

A.M.D.G.

***A Classic Path Through
High School
For Exceptional Early Teens***

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AClassicPath.com

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*For Peter, Brian, and Jack.
Who always make their Dad proud.*

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Introduction:

As you progress from the child your parents raised to the adult whose destiny you will decide, this book is to help you lay the foundation upon which you will build your life. I'm assuming you are a well-adjusted teenager who wants to realize the full potential of their life. Is there such a thing as a well-adjusted teenager? If you are like most teens, you probably don't think you qualify but whoever gave you this book thinks you possess qualities that set you apart from most of your peers. Don't get too excited though, every mother thinks their baby is special. But seriously, someone who loves you wants you to realize your full potential and I'm sure they have told you that this journey of life is not easy. That doesn't mean our time here on earth needs to be drudgery. As you grow into your life, you will find the people you most enjoy being around see life through a positive perspective, the glass half-full to use a common analogy. It is usually not because they haven't faced their share of adversity, it is just that they have a good way of dealing with what life throws at them.

Humans have been facing life's troubles for about 40,000 years, and until recently that often meant life or death. Whether it was dodging dangerous beasts or disease and plagues, most of human history has been a story of strife. Thinking about that makes losing Wi-Fi for a weekend or having to explain a poor grade to your parents seem not so awful. Modern life brings its unique challenges but understanding history helps us overcome the enduring trials of life that people have struggled with through eras and civilizations.

In the following chapters we will experience the story of human history, highlighting some important milestones and advancements, such as writing itself which came about as early as 4000 BC. Some Hindu Scripture and the stories of today's Old Testament were handed down orally for generations before actually being written around 500 BC during an era of great human awakening when

people began asking themselves about the meaning of life. That has remained the ultimate question through the history of human civilization up to this day. Most societies have been built around religious beliefs to answer that question.

That is why the first chapter in this book is about God. If you have been raised in a religious home some of it may sound familiar but I hope to present it in a way that shows how philosophy has evolved, and those aspects that have remained constant. Since so much of early human thought was developed under the auspices of the early Christian Church, we will look at the history of philosophy extensively through a religious lens. The Church was also the world's dominant political power for most of its existence and the sole supporter of arts and sciences. Until the last several hundred years, popes were more powerful than any kings or presidents that we could imagine today, so my references to popes and saints are a function of their historical relevance.

The Renaissance in the 15th century was when the value of the written word came to be more widely appreciated by humanity, marking another milestone in human evolution. By this time, Church organizations were teaching upper class people to read and write. A group of Catholic priests called the Jesuits set out in 1540 to educate humanity with lessons dating as far back as the ancient Greeks from two thousand years earlier, such as using reason and logic to question authority. They became so influential that they were actually banished for a few decades before being reinstated hundreds of years ago. In 2013, Pope Francis became the first Jesuit to rise to Catholicism's highest position. The order educates more people today than any other organization. Wherever you are in the world, you are not far from a Jesuit school. Having gone to Jesuit high school and undergraduate college myself, their classical education has a heavy influence on this book.

Once kings began to question the authority of the popes, it would not be long until people began to question their political masters. The Age of Enlightenment in the 18th century was when philosophers began to see humans as individuals with distinct rights. With those rights come responsibilities which are addressed in the

second chapter, Country. You will be introduced to pioneering thinkers like Rene Descartes and John Locke and learn how their basic concepts fit into the context of human thought. You will hopefully see how Aristotle's views on friendship from 2,500 years ago are still relevant today. You may never be called to such greatness, but stories about the lives of Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King Jr. who overcame extreme adversity and corrected major societal wrongs are meant to inspire you to overcome the adversity that will surely come your way. Chapter 2 also discusses how you fit into your society which generally means your school. Joining groups, developing your talents and letting your actions communicate who you are.

