

Morality



Does It Matter How We Live?

A Christian View
of Morality

Dick Tripp

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Foreword

Omar Bradley is quoted as saying, "Ours is a world of nuclear giants and ethical infants." How sadly true! This excellent study on ethics for contemporary living is yet another volume in Dick Tripp's growing series of booklets on the Christian faith. In this worthy companion to *What is Truth and Does it Matter?* the author rightly argues that Truth and Morality are inseparable. The moral crisis of our age is the result of wrong choices rather than of environmental or psychological factors. This is a message that our secular media need to hear! Our escalating rates of crime and human suffering call for a "conversion of the wrong-doer to a more responsible lifestyle". Here is an outline of how this change can be accomplished, for the "Good Life" of Greek and modern philosophy is failing to stop the downward spiral of human suffering.

The only satisfying foundation for a stable personal and social morality is found in the biblical understanding of God as just and as love. Any idea of morality that does not take this God into account is doomed to failure. It is only by the undeserved grace of God that the seeker after God can be transformed in his or her inner life and motivation and enter into a covenant relationship with God himself. The author argues this case with clarity and illustrates his points with copious examples and quotations. The comprehensive list of New Testament references on Christian moral responsibility will be very useful to every preacher and study group leader. Our greatest gift to the next generation is the way we live now. This booklet offers a sure foundation for facing the new millennium with confidence.

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Part I - Exploring the territory

Today's moral confusion

We live in a world that appears to have lost its moral moorings. Fifty years ago, Omar Bradley said:

The world has achieved brilliance without wisdom, power without conscience. Ours is a world of nuclear giants and ethical infants.

Ten years later Robert Fitch, in *Christianity in Crisis*, put it like this:

We live today in an age when ethics has become obsolete. It is superseded by science, deleted by psychology, dismissed as emotive by philosophy. It is drowned in compassion, evaporated into aesthetics and retreats before relativism.

Things have not improved in fifty years and today even the whole idea of right and wrong seems to be up for grabs. Ravi Zacharias, in *A Shattered Visage: The Real Face of Atheism*, sums up his analysis of the situation today:

The logic of chance origins has driven our society into rewriting the rules, so that utility has replaced duty, self-expression has unseated authority, and being good has become feeling good. These new rules plunge the moral philosopher into a veritable vortex of relativisations. All absolutes die the death of a thousand qualifications. Life becomes a pin-ball game, whose rules, though they be few, are all instrumental and not meaningful in themselves, except as a means to the player's enjoyment.

Having come loose from our moral moorings in the brave new world, we find ourselves adrift in uncharted seas and have decided to toss away the compass.

Not so long ago the *Times Literary Supplement* referred to a society that has never made a movie of Leonardo da Vinci but has produced three about Joey Buttafuoco—famous only for having had a teenage love, Amy Fisher, who shot his wife!

One wag has expressed the vagueness that exists about moral values today in the following verse:

It all depends on where you are;
 It all depends on who you are;
 It all depends on how you feel;
 It all depends on what you feel;
 It all depends on how you're raised;
 It all depends on what is praised;
 What's right today is wrong tomorrow;
 Joy in France, in England sorrow;
 It all depends on points of view;
 Australia, or Timbuctoo;
 In Rome do as the Romans do;
 If tastes just happen to agree,
 Then you have morality;

But where there are conflicting trends,
It all depends, it all depends.

Ian Hassall, New Zealand's former Commissioner for Children, was recently interviewed by Kim Hill on radio. He raised concern about the loss of values in this country and their replacement only by free market instincts. He placed a link squarely between the rise in suicide, particularly youth suicide, and the absence of values to live by. He cited the sociologist Durkheim, who over a hundred years ago noted a rise in suicide, violence and mental illness when a community loses its values base and therefore meaning. Durkheim called this condition 'anomie' and considered it the worst condition of society.

The growing crime rate in many countries is one of the consequences of this lack of moral values in society. In the 1950s, psychologist Sharon Samenow and psychiatrist Samuel Yochelson, sharing the conventional wisdom that crime is caused by environment, set out to prove their point. They began a 17-year study involving thousands of hours of testing of 250 inmates in the District of Columbia. To their astonishment, they discovered that the cause of crime cannot be traced to environment, poverty, or oppression. Instead, crime is the result of individuals making, as they put it, wrong moral choices. In their 1977 work *The Criminal Personality*, they concluded that the answer to crime is a "conversion of the wrong-doer to a more responsible lifestyle." In 1987, Harvard professors James Wilson and Richard Herrnstein came to similar conclusions in their book *Crime and Human Nature*. They determined that the cause of crime is a lack of proper moral training among young people during the morally formative years, particularly ages one to six.

The lack of moral values in society, and the need to do something about it, is becoming increasingly recognised. In a speech which attracted a good deal of media attention (and some flak), our Governor General, Sir Michael Hardie Boys, deplored the lack of values in society and appealed for a return to some basic moral values. He quoted a report commissioned by UNESCO on Education for the 21st Century. It contains, surprisingly, the following statement:

Often without realising it, the world has a longing, often unexpressed, for an ideal and for values that we shall term 'moral'. It is thus education's noble task to encourage each and every one, acting in accordance with their traditions and convictions, and paying full respect to pluralism, to lift their minds and spirits to the plane of the universal and, in some measure to transcend themselves. It is no exaggeration to say that the survival of humanity depends thereon.

The situation in North America is such that, according to columnist Douglas Todd, “More than four out of five North Americans believe a decline in morals is the continent’s gravest problem and that ethics should be taught in the schools.” One result of this concern is that entire new specialities have grown up overnight. Today medical ethics, business ethics, environmental ethics and legal ethics are not only serious endeavours but required curricular studies in respected professional schools across the land. Ethics has been spoken of as a “growth industry”.

Where do we start?

If these examples accurately describe the problem, then the question is; where do we look for the answer? Where do we find a solid basis for teaching morals, even if we can agree on what those morals should be?

It is significant to note the extent to which some people, who believe that we are the chance product of an evolutionary process in which God has had no say, go to find some basis for ‘moral’ behaviour. Well-known writer, Philip Yancey, in a recent article in Christianity Today, describes today’s evolutionary psychologists as society’s new prophets. He quotes Robert Wright, one of the best-known expositors of evolutionary psychology to the general public:

We believe the things—about morality, personal worth, even objective truth—that lead to behaviours that get our genes into the next generation...What is in our genes’ interest is what seems ‘right’—morally right, objectively right, whatever sort of rightness is in order.

Such people would describe all behaviour, even a mother’s love or the sacrificial life of a Mother Teresa, in terms of our genes’ programming for survival. As Yancey comments:

Carry the logic far enough, and any notion of good and evil disappears. In essence, the evolutionary psychologists have devised a unified theory of human depravity that would make John Calvin blush. Hard-wired for selfishness, we have no potential for anything else.

Hitler was being realistic when he said, “I cannot see why man should not be just as cruel as nature.” As an evolutionist with no belief in God, he had no basis for saying anything else. Artificial-intelligence guru, Marvin Minsky, likes to say that we are just machines made out of meat!

Some evolutionary biologists cheerfully acknowledge the problem. Wright himself says, “The question may be whether, after the new Darwinism takes root, the word *moral* can be anything but a joke.”

Communism has nothing to offer in this respect. The sight of top Russian officials appealing to Western Christian evangelicals to fill the moral gap left by seventy years of atheistic teaching in Russia has highlighted only too clearly the moral bankruptcy of this system.

New worldviews and ways of thinking that have been around over the past generation, such as New Age and postmodernism, don't seem to be much help either, as they differ amongst themselves as to whether there is any basis for morality at all¹. Does it all depend on our personal feelings? Ernest Hemingway, in *Death in the Afternoon*, defined morality this way: "What is moral is what you feel good after, and what is immoral is what you feel bad after."

The human rights movement is limited in what it can offer us here. Disenchantment with what has been done in the name of human rights since the United Nations issued its Declaration on the subject 50 years ago has led an international committee, headed by former German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt, to draw up a "Universal Declaration of Human Responsibilities." A particularly strong paragraph states:

No person, no group, no organisation, no state, no army or police stands above good and evil; all are subject to ethical standards. Everyone has a responsibility to promote good and to avoid evil in all things.

The problem is, however, who decides what is good and what is not? And who are we accountable to?

The Greek philosophers focused on deciding what they considered to be the "Good Life" and then sought to promote those qualities and virtues that would result in this good life. They relied heavily on their faith in human reason, as did the Enlightenment in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, in order to determine what this "Good Life" and these virtues should be. The problem with this approach is that you will never get everyone to agree on what that good life is and what virtues we need to get it.

Any view that is based on human reason alone takes us back to what *we* think the good life is meant to be. There are no ultimate criteria by which our view can be judged. Many philosophical ethicists have noted this. Nowell-Smith, for example, concluded his lengthy treatise on ethics with a blatant acknowledgment that his ethical reflections in the end bring him back to the individual human person:

¹ I have given a brief summary of New Age and postmodern views and compared them with Christian views in the booklet *What Is Truth and Does It Matter?*

What sort of [ethical] principles a man adopts will, in the end, depend on his vision of the Good Life, his conception of the sort of world he desires, so far as it rests with him to create. Indeed his moral principles just are this conception.

