

# The Teacher of Galilee: A Seer Who Really Did See

August 30, 2017

Today's guest post is by anthropologist Spencer H. MacCallum.

## A Wakeup Call for Christian Libertarians The Teacher of Galilee: A Seer Who Really Did See

“How tantalizing,” economist William H. Peterson wrote some years ago, “to find that virtually all the world’s major religions exalt the Golden Rule in one way or another.”<sup>1</sup> He reproduced the different wordings he had read as follows:

### **CHRISTIANITY**

**Do unto others as you would have them do unto you**

### **JUDAISM**

**Do not do to your fellow what is hateful to you.**

### **ISLAM**

**No one is a believer until he desires for his brother what he desires for himself.**

### **BUDDHISM**

**Do not hurt others in ways you would find hurtful.**

### **CONFUCIANISM**

**Do not do unto others what you would not have them do unto you.**

The common wisdom is that *all major religions teach the golden rule*. This appeals, because it speaks to us of the brotherhood of man. But on examination, does this common affirmation not fall into that large catch-bin of notions that are widely but mistakenly believed? Spencer Heath was fond of remarking that the positive version propounded by the teacher of Galilee was unique—and that its uniqueness carried profound implications.<sup>2</sup>

The Galilean's precept was to: "*Do unto others...*," whereas other great religious teachers counseled that men desist—indeed, that they *refrain* from doing.

Seemingly a small difference? But how dramatic a difference! It heralds the transition from the ancient world with its many tribal divisions and parochial interests to today's evolving world economy. This economy is lengthening our lives and vastly multiplying our resources and opportunities to lead a creative life, following the example set in Genesis. The teacher of Galilee was arguably a seer who really did see; for among all the world's religious precepts, his alone is consonant with free enterprise. The vision of all others was that men should desist from the hurt they do one another, thus to *escape* the scourges of the ancient world. The Nazarene showed in a practical manner how to do that, and a whole lot more. He showed how to effectively overcome evil—by *displacing* it with good.

The free-market process consists in people *doing good* for one another, not in refraining from harm as other religions counsel. We can be one-hundred-percent compliant with those other teachings *while standing in our tracks and starving to death*, and our neighbor starving also. Those other teachings are good counsel as far as they go, but they fail to rise above Benjamin Franklin's aphorism that "honesty is the best policy." It takes little reflection to see that merely being honest is not the whole story. It is incomplete as a prescription for free enterprise. Alone, it makes no history. Nor does merely wishing your neighbor well, as in Peterson's Islamic example; however cherished as a sentiment, wishing alone doesn't make it happen.

Peterson came close to seeing the uniqueness of the Christian precept when he called the market place "the Golden Rule in action." He couldn't have said that of any of the others.

Some prefer the negative precepts expressly *because* they are negative. They fear that the positive command might open the door to mischief, that it could be invoked to justify imposing one's tastes on others. Am I, for example, who like curdled milk, called upon to serve it to you, who hate it? And what of the masochist? Any such interpretation of the Galilean precept makes nonsense of a rule intended to apply to everyone. The commandment of the Galilean admits of only one reading that can be universalized; for only the *how* of the doing, not the *what*, can be applied across the board. So we are enjoined to do unto others as we would have them do unto us, which means *in a certain manner*, namely, with regard for the other person's wishes in the matter. And even the masochist wants that.

So the Galilean teaching requires two things. It requires *doing* for others, and it requires granting others perfect freedom. Serving one another in perfect freedom is the market process. One serves another, and that service, if it is truly a service in the mind of the other, induces a reciprocity, a reciprocity that is wholly voluntary. Hence those practicing the rule live longer and more abundantly, as promised in holy writ.

By way of contrast, there is no way to *practice* the negative rule. The version stated in the positive is the strict formula for private enterprise—the recipe in a nutshell. Has it ever been put more succinctly?

Moses' similar teaching, to *love your neighbor as yourself* (Leviticus 19:18) was a lineal precursor and, significantly, was also stated in the positive. Moses' putting his teaching in terms of feeling rather than of action was appropriate for a time in human experience when the cooperating group was small and face-to-face, heavily circumscribed by the amenities of kinship. Under such conditions, the nexus between feeling and reciprocal behavior was so close as to be virtually inseparable. But today, even though each of us continues to enjoy a circle of familiars with whom we interact on an intimate and psychological plane, the cooperating group is no longer familial. By the evolution of the free-market process—an evolution now accelerating at an exponential rate—the cooperating group has become global. We are rapidly learning how to serve and be served by strangers, persons we don't know and never expect to know. The ancient rule expressed in terms of subjective feeling was appropriate among intimates, but it never could bring the stranger into the circle. The Galilean teacher overcame that limitation. It would seem that he in some manner intuited a creative destiny for humankind that was little evidenced in his day and is still only dimly seen.