So this is not merely a history book. In Chapter 2 we begin to look at Dr. Daniel Siegel's research into the unique characteristics of the teenage brain. We will look at that more deeply in the following chapters, Sex and Drugs. An objective of those chapters is to show you that much of what happens in those realms has changed little over thousands of years. Teenagers crave novelty and excitement but much of what you might think is new and beyond where others have gone is at least as old as recorded history. Many of the lessons therein are just as old. I want you to learn from the unfortunate role models who fell victim to many of the same challenges that you face today.

Wanting to be popular and succumbing to peer pressure have always been particular challenges for teenagers. We will see common lessons where the easy way that feels good usually doesn't end up feeling too good in the long run. Instead, thinking through the decisions you make will increase the chances that you will be happy with those decisions years later. Your thoughts may not lead you where you wanted, but they will lead you where you belong.

Even though he was a celibate priest, Pope John Paul II thought a lot about sex and the relationships of married couples. His *Theology of the Body* is so groundbreaking that the greatest living philosophers and theologians think he is among only four popes to be considered "Great" and the first in more than 1,000 years. Don't feel intimidated, his concepts are difficult to fully grasp but I hope

you understand him enough to realize that he saw the wonders of sex as one of God's greatest gifts to humanity. Therefore not something to be recklessly squandered.

Recent years have witnessed great advancements in research into the human brain. It seems not a few months go by in which another major study builds on the established knowledge we have gained into this enormously important facet of our lives, one that has been largely mysterious to your parents' generation. That accumulating base of knowledge has confirmed Dr. Siegel's research showing the teenage brain to be at a uniquely vulnerable point in our lives. That's why these years can be among the more difficult ones in life. Knowing this should help you manage these natural and temporary weaknesses. The key word being temporary. That doesn't mean life gets easy as soon as you get out of high school. Remember, nobody ever said life was easy. You will read how it isn't even easy for those who look like they're sitting on top of the world. Rock stars like Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix and Jim Morrison were able to overcome any burdens from drugs and alcohol in their teenage years but took on deadly habits that killed them by age 27.

A consistent theme through this book is to use these years to build a solid foundation for your life. The habits you form in your youth will likely remain throughout adulthood so make them good habits. You will learn that keeping a sound mind in a sound body was originally articulated in the 1st century and has remained ever since as an integral brick in that solid rock foundation. You do not have to be athletic to keep your body fit. Even those of us not blessed with the bodies we desire can make efforts to keep ourselves in shape and those of us who struggle with grades can still keep our minds sharp. Daniel Boone, the 18th century American pioneer was both. A small man physically with little education, his father once said, "Let the girls do the spelling and Dan will do the shooting." Rather than using freely available fallen timbers, he was smart enough to build his forts with freshly cut trees so they would not catch fire from the Indians' flaming arrows. Chapter 5 is not about rock stars, we cover that previously, it's about the settlement of Kentucky led by Daniel Boone with fortitude and intelligence rarely called for among men.

It is a story about the mutual respect he held with his adversaries, especially the great Shawnee warrior, Tecumseh.

The Shawnees kept a meticulous history so we will get to know Tecumseh from his birth through death. He was a superstar kid who excelled in all the games his friends played and he was universally loved. The solid foundation he built for his life led him to grow into a fierce warrior with morals invulnerable to peer pressure. That made him almost as influential as George Washington was among the white settlers who were increasingly becoming neighbors to the Native Americans in the years preceding the Revolutionary War. It is a more complex story than the common caricature of Europeans stealing land from Native Americans. We will see how people from two of earth's most diverse cultures can share so many commonalities. Good qualities like respect and responsibility passed down from parents to children. Unfortunately also bad characteristics that so often lead to pain and suffering.

I hope the knowledge you gain from the experiences of others will help you build a better life for yourself and avoid some of the pitfalls that have brought down great people. Scattered extensively throughout this book are 14 points that have provided guardrails for people of all faiths, or no religious beliefs, for thousands of years; themes that help people stay on the path they have chosen for their lives. I'm referring to the Seven Deadly Sins and their corresponding Seven Holy Virtues introduced in Chapter 1. These fourteen concepts are classic because they affect all of us, so thinking about how they apply to you will help you avoid the bad ones and embrace the good.