To rightly use the term “moral” then, it is important to decide who we are ultimately accountable to. The very fact that we appoint judges and courts (though some, no doubt, wish we didn’t) points to the fact that we are not happy with the idea that everyone should make their own rules about what is right or wrong. However, if we don’t approve of that, there are only two alternatives: either we are accountable to other human beings, which usually, though not always, means the majority (Marshall McLuhan has suggested that ethical norms could be established by a computer which would record simple majority decisions), or, if God exists, and if he is interested in our behaviour, we are ultimately accountable to him.

The purpose of this booklet

This booklet is written on the premise that God *does* exist and that he is interested in our behaviour and that any ideas of “morality” that do not take him into account are doomed to failure¹. Robert Kane, a secularist, in *Through the Moral Maze: Searching for Absolute Values in a Pluralistic World*, recognises the problem:

We simply do not know enough to ground ethics necessarily in human reason and knowledge alone; and centuries of failure in trying to do so have led many to relativism, scepticism, and nihilism.

However, if God does exist, if he has created us for some purpose, and if he is ultimately going to judge us by some criteria of his choosing (more of that later), then it is obviously important to find out what he thinks about it all. The purpose of this booklet is to spell out clearly the Christian view as to why it matters how we live, as it is presented to us in the Bible. This book has always been regarded as the authoritative revelation on what Christianity is all about². I won’t be looking at specific issues that society is wrestling with today, such as justice, poverty, care of the environment, homosexuality, abortion—all of which, though important and pressing issues, would need a booklet in themselves. Rather, I will be looking at more

¹ If you wish to explore further the question of the existence of this God, what he is like, how he has made himself known in Jesus Christ, and the evidence for this, see other titles in this series.

² If you have doubts about the reliability of the Bible to give us a true picture of who Jesus is (the founder of Christianity) and what he did, may I commend to you the titles *Can We Trust a Book Written 2,000 Years Ago?* and *Did the Writers of the New Testament Get Their Picture of Jesus Right?* in this series.

basic questions, such as: Is there any firm basis for deciding what is good and what is bad? Will it matter if I decide to be “bad” rather than “good”? What happens if I try, but fail? What is life meant to be about, anyway?

You may be sure of one thing. What you will find in these pages you will not get from the TV, the newspaper or the movies. We are told that in this modern world we receive something like 16,000 value messages a day from one source or another. It is very unlikely that many of these will correspond clearly with what is taught in the pages of the Bible. It is very likely (unless you are one of the minority of people who read the Bible regularly, listen to Radio Rhema, or attend a church regularly where these things are clearly taught) that you will have distorted ideas about what Christian morality is all about.

My challenge to you is to read this with an open mind. If you don't like it, can you come up with a better reason for expecting people to behave in a certain kind of way? And just one point for clarification—I make no distinction between “morality” and “ethics”. Some might do so, but I stick with popular usage which generally does not.

C. S. Lewis, in *Mere Christianity*, gives a very helpful illustration. Imagine we are a fleet of ships sailing in formation to a particular destination. Now if the fleet is going to arrive safely without mishap, three things are necessary. First, the individual ships must be seaworthy. Their insides must be in good working order so they can keep afloat, steer well and have the motive power to make the journey. Second, they must be aware of the other boats so they don't bump into one another and so cause harm to themselves and others. Third, they must have some idea about where they are heading—why they are afloat in the first place. It will be of no use if, after a good journey, they end up in Calcutta when they were supposed to get to New York.

The first of these we could describe as individual morality—virtues, vices and character building, which we don't hear much about from our modern ethical philosophies. We have got to keep ourselves shipshape for the journey. The second we could call social ethics—how to get along with one another and help, rather than hinder, others on the journey. The third issue is—why are we here at all and where are we supposed to be going? Many modern philosophers avoid this issue as they have no answer to it. And yet this is the most important question of all. For morality to be of any *use* there must be some point to it all. We have got to know our destination.

Christianity, rightly understood, provides the answers to these three basic questions. It gives clear guidance as to how to keep ourselves in good working order. It gives very clear instructions on how we should relate to one another and why. More than that, and most importantly, it gives us a

clear purpose for making the journey in the first place, a purpose that reaches well beyond the confines of this brief earthly existence. In addition, it tells us how to get aboard the fleet and how to deal with calamities along the way. In this journey, no shipwreck need be final. Finally, it gives the motive power to see the journey through to the end, an end which is only a greater beginning.

Part II - Christian morality

Can we have morality without God?

It has always seemed rather ridiculous to me for people to think that you can still have "morality", particularly Christian morality, without God. C. S. Lewis said:

If no set of moral ideas were better than another, there would be no sense in preferring civilised morality to Nazi morality. The moment you say one lot of morals is better than another, you are in fact measuring them by an ultimate standard.

And the moment you admit that there must be some ultimate standard, you are arguing for the existence of God.

Even someone like Nietzsche, the German philosopher who is credited with giving a major boost to the elimination of God from Western culture, never tired of pointing out that Christianity is a whole and that one cannot give up faith in God and keep Christian morality. He said:

When one gives up the Christian faith, one pulls the right to Christian morality out from under one's feet. The morality is by no means self-evident. Christianity is a system, a whole view of things thought out together. By breaking one main concept out of it, the faith in God, one breaks the whole. It stands or falls with faith in God.

In chapter 1 of his letter to the Romans, Paul spells out very clearly the moral consequences of people turning away from God. Three times he declares that, as a result of rejecting the truth of God that he has clearly made known in his creation, "**God gave them over...**" (vv 24, 26, 28). But what did he give them over to?

"God gave them over in the sinful desires of their heart to sexual impurity..." (v. 24).

"God gave them over to shameful lusts..." (v. 26).

"God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done" (v. 28).

This is from the *New International Version*. Another very good modern translation, *The Contemporary English Version*, has “**God let them...**”. However, the word is stronger than that. It is the common word used for “handing over” people to the courts or the arresting officer or prison. In other words, if we choose not to give God the place he deserves in our lives, then the inevitable consequence is moral decline. This is the way his judgment works. At the end of chapter 1, Paul gives the end result of this process. **“They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Although they know God’s righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practise them”** (vv 29-32). That’s quite a picture!

Is the picture given in Romans 1 really an exaggeration of the way things actually happen? Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, who suffered much under an atheistic system, doesn’t think so, and he speaks from personal experience. In his 1983 Templeton Address, *Men Have Forgotten God*, he said:

The failings of human consciousness, deprived of its divine dimension, have been a determining factor in all the major crimes of this century.

Now, when a society turns from God, what we have described above may take a few generations to be fully worked out. We may cope for a while on the spiritual and moral heritage of our forebears. But if we don’t make that heritage our own, then we will be in trouble. The Swiss theologian, Emil Brunner, put it like this:

The feeling for the personal and the human which is the fruit of faith may outlive for a time the death of the roots from which it has grown. But this cannot last very long. As a rule the decay of religion works out in the second generation as moral rigidity and in the third generation as the breakdown of all morality. Humanity without religion has never been a historical force capable of resistance.

One could say that the very act of rejecting God is in itself an immoral act. Stephen Keillor, in *Prisoners of Hope*, says:

The initial act of eliminating our Creator God from our thinking is so immoral and unethical in itself as to render the following concern with ethical fine points quite absurd. It’s as if students were to murder the teacher and then sit down to have serious discussions about proper manners in the classroom.

If, indeed, we are living in a “moral vacuum” today, it is instructive to note that vacuums don’t happen by chance. You have to deliberately suck the air out. Chris Wright, in an article in *Themelios*, says: “Western culture for the past 200 years has been systematically sucking out the transcendent [God] from its public heart and core.” If we want to do something positive about the situation then we must look to the cause. We must begin with God. And I am not talking about “religion”, which can mean anything. I am talking about *the God who is really there*.

Bishop Desmond Tutu was recently interviewed by Bill Myers on a TV documentary on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which has been a focal process for enabling the people of South Africa to make peace with the injustices of the past. Describing the purpose of the TRC as he reflected on the perpetrators from both sides of the apartheid struggle, he said:

We’re not seeking to humiliate them, we’re not even seeking to prosecute them. We’re just saying that this is a moral universe, and you’ve got to take account of the fact that truth and lies and goodness and evil are things that matter, and we’ve got to acknowledge them.

Without morality, there is no basis for reconciliation and without God there is no basis for morality. Tutu can speak with conviction on such issues because he believes not only in God, but in a God who is both loving and just.

The only foundation for morality—the character of God

Morality begins with the character of God. There is no other foundation for it. And the sort of morality that really matters depends on the sort of God that really exists. The God I will be talking about here is not any old god such as humans have dreamed up over the centuries. It is the God who created this universe, who has made himself known through his dealings with chosen people through history and supremely through coming himself into our human existence in the person of Jesus Christ. If you don’t believe in this sort of God then we will have to deal with that issue before we can have any meaningful discussion about morality.

