a way of life.
FOR ANYONE CONCERNED WITH BIBLICAL TRUTH, I believe my analysis of the Golden Rule is sound. I would caution the reader to be careful with the word “truth,” especially when attaching it to the Bible. “Truth” is basically conformity to fact or actuality, but discovering “the facts” about the Bible is difficult. Generally the Bible was written over a period of about 700+ years – from the 6th Century BCE through the 2nd Century CE. The stories and teachings in the Bible come from a pre-science, Bronze Age culture, a culture beset with superstitions and manifold gods. The cultural influences on the Biblical writers is obvious as over a period of many centuries they came into contact with religious views from Egypt, Persia, Greek, and Rome. They were a wandering people and wandered into many beliefs and traditions that were incorporated into their own religious systems, generally known as Judaism.

We Christians have inherited much of that tradition and for that reason Christianity has evolved into a mixed bag of beliefs and institutional practices. Having majored in History as an undergraduate, spending six years in divinity school, another four years studying philosophy and philosophical history, and given a life time of reading, I am skeptical about “truth” as I am about “fact” and “belief.” That Jesus’ teachings about ethics and morality emerged from this historical quagmire as something practical, theoretically sound, and universally applicable is amazing.

In my lifetime, the moral teachings of Jesus and other Biblical writers have taken a backseat in the institutionalized church. These teachings have been set aside by those preaching instant salvation and working more on membership rolls and financial matters than on Spiritual substance. Admittedly, my interpretation of the Golden Rule and Spiritual Wisdom lacks the concreteness of more fundamental interpretations of “re-birth,” “being born again,” “forgiveness,” and “salvation.” These are
the cornerstones of Evangelical Christianity. On the other hand, THE WAY as taught and lived by Jesus is an invitation to living the love of God with others and with our inner selves. This is terribly difficult.

Because my view of salvation, like that in the Book of Hebrews, is a traveling experience of everyday living, I don’t think there are any guarantees or absolutes involved. Despite the many pre-scientific myths surrounding the life of Jesus, many created years after his death by various communities of believers, and despite the evolving nature of Judaism and its moral teachings, which were changing even during Jesus’ time, I think his teachings about morality and ethics sound. I hope this small treatise convinces you of the same.

With this said, I only ask that you answer one question: “How have you experienced God?” Many will answer through the church and its practices. Most will say they believe what they have been taught or have read in the Bible. We look outside perhaps to famous ministers or historical church music, but God will not be found there; God is to be discovered within our associations with others. Christianity, if nothing else, is a moral faith and requires much more of us than church membership, tithing, or celebrating the sacraments. These are institutional conventions and lack the power of Spiritual conversion. So I ask you to give even deeper reflection to my question. This is the starting point of my faith journey.
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Joseph P. Hester earned the B.A. degree in the Social Sciences from Lenoir-Rhyne College (University) in 1961, the B.D. and Th.M. degrees from Southeastern Seminary in 1964 & 1967, where he was a teaching Fellow in 1964-65, and the Ph.D. in Philosophy from the University of Georgia in 1973, where he held a teaching assistantship in the Department of Philosophy and a research assistantship with the Georgia Studies of Creative Behavior. He completed two years of post-doctoral studies in education and joined the ranks of public education as both a teacher and administrator in 1975. While in public education, from 1978-2001, he served as an adjunct professor in the graduate schools of both Lenoir-Rhyne and Appalachian State Universities. This began his ten year trek of writing The Philosophy for Young Thinkers Series. He spent 38 years in college teaching and public school education. In retirement he served on the editorial board for the Journal of Values-based Leadership from 2010-2014 for which he is a frequent contributor. Some of his writings can be found on his webpage at: http://josephphester.com/.
I view the Golden Rule as a summary of Jesus’ teaching about *faith-based ethics*. Mine is but a singular interpretation but I found even more than I expected. Reading Matthew I was confused about the content of the Golden Rule in Chapter 22:36-40, but found new understanding in the first letter of John (1 John 4). It is this understanding that I call the “logic of the Golden Rule” and summarize as “An Ethic of Love and Forgiveness.” The complexities embodied in the Golden Rule demand our introspection and commitment to rid ourselves of our biases and discriminatory attitudes and behaviors. Much is ask of us and we are responsible for activating God’s love, forgiveness, and moral imperatives in our own lives. Living this message is the responsibility of every Christian and should be pursued with intensity. We are God’s energy working in the world and this always requires our positive response. Spiritual unification with God’s Spiritual Wisdom – the Word becoming flesh – is our challenge as Christians (John 1:12).