Life is complex and confusing, and not only during adolescence. The stronger you build that foundation of your life, the better you will be able to roll with it all. A book of classic stories would be incomplete without one by the bard himself, William Shakespeare. He has stood the test of time because his subjects are timeless and so is his artful use of the English language. Many clichés, or very common phrases, you will hear as you grow up came from him and surprisingly many come from his play *Hamlet*. It is a story of adolescence meeting adulthood in which a young prince is paralyzed

with indecision and confusion. Unlike Daniel Boone and Tecumseh, Hamlet is unable to roll with the troubles life has thrown at him and at the risk of spoiling the ending, everyone winds up dead.

Not to end on a bad note, I conclude the book with the biggest influence on my life when I was your age, The Beatles. Their catalogue of lyrics cover so much of the human experience so I wrap everything up with reflections on how I found solace in their songs through life's confusion and hardship. Decades later I still do.

As you can see, the chapter titles provide a loose structure to explore issues that are important to the adolescent experience. The stories are classic because they address the essence of who we all are. After reading this book, you will be better prepared to construct your life to make your mark on history as you realize your individual talents and potential. Will it be a mark of beauty or a blemish? That answer will be determined by one of my dominant themes, self-knowledge. Throughout the book I will ask you to pause and think about a question, such as:

THINK: How well do you know yourself?

Self-knowledge has been at the heart of human thought for as long as there has been the written word. Clear self-knowledge will direct you towards your strengths and away from your weaknesses. The potential you reach in life will be defined by how much you make the world a better place which will be determined by how well you know and develop your unique strengths and characteristics. Reading this book will nurture that development for you.

I hope you enjoy the stories and learn from them. The chapters are long so take breaks at the section headers, but it is best to read the book in order. Don't be intimidated by words or concepts you don't understand, either take a break and look them up or just read on. This book seeks to broaden many of your horizons, including

your vocabulary. As with life in general, you learn when you don't realize it.

Now let's open up our minds for an adventure in reason and logic with Socrates and the advent of philosophy as we dive into Chapter One.

Chapter 1: God

*Oh God said to Abraham, "Kill me a son"
Abe says, "Man, you must be puttin' me on"
God say, "No." Abe say, "What?"
God say, "You can do what you want Abe, but
The next time you see me comin' you better run"
Well Abe says, "Where do you want this killin' done?"
God says, "Out on Highway 61"*

-Bob Dylan

Bob Dylan captures the absurdity of one of the oldest stories of God, written around 500 BC in or around modern day Israel. The God that made a covenant with Abraham, saying that if he agreed to sacrifice his beloved son Isaac, Abraham would become the leader of a great nation with more descendants than stars in the sky. At God's direction, Abraham built an altar for the sacrifice but before he "took the knife to slay his son"¹ the loving God rewarded him for his loyalty with a ram to substitute for Isaac. It is one of the early religious stories making the point that our decisions and actions have consequences that determine our destiny. Indeed, Abraham became the forefather of three major religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

The story appears in the book of Genesis, written at the beginning of a great worldwide intellectual awakening when humans began to question the world around us and our place in it. Across the Mediterranean Sea, the ancient Greeks had a polytheistic belief in an assortment of gods exerting control over various facets of life on earth. For example, Poseidon was the god of the seas, who punished Odysseus for blinding his one-eyed son the Cyclops with storms and peril on his return from the Trojan War. Aphrodite the goddess of love, frequently got in trouble

with her father Zeus, the father of all the gods, for interfering in the affections of mortals. Greek Mythology provides a rich heritage of tales of love and triumph but also common human weaknesses that together form the human condition. Unfortunately, the weaknesses often prevail.

Hundreds of years later, the dominant force on earth was the Roman Empire whose leaders considered themselves gods. People had little control over their destinies then, aside from staying on the right side of Caesar's Centurions. While recognizing their emperors as gods, Romans adopted the polytheistic tradition of the Greeks they conquered. Like the Greek gods, the Latin tradition is rich with lessons about the trials of life and how living virtuously is more difficult in the short term but pays rewards over time. It is a common theme through most religions through the millennia as well as the New Age philosophies of modern times. You will see how other common characteristics also recur throughout various faiths.