This God that Christians believe in is first of all *personal*. In other words, he is not just some impersonal “force” behind the universe. C. S. Lewis, in his excellent book *Beyond Personality*, pointed out that though God may well be *more* than personal, he is certainly not *less*. This God has revealed to us that he exists as three persons we know as “Father”, “Son” and “Holy Spirit”

who have always existed in loving relationships with one another¹. Thus the New Testament can declare that **“God is love”** (1 John 4:8). He has always been love and his purpose in creating humans was that he desired other personal beings with whom he could share that love. He desired to extend the family.

As God is personal, he therefore created us as autonomous “persons”, people with intelligence, feelings and the ability to make decisions. Though we share many characteristics with the animal creation, the Bible is very clear that we are more than that. We have been given a spiritual side to our nature that enables us to have a personal relationship with the living God. Because we were created for the prime purpose of enjoying relationships, both with God and with one another, then it stands to reason that whatever “morality” is, it must be *relational*. Whatever helps towards good relationships, either with God or other humans, must be “good”. Whatever hinders those relationships must be “bad”.

The second important thing to note here about this God is that he is *holy*. This is a word the Bible uses to sum up the perfection of God’s character. He is perfect in his love, in his justice, in his faithfulness and any other “good” qualities you can think of. He is altogether untainted by evil in any form. One of the metaphors the Bible uses to describe good and evil is that of light and darkness. Thus John, in his first letter, can say, **“God is light; in him there is no darkness at all”** (I John 1:5). In fact John is concerned in this letter to tell us that “God is light” before he tells us that “God is love.” When God gave his people the Ten Commandments at Mt. Sinai towards the end of the second millennium BCE, then he was giving them standards that expressed something of his own moral character.

Because God has created us as moral beings, if we are to live in a meaningful relationship with him then it is necessary that we exhibit the same moral character that he does. God and evil (“sin” is the most common Bible word) can have nothing in common. Here lies our greatest problem. To quote John again: **“Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates his brother is still in the darkness...and walks around in the darkness; he does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded him”** (1 John 2:9,11). How can sinful humans have any relationship with God who is morally perfect? How can what is *unholy* live with what is *holy*? When Isaiah had a vision of the awesome holiness of God, his natural reaction was his own unworthiness. **“Woe to me!...I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean**

¹ I have dealt more fully with the Christian understanding of the Trinity and the implications of it in the booklets *Understanding the Trinity* and *God’s Vision for His Family, the Church*.

lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty” (Isaiah 6:5). I am sure that would be the first reaction of any of us who had such a vision. If heaven exists then it must be a perfect place, which will mean that there are only perfect people there! Thank God there is an answer to this problem; and that brings us to our next point.

Grace, the motivation for morality

During a British conference on comparative religions, experts from around the world were discussing whether any one belief was unique to the Christian faith. They began eliminating possibilities. Incarnation? Other religions had different versions of gods appearing in human form. Resurrection? Again, other religions had accounts of return from death. The debate went on for some time until C. S. Lewis wandered into the room. “What’s the rumpus about?” he asked, and heard in reply that his colleagues were discussing Christianity’s unique contribution among the world’s religions. In his forthright manner, Lewis responded, “Oh, that’s easy. It’s grace.”

There are glimpses of grace in some other religions, but in Christianity it is the very foundation of our relationship with God. There could be no relationship without it. Because God wished us to have a relationship with him that was built on love and trust, it was necessary for him to give us freedom of will. To be truly autonomous persons we had to be free to choose whether we would love God or go our own self-willed ways. At the beginning of human history, we blew it. Humans turned from God in rebellion and as a result we have all been infected with the moral disease of sin. In the imagery of the Bible, men and women were banished from the garden, no longer having access to the “tree of life”, that quality of life which has its origin in God himself.

The rest of the Bible is the story of God’s plan to win us back to himself, culminating in the entrance into human history of God himself in the person of Jesus Christ, one who was both fully God, yet fully human¹. He came for a number of reasons—to demonstrate in his own life and character what human life was meant to be and what true goodness was like, but also to reveal to us in his own person what God was truly like. If this was all he had done, he would have been wasting his time, as we do not have the power to live that sort of a life. However, the main reason for his coming was something far more wonderful than that. It was to be identified with us, not

¹ I have dealt with the evidence for the divinity of Jesus Christ, both from the written records and from history, in the booklet *Is Jesus Really God?*

only in our humanity, but also in our sin. Though he himself was without sin, he took the full consequences of our sins on himself when he died on the cross. In some amazing way the Father was crediting to the Son the sins of us all. The Bible states this truth over and over in different ways. **“God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whosoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life”** (John 3:16). **“But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us”** (Romans 5:8). **“God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God”** (2 Corinthians 5:21).

God the Father raised Jesus to life after his burial to demonstrate his satisfaction with all he had achieved for us by his death. After forty days, in which he appeared repeatedly to his chosen followers, he ascended to heaven where he represents us sinful people in the presence of his Father. On the basis of his sacrifice for us, he now offers us a free pardon and reconciliation if we will but acknowledge our sin, turn from it in repentance, and invite him into our lives as our Saviour and Lord. In other words, the way is now open to anyone who wishes, regardless of what their past life has been, to be fully reconciled to this holy God, and to live in a daily relationship with him. We may also have the certainty that we will enjoy that relationship for ever beyond the veil of death, as Jesus has won the victory over sin and death on our behalf.

It is this reaching out to us in love, in spite of our rebellion, that the Bible calls “grace”. It is totally undeserved, and not based on any goodness in ourselves. In fact, before we can have it we have to be humble enough to admit that we don’t deserve it. Someone has spelt out the word “grace” as an acrostic as follows.

God’s
Riches
At
Christ’s
Expense

It means that, because the debt for our sins has been paid in full, no one is too bad to receive this full forgiveness if only they will come to Jesus, and no one is too good not to need it. The only sin God cannot forgive is the refusal to come. When the thief who was executed on the cross with Jesus turned to him in faith, Jesus said to him, **“I promise that today you will be with me in paradise”** (Luke 23:43). Henk Kamsteed, editor of *Challenge Weekly*, puts it like this: “A sin-soaked criminal is received by a blood-stained Saviour. That’s the pure definition of grace.” The Danish philosopher and theologian,

Soren Kierkegaard, warned against simply trying to live a more virtuous life in order to please God. He said:

*The greatest Christian heresy is to believe that the opposite of sin is virtue.
No. The opposite of sin is grace.*

When we put our trust in Jesus and experience this reconciliation, then morality takes on a totally new meaning. Being “good” is no longer a matter of trying to reach some impossible passmark. It is a matter of responding in love and gratitude to the love and forgiveness one has already received, and which is wholly undeserved. Christian morality, then, is something that grows out of the relationship, a relationship that could not exist without grace. Without grace there can be no true morality. As Donald Bloesch concludes in *Freedom for Obedience*:

Ethics in this theological perspective is no longer submission to law but instead a response to divine grace.

Os Guinness, in *The Dust of Death*, says:

To know God as creator, is significance. To know Him in revelation is clarity of knowledge. To know Him as personal is fulfilment. To know Him in character is order and values. To know Him in grace is freedom, love, joy, peace and adoration.

Helmet Thielicke, in *Theological Ethics*, made an appropriate distinction between Christian and philosophical ethics. He said:

In philosophical ethics the ethical acts are determined by the ‘task’ to be performed. In evangelical ethics they are determined by the ‘gift’ already given.

I often feel sorry for parents who desire their children to grow up “good” rather than “bad” but are unable to give them good reasons for doing so. God’s grace, revealed to us so clearly in the sacrificial death of Jesus for our sins, provides the only truly consistent reason, and once it is experienced it also provides the motivation. David Brainerd, a very effective missionary to North American Indians, wrote in his journal:

I found that when my people were gripped by this great doctrine of Christ and him crucified, I had no need to give them instructions about morality. I found that one followed as sure and inevitable fruit of the other.

Morality from the inside out

The first thing that happens when we turn in repentance and faith to Jesus is that he forgives our sins and accepts us fully. The basis for this is that another, Jesus himself, has already taken upon himself the penalty for those

sins. The Bible calls it being “justified”. This is a legal term that means we are acquitted of all the charges against us. However, that is only half the story. The second thing God does is literally to come and live within us in the person of the Holy Spirit. His Spirit is united with our human spirit. This is called being “**born of the Spirit**” (e.g. John 3:5) or simply receiving the Spirit (e.g. Galatians 3:14). We are now sons and daughters of God, adopted into his family.