Others have anticipated that there is a destiny for mankind, such Shelley in his poem “Queen Mab,” or the jurist Oliver Wendell Holmes when he wrote: “I think it not improbable that man, like the grub that prepares a chamber for the winged thing it never has seen but is to be—that man may have cosmic destinies that he does not understand.” But the teacher of Galilee articulated the all-important how of realizing that destiny—and he gave that destiny a name, “the kingdom of heaven.”

It is all the more inspiring, and somewhat uncanny, how broadly the positive version of the golden rule harmonizes with Judeo-Christian teaching. What, after all, does the Bible promise as the reward for practicing the divine will but life abundant, *even unto life everlasting*. Today we are seeing the fruit of that rule: as men have begun learning how to practice the divine will universally, not just among intimates but with strangers to the ends of the earth through commerce, rationally and impersonally, thereby displacing the *iron* rule with the *golden*, we have more than doubled our life expectancy while vastly improving the conditions of our life. More and more, this allows us to become creators in our world — following finitely, perhaps, but with ever expanding capacity the example of God as told in Genesis.

A skeptic might say yes, business has all of these qualities. But it is also rapacious; don't businessmen often join together to use the powers of government to restrict competition and exploit one another? The answer is that such predatory behavior, admittedly common, is no more practicing business than cheating at cards is playing the game of cards. None of the tragedies we suffer can be laid at the door of business. Properly considered, those are leftovers from ancient tyrannies that we are outgrowing as we learn to practice the golden rule universally. The blessings coming to us today are due to the spreading practice of that rule that we love one another not only as a sentiment but impersonally as well, and hence universally—in the rational and measured behavior of the market place.

We can now appreciate, in a broader sense, the passage where Jesus, having long before foresworn politics by saying, “Get thee behind me, Satan!,” gently rebuked his followers for arguing about who would be first in the kingdom of Heaven:

“You know that the princes of the Gentiles exercise authority over them, and they that exercise authority call themselves benefactors. But it shall not be so with you. He who would be first among you must become the willing servant of all.”

However unconscious the businessman may be of practicing the golden rule in his striving to serve the widest possible clientele, it is he more than any other who aspires to be the “willing servant of all.”

If we have here a reasonable interpretation of Jesus’ gospel of the kingdom of heaven, why does the Christian tradition that has come down to us—unlike the early Christian church—stress a ghostly afterlife to the virtual exclusion of the earthly? History suggests the answer. The early Christian aversion to violence and taxation was a growing threat to Roman rule, and Constantine met it by using an old political ploy. He co-opted Christianity into the Empire. He decreed Christianity the official religion and appropriated substantial public funds for its church building and other material needs. From that time forward the Empire exerted a major influence on the development of the Church. Because political governments live not by the golden rule but by the iron rule of the sword—by taxation and war—having no other mode of survival, the Empire had little choice but to relegate the notion of the ‘kingdom of heaven’ to a far off, distant place.

There are many levels on which one can love and appreciate the teacher of Galilee. Spencer Heath thought of him as a poet and a seer who really could see—one who had an intuition, divinely inspired if you wish, of what awaited humankind in the far distant future. That destiny would not simply be handed to men. It required a certain kind of *behavior*. And as the Gospels abundantly make clear, the carpenter’s son had a sure sense of what that behavior was. It was not likely an accident of phraseology that his rule calls for the behavior that, as men practice it not only among their intimates but with strangers universally, leads unerringly in the path of his intuitive anticipation of a ‘kingdom of heaven’ on the earth. Today we can begin to see, although still, perhaps, through a glass darkly, what in his day was in the far-off future. As the vision clears, however, it will inspire us to act consciously and increasingly in our god-like image.

So what does this have to do with Christian Libertarians? Simply that the non-aggression principle (NAP) is well and good so far as it goes. But how far does it go? What power has it to inspire? It is not creative. It falls in the category of the negative versions of the golden rule—which is not to say that it either could be or should be discarded, because *it is implicit* in the positive wording. It is simply incomplete. So let us look beyond mere non-aggression to the positive, creative potential of the world now dawning. Let us look ahead to the principle of creativism, to creating a better world, a ‘heavenly kingdom’ on the earth and quite possibly beyond—not by doing to others what we think they *should* want, but by truly serving them through the free market process. Let us become entrepreneurs with a vision. Let us enter into business with imagination. Jesus’ positive rule is the divine command, if you wish. It is the *way of life*.

This piece is distributed by the author according to a [Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/).

1. William H. Peterson, "The Golden Rule and the Free Market," *Ideas on Liberty*, June 2000, pages 48-49.
2. This article was inspired by Spencer Heath, *Economics and the Spiritual Life of Free Men: The Chapman College Talks and Selected Essays*; edited by the author, Heath's grandson and literary executor (sm@look.net). Forthcoming. Also forthcoming is the *Spencer Heath Archive*, a work in process digitizing Heath's work, to be domiciled at the Universidad Francisco Marroquin, Guatemala.