Socrates Knew That He Knew Nothing

Although not the first philosopher, Socrates was the first to gain a wide following. Born around 450 BC, he became famous teaching that the way to gain knowledge is through living a virtuous life in search of what is good, which he saw as truth. Socrates wrapped virtue, goodness and truth all together in a single concept. He used logic and reason to question authority as generations of philosophers have continued to do in the 2,500 years since. Socrates did not simply accept the conventional wisdom that the elites of his day were better people than everyone else, and that got him into trouble. His use of logic and reason was so powerful that his lessons resounded despite never committing anything to writing. He would simply sit with his students and convey his wisdom orally. Recording it all for posterity was mostly left to his student Plato who went on to teach Aristotle. Both philosophers continued Socrates' quest for truth and the answer to the ultimate question of why we exist.

Most of what we know about Socrates comes from Plato's writings. In addition to that admirable legacy, Plato could be considered the father of geometry due to his belief that truth can be found in shapes and forms that exist in nature and beyond. Recognizing these forms and how they interact with us is his path to truth. Plato focused on the metaphysical, those things beyond our sensory perception. Only intelligent and enlightened people could recognize these shapes and forms which is why Plato thought society would be best governed by philosophers.

His student Aristotle was more down to earth. Less concerned with the metaphysical, he concentrated on the physical world around us. He saw truth in how our senses perceive the reality around us, those things we see, hear and touch. As one of humanity's earliest scientists, he wrote it all down for future scientists to develop further. For example, his species classifications still form the basis of today's zoology. Not solely focused on earth, he spent much of his time pondering the cosmos. Aristotle is widely credited for determining that the earth is round after noticing that ships sailing beyond the horizon disappeared from the hull first and top of the mast last.

Although incorrect, Aristotle's theory of a geocentric universe, revolving around the earth, formed the basis of science for almost two thousand years. It was intuitive to believe that the universe revolved around the earth because we all see things as revolving around us. This is an early lesson that even the smartest among us can be wrong sometimes, so don't worry if you ever find yourself looking foolish. Aristotle founded his Lyceum school which together with Plato's Academy comprised the School of Athens. They created the educational tradition of which high school is the modern descendant.

Socrates taught his students to ask penetrating questions in a search for the truth which he found through a process of eliminating false theories. When his friend asked the Oracle of Delphi "Is anyone wiser than Socrates?" the answer was "no human is wiser."² Delphi was the mountaintop site of a temple dedicated to Apollo, the Greek god of truth and prophecy. It's

kind of funny that ancient societies would group those two concepts together; before science, religious prophets were the arbiters of truth. Within the temple sat the Oracle, a priest or priestess who would interpret sounds from the earth as wisdom and truth. Modern science attributes the sounds to probable natural gas springs in the mountain. Socrates humbly tried to disprove the Oracle's assertion but found the elites of his day all lacking in knowledge but thinking they knew much. He concluded that he was wiser than all the politicians, poets and artisans, "because I do not fancy I know what I do not know."³

That self-knowledge gave Socrates the confidence to teach the youth of Athens the way to virtue, goodness and knowledge. A common tool was to use stories such as the Allegory of the Cave described in Plato's *Republic* and which I will summarize as follows (try to get past the absurdity and follow the details). Prisoners in a cave have been chained to a wall since birth seeing nothing but shadows on an opposing wall cast by hidden people sitting behind them. The prisoners identify the repetitive shadows and status adheres to the ones who can predict their order. When one of the prisoners is released out of the cave, the light is initially blinding but eventually he can see the real world all around him. Socrates explains that when the man went back into the cave, his eyes needed time to adjust and the other prisoners were better at identifying the shadows still familiar to them. Although the freed prisoner gained true knowledge, the other prisoners mocked him because leaving the cave made him worse at their game, which to them is truth. The other prisoners did not want to be released.