Jesus constantly emphasised that God is not just concerned with outward behaviour, but also with what goes on inside us, who we really are. This was in sharp contrast to the morality of the Pharisees who tended to focus on outward rules of behaviour, rules about such things as circumcision, keeping the Sabbath and dietary regulations. Outward rules of behaviour always act as boundary markers, excluding those who don’t observe such rules or who have other rules. Jesus, instead, concentrated primarily on inward thoughts and motives—matters of character. For Jesus, it is what goes on inside us that determines the true value of our outward acts. This tends to put us all in the same boat, as we all have problems here!

In describing the person who is blessed by God, at the beginning of his famous Sermon on the Mount, Jesus mentions qualities that mainly have to do with inner attitudes and motives (Matthew 5:1-12). He declared that we could commit murder and adultery by our inward thoughts without committing the deeds (Matthew 5:21,22, 27, 28). He spoke of those who “**honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me**” (Mark 7:6). He declared, “**What comes from your heart is what makes you unclean. Out of your heart come evil thoughts, vulgar deeds, stealing, murder, unfaithfulness in marriage, greed, meanness, deceit, indecency, envy, insults, pride, and foolishness. All of these come from your heart, and they are what make you unfit to worship God**” (Mark 7:20-23). Again he said, “**A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot produce good fruit...You cannot pick figs or grapes from thorn bushes. Good people do good things because of the good in their hearts. Bad people do bad things because of the evil in their hearts. Your words show what is in your hearts**” (Luke 6:43-45).

Most of us are pretty good at putting on a reasonable show on the outside. But what we really are is determined by what is on the inside! It is obvious that if our morality is going to be acceptable to God it must begin on the inside. God comes in the person of his Spirit for this very purpose—to begin a radical make-over job, beginning on the inside. This means that as I begin to grow in my relationship with God through Bible reading, prayer, learning to trust and obey him, and fellowship with others on the same

journey, I will become conscious of changes. New desires will replace old—a new love for God and desire to please him, a new concern for others. Old habits will begin to drop off and new ones form. The Bible says, **“God’s Spirit makes us loving, happy, peaceful, patient, kind, good, faithful, gentle, and self-controlled”** (Galatians 5:22, 23). These are qualities that Jesus exhibited perfectly in his own flawless character.

This transformation doesn’t happen overnight. The process will continue till we die, and it depends on our co-operation. But it is God’s doing—transformation from within. The day will one day come when God will **“present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy”** (Jude 24). In that tremendous day of resurrection the process will be complete and we will be seen to be the perfect handiwork of him who died and rose again for our salvation. **“We will be like him, because we will see him as he truly is”** (1 John 3:2). Claudio Taffarel is a Brazilian soccer player who made the finals of the 1994 and 1998 World Cup. Describing the effects of the realisation that Jesus had died for him, the confession of his sins and his efforts to follow Jesus’ teaching, he said:

The verse in the Bible: ‘Draw near to God and he will draw near to you,’ really spoke to me. My commitment to Jesus Christ didn’t bring big changes at first, but as I looked at myself, I realised that I was gradually changing from the inside.

So true morality is made possible, both by the grace of God by which we are accepted undeservedly into his family, and the transforming presence of the Holy Spirit within. Grace provides the motivation, the Holy Spirit the power.

How reliable is conscience?

It may be helpful at this point to say a little about the place of conscience in discerning right and wrong. Because God has created us as moral beings who are personally accountable to him, and created us for fellowship with him, he has given us a built-in moral conscience. In Romans, chapter 2, Paul is speaking about those peoples of the world who have never had the privilege of being given God’s moral law as the Jewish people had. He says, **“Some people naturally obey the Law’s commands, even though they don’t have the Law. This proves that the conscience is like a law written in the human heart. And it will show whether we are forgiven or condemned, when God has Jesus Christ judge everyone’s secret thoughts, just as my message says”** (vv. 14-16).

The problem, however, is that we live in a fallen world where we have all been infected by sin, and one of the results is that our conscience gets

distorted too. The Bible talks about a “**good conscience**” (1 Timothy 1:5), and a “**clear conscience**” (1 Timothy 3:9), but it also talks about a “**weak conscience**” (1 Corinthians 8:12), a “**seared**” conscience (1 Timothy 4:2), a “**corrupted**” conscience (Titus 1:15) and “**an evil conscience**” (Hebrews 10:22). Our conscience can be desensitised if we fail to listen to it, even to the extent that we become morally blind, stumbling around in moral darkness as John puts it (1 John 2:11). Our conscience is a bit like an alarm clock. We are very good at rationalising our behaviour and we can reset it and make it go off when we want!

Because we *do* have consciences, however, and because we really *are* accountable to God, it means that guilt is something very real. Because the whole concept of sin and accountability tends to be rubbished today, all feelings of guilt tend to be written off as psychological problems. We need a psychiatrist, not a minister of the gospel! Now it is certainly possible to have exaggerated or unreal feelings of guilt. But this does not negate the real thing. Christianity not only takes guilt seriously, but it has an answer for it in confession, repentance and the acceptance of forgiveness through the cross of Christ. When we fail morally we can dismiss it, we can deny it, we can distort it, or we can deal with it. If we deny the reality of sin and guilt and our accountability to God, then we have no way of dealing with it. Our mental homes are full of people who would not be there if they knew they were forgiven.

Because our conscience is not sufficient guide in itself to living as God intended we should, if we want to live in a meaningful relationship with him we need some clearer guidelines. God has given us these through the inspired writers of the Bible. As Paul puts it in writing to his younger disciple, Timothy, “**Everything in the Scriptures is God’s Word. All of it is useful for teaching and helping people and for correcting them and showing them how to live. The Scriptures train God’s servants to do all kinds of good deeds**” (2 Timothy 3:16, 17). What are these guidelines?

Biblical guidelines

The Old Testament—the millennium before Jesus

As the Old Testament is a much misunderstood book and as all the moral principles that are found in the New Testament find their beginnings in the Old, I will start there.

Compassion

The Old Testament gives us the story of God’s dealings with the human race from the beginning of human history till the fifth century BCE.

Particularly, it tells how God progressively made himself known to one man, Abraham, and then his descendants, the Israelites, in preparation for the coming of Jesus Christ. His usual method of communicating with his people was through inspired prophets. This God they had come to know was faithful (Jeremiah), just (Amos), loving (Hosea), holy (Isaiah) and merciful (Micah). Drawing these characteristics together, the Old Testament writers presented this God as, above all, compassionate. It was right at the beginning of their relationship with God as his chosen people that he revealed himself to Moses as **“the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness”** (Exodus 34:6). The declaration that God abounds with love and is filled with compassion is found repeatedly throughout the Old Testament¹, being as it were its central theological statement. Concerning this, Williston Walker, in an article in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, concluded:

Nothing therefore is more prominent in the Old Testament than the ascription of compassion, pity, mercy, etc. to God. The people may be said to have gloried in it.

Grace

The idea of grace is also prominent at the beginning of the Old Testament story. The declaration **“I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery”** repeatedly serves to introduce commands as to how God’s people were to live in the covenant community (e.g. Exodus 20:2). God had taken the initiative (as he always does) to rescue the people from their predicament and to bring them into a special covenant relationship with himself, a covenant based on his own love and faithfulness towards them. Now that they *are* in that relationship, which is all of his doing, he expects them to behave in a certain kind of way. Because he is holy, they are to be holy. **“You are to be holy to me because I, the Lord, am holy, and I have set you apart from the nations to be my own”** (Leviticus 20:26). Holiness involved obedience to the covenanting God as motivated by love and gratitude (Deuteronomy 6:5, 20-25). The purpose of the covenant was to build a personal relationship, built on love and trust. As Walter Kaiser notes in *Toward Old Testament Ethics*:

The covenant aims to establish a personal relationship, not a code of conduct in the abstract.

The social nature of the moral code

A third noteworthy emphasis of the Old Testament is the strong social nature of moral code. **“Lord, who may dwell in your sanctuary? Who may**

¹ E.g. Nehemiah 9:17; Psalm 86:15; 103:8; 111:4; 116:5; 145:8; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2; Isaiah 54:10.

live on your holy hill? He whose walk is blameless and who does what is righteous, who speaks the truth from his heart and has no slander on his tongue, who does his neighbour no wrong and casts no slur on his fellow man...who keeps his oath even when it hurts, who lends his money without usury and does not accept a bribe against the innocent" (Psalm 15). The commands to love God with all our heart and to love our neighbour as ourselves are both Old Testament commands (Deuteronomy 6:5; Leviticus 19:18). The first four of the ten commandments deal with our relationship with God, but the last six deal with our relationships with others.

God's people as an example

God wanted his people to be seen as a people who exhibited something of his own character, who could be an example to the rest of the nations. **"Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation"** (Exodus 19:5, 6). However, in their concern for one another, the stranger and the foreigner were not to be excluded (e.g. Deuteronomy 5:13-15). It is noteworthy also from this last reference that the care of animals was also part of their responsibility, as in Proverbs 12:10: **"A righteous man cares for the needs of his animal."**

This strong emphasis on community, which Kaiser calls "corporate solidarity" means that God's covenant people do not find their true being just as individuals but as members of the community. Thomas Ogletree draws out the implications of this in *The Use of the Bible in Christian Ethics*:

Our wholeness as moral beings cannot be abstracted from the moral soundness of the community to which we belong.