There is a lot in that parable. You can see how truth can be disguised and even blinding when you are confronted with it unexpectedly. It says that what all your peers see as truth may not in fact be true. Notice how the group didn't recognize truth and preferred imprisonment to freedom. It says that it can be uncomfortable to be confronted with truth. It also says you will know truth when you see it and be better for recognizing it. Remember that Socrates conflated truth and goodness as the same



THINK: Which part of Socrates' Allegory of the Cave resonates most with you?

concept. Just because everyone else thinks something is true, that doesn't make it true, or good.

Philosophers have spent the 2,500 years since Socrates told the story discussing all that it might mean. The politicians, poets and other elites of those days thought it meant Socrates was calling them ignorant. Plato described him as a “gadfly,” the first such use of the term previously used to describe insects that fly around and sting the rears of horses. Wanting to get rid of him, the elites of Athens prosecuted Socrates for corrupting the minds of the youth. He used logic in his defense pointing out that the Oracle of Delphi said he is the wisest among men so it was his duty to share his knowledge to make a better society, like the prisoner who is obligated to tell his former captives of the knowledge he gained outside the cave. Unfortunately the jury resembled the other prisoners and rejected his defense; Socrates was sentenced to death by drinking poisonous hemlock.

Confucius Says

Around the same time that Socrates was teaching virtue to the Greek youth, on the other side of the Eurasian continent, Confucius was wandering the kingdoms that comprise today's China also teaching about our control over our own destinies through the decisions we make and the actions we take. The truth in his lessons made Confucius as important to Asian culture as Socrates is to Western civilization. He had to wander because the elites of Asia were not welcoming of his teachings that often cast them in unflattering terms. Perhaps you notice that in ancient Greece and Asia, two very distinct cultures, the smartest minds saw the elites as lacking. That too follows consistently through history so don't despair that so many of today's politicians are also lacking, that's always been true.

Like Socrates, Confucius' greatest impact came after his death when students compiled his lessons to preserve for future

generations. You can read his brief *Analects* freely at any library or on the internet. Pertaining to your high school years, you can read number 15 in chapter 2 stating *“If you study but don’t reflect you’ll be lost. If you reflect but don’t study you’ll get into trouble.”* It is a message urging diligence and balance. Don’t get too lost in your books and fail to see the world around you, and at the same time don’t be a dreamer who never really learns. Confucius even echoes Socrates when he says *“To know when you know something, and to know when you don’t know, that’s knowledge.”* Self-knowledge and improvement are dominant themes for Confucius just like we see in western civilization. He expands on the concept when he says *“The craftsman who wishes to do his work well must first sharpen his tools.”* It is not enough to have the tools and the knowledge to use them. Your skills must be practiced to stay sharp. You may have already realized this from playing sports or music or other activities that get more enjoyable as you practice more. Repeating boring steps may not be fun but overcoming challenges and playing well are. Of course, if you want to play well, you have to do the tedious practice. Perhaps Confucius’ most famous analect is a precursor to the Golden Rule so familiar in western civilization, it is commonly called the Silver Rule since it is told from the negative perspective. When asked if there is a single saying for one to practice their entire life, Confucius responded *“That would be reciprocity: That which you do not desire, do not do to others.”*

Socrates and Confucius were not so focused on an all-powerful god who would decide our eternal fate. Instead they taught about seeking virtue among humanity for reasons rooted here on earth. Socrates sought social justice while Confucius sought social harmony. Both saw an ethical life as the means to reach those ends.