The inward nature of morality

A fifth point that, as we have seen, Jesus underlined in his teaching, is the inward nature of morality. **"Do not hate your brother in your heart"** (Leviticus 19:17). **"Surely you desire truth in the inner parts"** (Psalm 51:6). **"If I had cherished sin in my heart the Lord would not have listened"** (Psalm 66:18).

Justice for the poor

Sixthly, there is a very strong emphasis on the justice of God and his bias towards the poor and oppressed. This comes through especially in the teaching of the prophets, though it has its roots in the earlier books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy that tell the story of the Israelites' delivery from slavery in Egypt and the lessons they were to learn from that. A typical example is the eighth century BC prophet, Amos, who

spared no words in warning of God's judgement on those who rule without regard to justice for those who are at the bottom of the social scale. **"This is what the Lord says: 'For three sins of Israel, even for four, I will not turn back my wrath. They sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals. They trample on the heads of the poor as upon the dust of the ground and deny justice to the oppressed'"** (Amos 2:6, 7). Their religious observances are hateful to God while they allow such practices to continue. **"I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies. Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings I will not accept them** (5:21, 22). Instead they are to **"let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!"** (5:24). Such teaching by the prophets is graphically illustrated in the stories of the Old Testament, such as Nathan's rebuke of David for his adultery and murder (2 Samuel 12) and Elijah's rebuke of King Ahab for his murder of Naboth (1 Kings 21). God's love for his people in the Old Testament is clearly balanced by his passion for justice and righteousness.

This theme was taken up by Jesus at the very beginning of his ministry when, reading from the Old Testament book of Isaiah, he declared in the synagogue, **"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour"** (Luke 4:18, 19). His ministry that followed wonderfully demonstrated those words. His heart was for the poor and disadvantaged.

Hope

A seventh emphasis, that comes through very strongly in the later prophets, is that their present moral concerns were very much related to their future hope. The prophets directed their hope towards the dawning of the reign of the sovereign God over all the earth and the role of his people in that reign. The day would come when **"the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea"** (Isaiah 11:9), and **"His rule will extend from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth"** (Zechariah 9:10). This hope, which focused on the coming of the Messiah, provided a future perspective on their present behaviour. The hope of future participation in God's kingdom had serious moral implications. Moral decisions carried consequences for the future. Only the righteous could look forward to sharing in the messianic era. **"Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever"** (Daniel 12:3). Though there is not a strong emphasis on life after death in the Old Testament, the hints

are there. It was recognised that many of the “good” would not be rewarded in this life, but the prophets held out the hope that God would surely act on behalf of his covenant people at the end of the age.

Wisdom

Another point worth mentioning is the importance of “wisdom” in the Old Testament. For the Israelites true wisdom began with a proper reverence for God. **“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline”** (Proverbs 1:7). But wisdom did not stop there, it extended to every aspect of day to day living. The Book of Proverbs, particularly, is packed with wisdom for character building and sorting out one’s priorities in life. (It is a great book for teenagers!) All this is important for being a member of God’s covenant community.

A final matter of importance is that many of the moral and spiritual principles of Old Testament are found in the stories of God’s dealings with real people that are found there. Telling stories is one of the most effective ways of teaching moral principles, particularly for children, and at this the Old Testament excels. It is the world’s greatest storybook, as well as being the one that gives the most accurate picture of this world of humans as it really is.

The New Testament—the coming of Jesus

When we come to the New Testament we find that all the main points we have discussed about the Old Testament are found here and clarified further. We would expect this. After all, the God who called his people out of Egypt in Old Testament times is the same God with whom we have to reckon today.

The New Testament begins with the appearance of Jesus in human history. This is not the place to go into the evidence for believing that Jesus was the Second Person of the divine Trinity, God the Son, now taking upon himself our human nature. I have dealt with this in the booklet *Is Jesus Really God?* Here I will assume it. As John puts it, **“The Word was truly God [and] became a human being and lived among us”** (John 1:1, 14). Though much of Jesus’ teaching was based on the principles found in the Old Testament, which he referred to constantly, we now find that two new important factors enter the moral equation.

Jesus as a model of true humanity

First, Jesus, in his own example, has given us a perfect picture of what it means to be truly human. All that he was, and all that he did, speaks powerfully to us of all that God intended humans to be, and underlines the height from which we have fallen. As several writers of the New Testament

declare, he was without fault, which can be said of no other figure in human history. We now have no excuse for not knowing what is truly good. He himself is the model for those who would claim to be his followers. He said, **“As I have loved you, you must love one another”** (John 13:34). After washing his disciples’ feet on the night of his betrayal, he said, **“Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you”** (John 13:14,15). John says in his first letter, **“If we say that we are his, we must follow the example of Christ”** (1 John 2:6). However much we may be conscious of failure, this gives us a clear goal to work towards. But this is only half the story.

Christ within us

The second new factor concerns our personal relationship with Jesus. If we have come to him in repentance and faith and received his forgiveness and the promised gift of the Holy Spirit, then we have in him not just a moral ideal to follow but *we have been touched by the Risen Lord himself*. Stanley Grenz, in *The Moral Quest*, puts it like this:

Consequently we do not merely admire Jesus as we might admire other historical figures such as Ghandi, Albert Schweitzer or Mother Teresa. We do not simply draw inspiration or a pattern for living from his life as we might do from theirs. The Christian ethic does not look to Jesus solely as a historical example who we seek to emulate. We do not look to him only as the main character in a story from a bygone era on whose life we can reflect and thereby draw instruction. Rather he has loved us and has sacrificed his life for us. To this personal experience of Jesus’ great love, we find ourselves compelled to respond with gratitude and love. Hence, rather than merely patterning our lives after his, we enter into relationship with him. In this relationship we desire to live as Christ would have us live, that is, to have Christ formed in us.

We may bear the *memory* of others in our hearts, whose example we wish to follow, but Christ has come to *live* in our hearts in order that he may begin to reveal something of his character *through* us. As we have touched on earlier, it is the ministry of the Holy Spirit to accomplish this transformation. As Paul puts it, **“We, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit”** (2 Corinthians 3:18). Much of the New Testament, particularly the letters, was written to give us guidelines as to what living out this relationship with Jesus means in practice.

One of the most striking things about the New Testament teaching on how we should live is its comprehensive nature. I mentioned earlier that I do

not have the space, nor is it my intention, to deal in detail with specific moral issues. However, in order to give some indication of the wide range of teaching in the New Testament about how we should live, and to give some assistance to those who wish to check things out for themselves, I offer the following index of subjects, with the references to where they are found in the New Testament. The list is fairly exhaustive but not completely so.

As you skim through the list of topics that are covered here, I suggest you note the following emphases that you will find in the New Testament—our relationship with Jesus; qualities that have to do with character; qualities that have to do with relationships, getting along with one another; our attitude to things such as material possessions and our daily work; and the strong emphasis on truth. The discussion continues after this list of texts

New Testament Index of Christian Behaviour

Christian Foundations

Our attitude to Jesus: Matthew 7:21-23; 10:32, 33, 37-39; 11:28-30; 12:30; 16:24-26; Luke 14:25-33; John 1:11, 12; 3:18-21, 36; 5:22-24, 39, 40; 6:29, 35, 40, 45, 51-58; 7:37-39; 8:12, 24, 42; 10:9, 10, 27; 11:25; 12:26, 44, 45, 48; 14:1, 12-15, 21, 23, 24; 15:1-10, 14, 15; 16:27; Acts 10:43; 13:38, 39; 20:21; 1 Corinthians 16:22; Galatians 2:15-21; 3:23-27; 5:5, 6; Ephesians 6:24; Philippians 1:20, 21; 3:7-15; Colossians 2:6, 7; 1 John 2:22, 23; 3:23; 4:2, 3; 5:10-12; Revelation 3:20.

Repentance: Matthew 4:17; 21:28-32; Mark 6:12; Luke 13:1-5; Acts 2:38; 3:19; 17:30, 31; 20:21; Acts 26:20; Romans 2:4; 2 Corinthians 7:9, 10; 2 Peter 3:9; Revelation 2:5, 16, 22; 3:3, 19.

Faith: Matthew 13:58; 14:31; 15:28; 21:18-22; Mark 4:40; 5:34; 9:23; Luke 7:9, 50; 17:5, 6, 19; Romans 1:17; 4; 5:1, 2; Galatians 2:15-21; Ephesians 2:8, 9; 3:17; 6:16; 1 Timothy 6:12; Hebrews 3:18, 19; 11; James 5:15; 1 Peter 1:6, 7; 1 John 3:23; 5:4, 5.

Christian Moral Responsibilities

Attitude to our bodies: Romans 12:1; 1 Corinthians 6:18-20.

Attitude to civil authorities: Romans 13:1-7; Titus 3:1; 1 Peter 2:13-17.

Attitude to God's word: Matthew 4:4; 7:24-27; 13:1-23; John 15:7; Acts 17:11; 20:32; Ephesians 6:17; 2 Timothy 3:14-17; Hebrews 12:25; James 1:21-25; 1 Peter 2:2; 1 John 2:5, 14; Revelation 22:7, 9, 18, 19.

Attitude to our enemies: Matthew 5:23-26, 38-48; 18:15-17; Luke 6:27-36; Romans 12:14, 17-21; 1 Thessalonians 5:15; 1 Peter 3:9.

Attitude to false teaching and teachers: Matthew 7:15-20; 16:12; 24:5, 23, 24; Acts 20:29-31; Romans 16:17-19; Ephesians 4:14; Philippians 3:2, 3; Colossians 2:4, 18, 19; 1 Timothy 1:3-7; 4:1-7; 6:3-6, 20, 21; 2 Timothy 2:14-18, 23-26; Titus 1:10-14; 3:9; Hebrews 13:9; 2 Peter 2:1-3; 3:17; 1 John 4:1-6; 2 John 7-11; Revelation 2:2, 14-16, 20-23.

Attitude to material possessions: Matthew 6:19-34; 19:16-26; Luke 12:13-21; 16:1-15, 19-31; Ephesians 4:28; Philippians 4:11, 12; 1 Timothy 6:6-10, 17-19; Hebrews 10:34; 13:5; James 1:9-11; 5:1-5; Revelation 2:9; 3:17.

Attitude to Satan: Ephesians 6:11-13; 1 Peter 5:8, 9; Revelation 12:10, 11.

Attitude to sin: Romans 7:11-14; 8:12-14; 12:9; 13:14; 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1; Colossians 3:5; 1 Thessalonians 5:22; 2 Timothy 2:19, 22; Titus 2:11, 12; Hebrews 12:4; James 1:21; 1 Peter 1:14; 2:11; 1 John 1:8-2:2; 3:6; 5:18.

Attitude to work: Ephesians 6:5-8; Colossians 3:17, 22-24; 1 Thessalonians 4:11, 12; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15; Titus 3:14.

Attitude to the values of this world: John 15:18-21; Romans 12:2; Ephesians 4:17; James 1:27; 4:4; 1 John 2:15-17.

Baptism: Matthew 28:19; Acts 2:38.

Be blameless: 1 Corinthians 1:8; Philippians 2:15; 1 Thessalonians 5:23; 1 Timothy 5:7; 2 Peter 3:14, 15.

Be unafraid: Matthew 10:26-31; Mark 4:40; Luke 12:4-7; 2 Timothy 1:7; Hebrews 13:6; 1 Peter 3:14, 15.

Be joyful: John 15:11; 17:13; Romans 5:2, 3, 11; 12:12; Philippians 3:1; 4:4; 1 Thessalonians 5:16; James 1:2; 1 Peter 1:6, 8.

Character: Matthew 5:1-10; 12:33-35; Romans 5:3, 4; Galatians 5:22, 23.

Contentment: Philippians 4:11-13; 1 Timothy 6:6-9; Hebrews 13:5.

Controlling anger: Ephesians 4:26, 27, 31; Colossians 3:8; James 1:19-21.

Doing God's will: Matthew 7:21; John 7:17; Romans 12:1, 2; Colossians 1:9; Hebrews 10:36; James 4:13-16.

Doing good: Matthew 5:16; Galatians 6:9, 10; Ephesians 2:10; Colossians 1:10; 1 Timothy 2:9, 10; 6:17-19; 2 Timothy 2:20, 21; 3:16, 17; Titus 2:14; 3:8; Hebrews 10:24; 13:16; James 2:14-26; 3:13; 1 Peter 4:19.

Empathy: Romans 12:15; 1 Corinthians 12:26.

Employer/employee relationships: Ephesians 6:5-9; Colossians 3:22-4:1.

Encouraging: 1 Thessalonians 4:18; 5:11, 14; Hebrews 3:12, 13; 10:24, 25.

Family relationships: Ephesians 5:21-6:4; Colossians 3:18-21; 1 Timothy 5:8; 1 Peter 3:1-7.

Forgiveness: Matthew 6:9-15; 18:21-35; Ephesians 4:32; Colossians 3:13.

Gentleness: Galatians 5:23; Ephesians 4:2; Philippians 4:5; Colossians 3:12; 1 Timothy 6:11.

Giving: Matthew 5:42; Mark 12:41-44; Luke 6:38; 12:33, 34; Acts 20:35; 1 Corinthians 16:1, 2; 2 Corinthians 8 and 9; Galatians 6:6; Philippians 4:15-19; 1 Timothy 6:17-19.

Golden rule: Matthew 7:12.

Gratitude: Luke 17:11-19; Ephesians 5:19, 20; Colossians 1:11, 12; 2:6, 7; 3:15-17; 1 Thessalonians 5:18; Hebrews 12:28.

Holiness: Luke 1:75; Romans 6:19-22; 12:1; 1 Corinthians 7:34; 2 Corinthians 7:1; Ephesians 1:4; 2:21; 4:24; 5:27; Colossians 1:22; 3:12; 1 Thessalonians 3:13; 4:7; 1 Timothy 2:8, 15; 2 Timothy 1:9; Titus 1:8; Hebrews 12:10, 14; 1 Peter 1:15, 16; 2:5, 9; 2 Peter 3:11.

Honesty: Matthew 5:33-37; Ephesians 4:15, 25; 6:14; Colossians 3:9; James 5:12; Revelation 14:5; 21:8, 27; 22:15.

Hope: Romans 5:2-5; 8:20, 24, 25; 12:12; 15:4, 13; 1 Corinthians 13:7, 13; Galatians 5:5; Ephesians 1:18; 4:4; Colossians 1:5, 27; 1 Thessalonians 1:3; 5:8; 2 Thessalonians 2:16; 1 Timothy 1:1; Titus 1:2; 2:13; 3:7; Hebrews 3:6; 6:11, 18; 7:18, 19; 11:1; 1 Peter 1:3, 13, 21; 3:15; 1 John 3:3.

Hospitality: Romans 12:13; Hebrews 13:2; 1 Peter 4:9; 3 John 8.

Humility: Matthew 18:1-5; 23:8-12; Mark 9:33-36; Luke 14:7-11; 17:7-10; 18:9-14; Romans 12:3, 16; 1 Corinthians 1:26-31; 3:18, 19; 4:6, 7; Galatians 6:3-5; Ephesians 4:2; Philippians 2:3-11; Colossians 3:12; Titus 3:2; James 3:13; 4:6, 10; 1 Peter 3:8; 5:5, 6.

Hypocrisy: Matthew 6:1-18; 23:1-33; Mark 7:6-8.

Inner thoughts: Matthew 5:21, 22, 27, 28; 23:25-28; Mark 7:20-23; Luke 16:15; Romans 7:7, 8; 1 John 3:15.

Judging others: Matthew 7:1-5; Romans 14:10-13; 1 Corinthians 4:4, 5; James 4:11, 12.

Kindness: 1 Corinthians 13:4; 2 Corinthians 6:6; Ephesians 4:32; Colossians 3:12; 2 Peter 1:7.

Laziness: 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15.

Living in dependence on the Holy Spirit: Romans 8:1-17, 26, 27; Galatians 5:16-25; 6:7, 8; Ephesians 5:18; 6:18; 2 Timothy 1:14; Jude 20.

Living for God and for his glory: John 12:24-26; Romans 14:6-9; 1 Corinthians 10:31; 15:58; 2 Corinthians 5:15; Colossians 3:23, 24; 1 Thessalonians 1:9.

Living in the light of Jesus' return to gather his people and judge the world: Matthew 24:42-51; 25; Mark 13:32-37; Luke 12:35-48; Philippians 3:20-4:1; Colossians 3:1-4; 1 Thessalonians 1:9, 10; 3:13; 2 Timothy 4:6-8; Titus 2:11-14; James 5:1-9; 2 Peter 3:11-13; 1 John 2:28; 3:2, 3.

Love: Matthew 5:43-46; 22:34-40; Luke 6:27, 32; John 13:34, 35; 15:12, 13; Romans 12:9, 10; 13:8-10; 1 Corinthians 13; 16:14; 2 Corinthians 6:6; Galatians 5:6, 13, 14, 22; Ephesians 1:15; 3:16-19; 4:2, 15, 16; 5:2; Philippians 1:9-11; 2:1, 2; Colossians 1:4, 5, 8; 2:2; 3:14; 1 Thessalonians 1:3; 3:12; 4:9, 10; 5:8, 13; 1 Timothy 6:11; 2 Timothy 1:7; Hebrews 10:24; 13:1; James 2:8; 1 Peter 1:22; 2:17; 3:8; 4:8; 2 Peter 1:7; 1 John 2:10, 11; 3:11-20, 23; 4:7-12, 16-21; 5:1-3; 2 John 5, 6.