Between Europe and China sits India, where in this same classical era of great human awakening, Siddhartha Gautama became Buddha which means “the awakened one.” Born a prince, he gave up a life of material wealth for one of prayer and meditation. Doing so, he found the path to true enlightenment

through a “Middle Way” between self-indulgence and self-mortification. Buddhism also avoids any focus on an all-powerful god but lays out ways of life that enable one to avoid the suffering caused by the evil of this world. Like most religions, the path to wisdom traverses through ethical acts but Buddhism adds deep concentration or meditation. Meditation is when you focus your thoughts completely and totally on the single concept you are meditating about and purge any other thoughts from your mind. Or you could meditate on all the thoughts traveling through your consciousness. You might meditate about your breathing or the sounds of nature where you are sitting or a problem you are struggling with. It could be a deep state of prayer. For many people, meditation is a way to find yourself by searching deeply within yourself.

Buddhism also goes further than other classical philosophies by delving into the concept of reincarnation. Buddhists believe the status you attain in your next life is determined by the way you live your current life. That means if you don’t want to come back as a cockroach in your next life you better treat people nicely in this one. Your destiny is determined by karma, the moral law of cause and effect. Karma acts as seeds that come to fruition throughout this life and determine our place in the next. The best way to build positive karma is by studying the Buddha’s teachings together with other Buddhists in monastic communities. Leading such a virtuous life will also offset negative karma. You don’t have to shave your head and become a monk though, any good thoughts and actions build good karma while bad deeds or intentions generate bad karma. It’s not just your actions that determine your destiny but thoughts too, so keep them positive.

Karma also figures prominently in Hinduism whose billion adherents today are more than any other religion except Christianity and Islam. Like Socrates’ allegories, Hindu Scripture uses metaphorical meanings to teach the ways to earn positive karma by leading an ethical life. They include accounts of the origin of the world, hymns praising a variety of gods, and prayers

for life. The Hindu Scriptures are among humanity's oldest written texts produced between 1500 and 1200 BC.

Originally it was considered a synthesis of the cultures and traditions of a region in northern India, of which Confucianism and Buddhism are major contributors. To those belief systems, Hinduism adds the reading of Scripture and worship of a god or gods but unlike other religions, it leaves any particular practices or rituals to the individual. There is no centralized Hindu authority, like popes or bishops, but there are sages and gurus who help individuals practice their faith in regional, local or personal ways. Pilgrimages are made to common holy sites and daily prayers and purification rituals are common Hindu practices. Cows are sacred in India so if you have a hamburger it won't be made with beef. Several reasons include their gentle nature, usefulness in working the fields and the milk and butter that they provide. A Big Mac in India is made with lamb meat.

For Hindus, the ultimate goal in life is to reach nirvana which is defined in different ways. To some it means full self-knowledge through perfect unselfishness; or it can mean a union with God. Nirvana is defined ultimately as detachment from the desires of this world and perfect mental peace. Hinduism and other ancient faiths and philosophies marked the beginning of humans questioning the purpose of our existence and the religions that followed continue in that search for an answer to life's ultimate question.

Sons of Abraham

When God spared Abraham's son Isaac on the mountain in today's Jerusalem, He promised that Abraham's descendants would found a great nation, and around 1000 BC, Isaac's descendant David prevailed in a battle with the mighty Goliath and went on to found the nation of Israel. Comprised of twelve related tribes of Middle Eastern nomads, they all followed a set of laws that were given to Moses by God on the nearby Mount Sinai.

Known since as the Ten Commandments, the laws have become ubiquitous throughout western civilization, even appearing on the edifice of the Supreme Court of the United States. The first four Commandments relate to loyalty and devotion to God. Family bonds are kept strong by honoring our parents and not committing adultery. The importance of community is stressed in the prohibitions on stealing, killing and telling lies. Finally, we keep our souls sound by not coveting our neighbors' spouses or property. Following these and other laws through the centuries had brought freedom from slavery under the Egyptian Pharos and brought Moses' people to their Promised Land. However, that history is also rife with examples where disobeying God's law brought hardship and strife. David committed adultery and lost a son but he repented and gained God's forgiveness. Archeological evidence confirms Jerusalem's repeated sackings which Scripture attributes to disobeying God's laws. Kind of like generating bad karma and paying a price for it. Beyond the Ten Commandments, Jewish ethics address concepts such as truth, justice, peace, compassion, humility and respect that are found through the various books of what is commonly referred to as the Old Testament.