Marriage & divorce: Matthew 5:31,32; 19:1-12; Mark 10:2-12; Luke 16:18; 1 Corinthians 7; Hebrews 13:4.

Modesty: 1 Timothy 2:9, 10; 1 Peter 3:3, 4.

Motives: Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18; Luke 11:34, 36.

Obedience to God: John 14:15, 21,24; 15:10, 14; Acts 5:32; Romans 1:5; 6:16, 17; 16:26; 2 Corinthians 10:5; Hebrews 5:9; 1 Peter 1:2; 1 John 3:22-24; 5:3; 2 John 6; Revelation 12:17; 14:12.

Patient endurance through trials and suffering: Matthew 24:13; Luke 9:62; Romans 5:3-5; 12:12; 2 Corinthians 4:16-18; Philippians 1:29; Colossians 1:11, 12, 22, 23; 2 Thessalonians 3:5; 1 Timothy 6:11; 2 Timothy 2:3, 10; 3:10-12; Hebrews 6:12; 10:36; 12:1-13; 13:13, 14; James 1:2-4, 12; 5:7, 8, 10, 11; 1 Peter 1:6, 7; 2:18-23; 2 Peter 1:6; Revelation 2:2, 3, 19; 3:10; 13:10; 14:12.

Peace of mind: Matthew 6:25-34; John 14:27; 16:33; Philippians 4:6, 7; Colossians 3:15; 1 Peter 5:7.

Praise: Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16; Hebrews 13:15; James 5:13; 1 Peter 2:9.

Prayer: Matthew 6:5-14; 7:7-11; 18:19, 20; Mark 9:29; 11:24, 25; Luke 11:1-13; 18:1-8; Romans 8:26, 27; 12:12; Ephesians 6:18; Colossians 4:2-4; 1 Thessalonians 5:17; 1 Timothy 2:1-4, 8; Hebrews 4:16; James 1:5-8; 4:2, 3; 5:13-18; 1 Peter 3:7; 4:7; 1 John 3:21, 22; 5:14-17; Jude 20; Revelation 8:3, 4.

Principles for deciding doubtful issues: Romans 14:1-15:7; 1 Corinthians 8.

Purity: Matthew 5:8; Philippians 1:10; 2:14, 15; 1 Timothy 1:5; 2 Timothy 2:22; Titus 1:15; James 3:17; 4:8.

Reverence for God: Matthew 10:28; Hebrews 12:28, 29; 1 Peter 1:17.

Self-control: 1 Corinthians 9:24-27; Galatians 5:22, 23; 2 Timothy 1:7; Titus 2:2, 6; 1 Peter 1:13; 4:7; 5:8; 2 Peter 1:6.

Service: Matthew 20:25-28; Mark 10:41-45; Luke 22:24-27; Romans 12:11; Galatians 5:13; Ephesians 4:11, 12; Philippians 2:5:8; 1 Timothy 6:2.

Sexual issues: Acts 15:29; Romans 1:18-32; 13:13, 14; 1 Corinthians 5; 6:9-20; Galatians 5:19-21; Ephesians 5:3-7; Colossians 3:5; 1 Thessalonians 4:3-8; 1 Timothy 5:1, 2; Hebrews 12:16; 13:4; Revelation 21:8; 22:15.

Social responsibility: Matthew 25:31-46; Luke 10:25-37; 14:12-14; 16:19-31; Romans 12:13; Ephesians 4:28; Hebrews 13:3; James 1:27.

Steadfastness: 1 Corinthians 15:58; 16:13; 1 Thessalonians 3:8; Hebrews 10:32; James 5:8; 1 Peter 5:9, 10; Revelation 2:13.

Support of our leaders: 1 Corinthians 9:1-14; 16:15-18; Galatians 6:6; 1 Thessalonians 5:12, 13; 1 Timothy 5:17, 18; Hebrews 13:7, 17.

Temperance: Romans 13:13; Galatians 5:19-21.

The Lord's Supper: 1 Corinthians 11:17-34.

Unity: John 17:20-23; Romans 15:5, 6; 1 Corinthians 1:10-13; 12:12-30; 2 Corinthians 13:11; Ephesians 2:11-22; 4:1-6, 15, 16; Philippians 1:27, 28; 2:1, 2; Colossians 3:14.

Unselfishness: 1 Corinthians 10:24; Philippians 2:4.

Use of our time: Ephesians 5:15-17.

Use of the tongue: Matthew 12:34-37; Ephesians 4:29; 5:4; Colossians 3:8; 4:6; James 2:1-12; 1 Peter 3:10.

Using our gifts: Romans 12:4-8; 1 Corinthians 12:4-30; 1 Peter 4:10, 11.

Value people regardless of social standing: James 2:1-7.

Wisdom: Matthew 7:24-27; Ephesians 1:17-19; Philippians 1:9-11; Colossians 1:9-12; James 1:5; 3:13-18.

Witnessing to Jesus: Matthew 10:32, 33; 28:18-20; Mark 8:38; John 15:26, 27; Acts 1:8; Philippians 2:14-16; 2 Timothy 1:8; Philemon 6; 1 Peter 3:15, 16.

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Where in the history of literature will you find teaching on human behaviour that is both as comprehensive and as challenging as this? However challenging it may appear, the Christian starts from the foundation of having first experienced God's forgiveness, love and full acceptance, and then of having received the Holy Spirit, the continued presence and transforming influence of God in his or her life. To attempt to live the kind of

life pictured in the New Testament without such a relationship with the living God is an impossibility. A “good” life is a God-centred life.

It means also that the Christian life is one of continued growth. None of us can say we have got it made. Peter says we are to “**grow in grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ**” (2 Peter 3:18). That is, we are to grow in our understanding and our experience of all that we have been freely given in Christ. This understanding and experience grow out of our daily relationship with him. If we are not growing then there is something wrong with the relationship. Paul could say, “**I have not yet reached my goal, and I am not perfect. But Christ has taken hold of me. So I keep running and struggling to take hold of the prize...This is the prize that God offers because of what Christ Jesus has done. All of us who are mature should think in this same way**” (Philippians 3:12-15). However far we have to go, it is the direction that is important. If we are truly committed to Christ then we will *want* to grow and to please him. The New Testament gives us the plan.

One thing is clear. The picture given above as to what Christian living is all about contrasts markedly with the Kiwi way of life at the end of the 20th century. Bishop Brian Carrell, in an article *Understanding our Western World* in a recent addition of *AFFIRM* magazine, sums up some of the ways in which Christianity differs from popular values:

...community over private persons, self-denial as more important than self-fulfilment, holiness before happiness, spiritual well-being above material comfort, prayer over ingenuity, human fallibility rather than human perfectibility, patient waiting ahead of instant gratification, the unseen over the seen, and accountability over total freedom.

The centrality of love

One thing that is constantly emphasised in the New Testament is the centrality of love. The following are some examples.

In answer to the question, “**Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?**” Jesus replied by quoting two commands from the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy, the command to love God and the command to love our neighbours as ourselves. He added, “**All the Law of Moses and the Books of the Prophets are based on these two commandments**” (Matthew 22:36-40).

On his last night with his disciples before his crucifixion, Jesus said to them, “**I am giving you a new command. You must love each other, just as I have loved you. If you love each other, everyone will know that you are**

my disciples" (John 13:34, 35). The important words here are **"as I have loved you"**. He had given them a perfect example of love in his relationship with them over two to three years. Now he commands them to do the same.

Paul considered love so important that he wrote a whole chapter on it (1 Corinthians 13). He said, **"All that the Law says can be summed up in the command to love others as much as you love yourself"** (Galatians 5:14; see also Romans 13:8-10).

Again he said, **"live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God"** (Ephesians 5:2).

After giving a list of Christian virtues, he said, **"And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity"** (Colossians 3:14).

It is interesting that the command to "love one another" is found at the heart of every passage of ethical instructions which Paul gives (see Rom 13:9; Gal 5:13, 22; Eph 5:2; Col 3:14; I Thess 4:9). It is as if he regards other commands as merely an explanation of what it means to love.

James describes the command to love others as ourselves as **"the royal law"** (James 2:8).

We are commanded to do many things for each other in the New Testament, but the command to **"love one another"** occurs 16 times.

Why is love so important? Simply because it demonstrates the true character of God. God is a Trinity of persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who have always existed in relationships of love¹. The Bible says that **"God is love"** (1 John 4:8). In enlarging the family and adopting us as his children, he calls us to demonstrate the true nature of the family. He commands us even to love our enemies because that is what God does (Matthew 5:43-48). **"You must always act like your Father in heaven"** (v. 48). And there is nothing that will more readily convince others of the true nature of God than Christians showing this love to one another. **"If you love each other, everyone will know that you are my disciples"** (John 13:35).

It is interesting that the Bible never defines what love *is*. However, it clearly says what it is *like* and, in doing so, always refers to the cross. **"We know what love is because Jesus gave his life for us"** (1 John 3:16). We learn what love is by seeing how God has *acted*. **"God showed how much he loved us by having Christ die for us, even though we were sinful"**

¹ I have explored this theme further in the booklets *Understanding the Trinity* and *God's Vision for His Family, the Church: A Call to the Churches of the New Millennium*.