The most important Jewish holy days comprise Passover, which commemorates the exodus from Egypt and freedom from slavery. Celebrated for the week after the first full moon in April, it begins with a ritual Seder meal including unleavened bread signifying that Moses' people did not have time for the bread to rise when they escaped bondage. The Jewish New Year, or Rosh Hashanah, comes in the fall and is a happy occasion for reflection and resolution for the upcoming year. The reflection continues nine days later with Yom Kippur, a day of fasting and repentance as atonement for the mistakes of the past year. The Jewish tradition is strongly focused on self-knowledge, repenting for your shortcomings and resolving to make the most out of your strengths.

Chanukah commemorates the dedication of the Second Temple in Jerusalem, around 200 BC, after it was sacked and

defiled by forces of the Greek King Antiochus IV. Jewish fighters prevailed against the outsiders but when they dedicated the Temple anew they couldn't light the menorah, a candelabra of nine lights, because all their holy oil had been destroyed by the invaders. They found one flask sealed with the signet ring of the High Priest and the miracle occurred when the one-day supply of oil lasted for the entire eight days it took to make a fresh supply. The eight-day holiday commemorates God's blessing of their victory over Antiochus IV.

The Jewish faith holds that God rewards those who keep his commandments and punishes those that transgress them and on a final judgment day will raise those He favors from the dead. In addition to observing religious holidays, the Jewish people seek God's grace by following rituals of cleanliness and purity such as keeping kosher diets and engaging in daily prayer. The rituals have the added benefit of building good habits that lead to an ethical life.

The Jewish Carpenter

Although living under the dominion of the Roman Empire, the Jewish elders known as the Pharisees were the local authorities in Jerusalem at the time of Jesus Christ's birth 2,020 years ago. Mary and Joseph, both descendants in the line of David, were fulfilling their duties as citizens of Rome by travelling to Joseph's ancestral town of Bethlehem to be counted in Caesar's census. A lot of other people were too, so the inns were all full when their baby came, necessitating the humble manger to be the birthplace of the Savior to a third of humanity. By the time he reached twelve years old, Jesus was teaching Scripture to the Pharisees, the high priests, who were amazed at his knowledge of their holy texts. At some point, we all think we are smarter than our teachers but in this case Jesus actually was.

Jesus never showed arrogance, only love. He rejected the common justice of an eye for an eye saying instead to turn the other cheek if someone strikes you. When his fellow Jews asked

Jesus which is the greatest commandment, He said first to love the Lord our God with all your heart and second to love your neighbor as yourself. All Christian laws have these two at their core. Notice how Jesus states loving yourself is as important as loving your neighbor.

THINK: What does it mean to love yourself and your neighbor?

The influence of Socrates reappears when Jesus uses stories, or parables, to teach lessons on how to live the perfect life. The Good Samaritan is the hero of the parable about a beaten man, robbed and left for dead on the side of a road. While others crossed the road to avoid the victim, a passerby from Samaria stopped, helped and cared for him; even though he did not know the victim. The parable is a call to service, to see beyond ourselves and love our neighbors. Since the good man was from far away Samaria, Jesus defines our neighbors very widely as our fellow man.

When the Pharisees brought a woman caught in the act of adultery to be stoned, they confronted Jesus to agree that the law should be upheld. Instead Jesus said that he who is without sin should cast the first stone. The lesson is that self-reflection and not being judgmental are integral parts of leading an ethical life. Surely we can all think of things we regret doing ourselves and are glad we got away without a mob throwing rocks at us. The Pharisees didn't like Jesus showing such compassion to those who have violated God's law so He answered them with parables like the Prodigal Son.

It is the story of a rich man with two sons, one of whom requested his inheritance early. The father agreed and the young son went on to waste all his money by living extravagantly. Then a famine hit and the son realized that his father's servants lived better than him. He returned home to beg forgiveness and ask to be hired as a servant. But before he could ask, his father ordered a huge feast and the finest robes to adorn his son who was lost but