(Romans 5:8). **“This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins...since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another”** (1 John 4:10, 11). It is the cross that defines so much of how we should behave in the New Testament—i.e. our attitude to our marriage partner (Ephesians 5:25) or to those who mistreat us (1 Peter 2:18-24) or to sin and suffering generally (Hebrews 12:1-4).

Christian love, then, is not primarily a matter of feelings. It is self-giving action on behalf of another. As James Hitchcock observed in an article ‘Self, Jesus and God’, in *Summons to Faith* (ed. Peter Williamson & Kenin Perotta):

One of the purposes of authentic Christianity is to take people out of themselves, to provide them with the means to overcome self-centredness and distorted self-love.

Ultimately, we are called to imitate Christ, a repeated theme of the New Testament, for in doing so we are actually imitating God. R. E. O. White, in *Biblical Ethics*, claims that this perspective is “the nearest principle in Christianity to a moral absolute,” for it “remains the heart of the Christian ethic.”

Christian morality and future hope

You will note from the Index to New Testament teaching on how we should live (pp. 33-39) that there is a strong emphasis on living in the light of Jesus’ return at the end of this age. One reason for this is undoubtedly that we may receive his commendation, **“Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things”** (Matthew 25:21). The Bible often mentions rewards for those who have lived faithfully for Jesus. However, there is more to it than that.

Christians are called to demonstrate here the marks of the future kingdom of God. In contrast to those whose **“god is their stomach”** Paul says, **“But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body”** (Philippians 3:18-21). In other words, because we know the value of our bodies and what they will be in the future, we will want to look after them here. Similarly, John, in speaking of Christ’s return, says, **“My dear friends, we are already God’s children, though what we will be has not yet been seen. But we do know that when Christ returns, we will be like him, because we will see him as he truly is. This hope makes us keep ourselves holy, just as Christ is holy”** (1 John 3:2, 3).

Dorothy Sayers had something worthwhile to say on this theme:

It is precisely because of the eternity outside of time that everything in time becomes valuable and important and meaningful. Therefore, Christianity...makes it of urgent importance that everything we do here (whether individually or as a society) should be rightly related to what we eternally are. "Eternal life" is the sole sanction for the values of this life.

This is one of the reasons Paul puts such emphasis on love. Stanley Grenz, in his excellent book *The Moral Quest*, puts it like this:

Whereas all other aspects of Christian existence will one day cease, love will carry over into the new [age] (1 Corinthians 13:8-13). Of the various dimensions of the moral life, love is central to the whole, for it alone provides insight into the coming age. Indeed, love is the actual quality of the age to come. Where love exists the new [age] is present. And the moral life is eschatological living [living for the future]: It involves acting now as those who belong to the age to come.

Does it matter how we live?

There are a number of reasons we could give for why it matters. If the picture given us in the Bible of the character of God, the nature and purpose of human beings, and God's purposes for us in this life and the next is true, then certain things must follow. Our true joy and satisfaction in life will only be found as our lives are lived out in a loving relationship with him. It also means that our *usefulness* in this life will depend on that relationship. Others who could be blessed and helped along the road to find their own true destiny will only be so helped if we allow God to work in our lives in the way that he wishes to do. One thing is certain: we will pass this way only once. Some believe in reincarnation, that we will have the opportunity to come back in another life and have another shot at it, but the Bible clearly and constantly denies this possibility—"We die only once and then we are judged" (Hebrews 9:27).

However, the Bible gives an even more pressing reason for facing these issues. The writer of Hebrews spells it out. **"The word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account"** (Hebrews 4:12, 13). In simple language, we are accountable, and a day of reckoning is coming when God **"will show what is hidden in the dark and what is in everyone's heart"** (1 Corinthians 4:5). In his written word, the Bible, God has set out clearly what his standards are.

If we have the courage to read it thoughtfully, it will sort us out. (It is not surprising that many don't want to read it!)

But we have to make a choice, which goes something like this. If I want to live in a relationship with God, I cannot do so without accepting his values, values that are an expression of his own goodness. Though I come woefully short of his perfection, he offers me forgiveness and total acceptance as his son or daughter. That is his grace given me in Jesus. However, I can't accept that forgiveness and live as I please. Once forgiven he calls me to live the rest of my life in grateful devotion to him. Though he never promises it will be easy, he offers his help and some tremendous promises along the way. The end result is guaranteed, but the choice is mine.

In the twentieth chapter of Revelation we have a picture of the final judgement when the chips are down and we have to face our Judge. Two books are mentioned—the Book of Life and the book which records the life and deeds of every person. The Book of Life is the record of those who have accepted the gift of eternal life which Jesus purchased for them at infinite cost to himself. They have accepted his forgiveness and chosen to love and serve him. Though they may receive rewards or punishments based on their faithfulness to their Lord, they will not be rejected from his kingdom. They are members of his eternal family and will share in the blessings of that family through all eternity. Those whose names are not in this book will experience the “**second death**”, described here as the “**lake of fire**”, and elsewhere as “**everlasting destruction**” and being “**shut out from the presence of the Lord**” (2 Thessalonians 1:9). It is not my intention to go into the meaning of these terms here. Whatever they imply, it means that there is no way I could live in such a wonderful and perfect place such as God's future kingdom will be without having experienced the forgiveness and cleansing that is offered me through Jesus.

J. W. Green wrote a poem which drives home in a striking way the fact that one day we must face our day of reckoning:

When the factories of our cities
 Will cease from the hum of steel cogs,
 And the spade has turned its last furrow of soil
 Or cut the last sod in the bogs;
 When our banks have raked in their last dollar,
 The Clerk has done with his pen,
 When the Judge of the earth says: “Close for the night,”
 And asks for a balance—
 WHAT THEN!
 When the last Evensong has been sung,
 And the priest has made his last prayer;
 When the people have heard their last sermon,

And the sound has died out on the air;
 When the Prayer Book lies closed by the altar,
 And the seats are all empty of men,
 And each one stands facing his record,
 And the great Book is opened—

WHAT THEN!

When the actors have played their last drama,
 The Comedian has made his last fun;
 When the film has flashed its last picture,
 And the billboard displayed its last run;
 When the crowds seeking pleasure have vanished,
 And gone out in the darkness again,
 When the trumpet of ages is sounded,
 And eternity starts—

WHAT THEN!

When the bugle call sinks into silence,
 And the long marching columns stand still;
 When the Captain repeats his last orders,
 And they've captured the last fort on the hill;
 And the flag has been hauled from the masthead,
 And midnight sounds out from Big Ben—
 And you and I stand with the guilt of the past,
 In the Law Courts of Heaven—

WHAT THEN!

However, if we have put our trust in Jesus as our Saviour and Lord, and experienced his grace and transforming presence, then we can face the future with absolute certainty, even with joy and anticipation¹. If this is a step that you have not yet taken, and would like to do so, then you may find the following suggested prayer a useful guide.

Dear God: I confess that I have come a long way short of your standards. I acknowledge my sins.

I accept the fact that you loved me enough to come in the person of Jesus and to pay for those sins on the cross.

I am sorry for my sins and as best I know how I repent of them.

I gratefully accept your forgiveness and your gift of eternal life.

Come into my life as my Saviour and Lord. I offer my life to you.

Give me the strength to change where it is necessary and to live worthily of being a member of your family.

I thank you for your great love.

Amen.

¹ I have dealt with the question of how we may be sure of a place in God's eternal kingdom in the booklet *Can I Know for Sure That I Am Going to Heaven?*

If you should make a commitment of your life to God like this, then I suggest you do two things. Begin reading a passage of the New Testament each day. Ask God to teach you as you do and to enable you to live by its teaching. Also, find other Christians you feel at home with and with whom you can share mutual encouragement. You will find that the New Testament has a lot to say about what we can and should do for one another as members of God's family¹.

The greatest gift that we can pass on to the next generation is an example of true goodness that is based on a sure foundation. The New Testament tells us where we can find such a foundation and what true goodness is all about. When our children are brought up in this faith we can confidently leave them, knowing that the God who planned this mighty universe will surely guide them and that their contribution to humanity will be worthwhile. There is no other way we can face the new millennium with confidence—no other antidote to the violence and false values that are so prevalent in today's world. One thing is certain. The final victory will be God's. This was assured by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

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If you wish to explore in some depth the history of the quest for morality and the Bible's teaching on how we should live, then I recommend two excellent books which I have found helpful in putting all this together:

The Moral Quest: Foundations of Christian Ethics, by Stanley J. Grenz. InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, Illinois, U.S.A. 1997.

The Moral Vision of the New Testament, by Richard B. Hays. HarperSanFrancisco, 1996.

And don't forget that your best source is the New Testament!

¹ I have a lot to say about this in the booklet *God's Vision for His Family, The Church: A Call to the Churches of the New Millennium*.

