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CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION®

Love and Marriage:

50 Years of Lessons

Greg Albrecht

Karen and I entered the grand adventure of marriage in 1969. We were young and in love. Given the demands of long hours in ministry and the reality of low pay, we knew we would never make a lot of money. At that time, we thought it was going to be hard, perhaps impossible, for us to ever purchase a house. Later we were able to scrimp and save and eventually buy a house, but “making a home” proved to be a far more challenging task.

We could not wait to start our family—and we didn’t! As we awaited the arrival of our first child, I lived in a Never-Neverland, with dreams and expectations of a little child emerging from Karen’s womb, smiling and cooing, “I love you Mommy and Daddy.” As Karen and I anticipated our first little bundle of joy, I did not dwell on

the grim reality that infants stink up the apartment or house, they cause parents to lose sleep and become grumpy, and then as children “mature” they have temper tantrums, scream and rebel.

We loved our daughter and our son before they were born, but like all parents, we were not prepared for the long hours and low pay involved in being a loving parent. Later, as exasperated parents of teens often say, there are those dog days of parenting when parents become so fed up with their teenagers they want to send them back.

It’s a good thing, in a way, that parents wanting to have children are blinded to the realities they will face, because if young married couples had any idea about how much kids would *smell and rebel*, the human race would have ended long ago.

Marriage requires commitment and it is a long slog—today it seems when someone wants an answer, solution or successful outcome, all one needs to do is “Google” it. I know far less now than I once thought I did, but I can tell you 50 years into the adventure of marriage, I do know that one doesn’t Google a successful marriage—nor do they ask Siri or Alexa to produce one out of thin air.

Marriage is one of the hardest things that anyone can ever undertake—but it is a worthy, noble and indeed divine endeavor.

Wedding vows promise to love, cherish, honor and be faithful through sickness and health, through riches and poverty ...to always “be there” and support each other. These vows are virtuous goals and laudable, but they are promises no human can perfectly keep. A more realistic vow would be something like, “in spite of my best intentions, I will screw up and fail on a regular basis and every once in a while, on a good day, I will admit it and ask your forgiveness. But don’t hold your breath expecting me to always say ‘sorry’ when I should.”

Many young people get married thinking that married life will be one eternal, unending, honeymoon of fun and frolicking...one long uninterrupted blissful time of floating in a swimming pool filled with wine and roses. Many starry-



Romans: Whose Righteousness?

But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.—Romans 3:21-22

Gods' grace confers the righteousness of God to us, through faith in Jesus. Conversely, the righteousness of religion must be earned by obedience to law. God's grace is amazing—it doesn't play by religious rules.

- We humans would rather earn what we believe we deserve from God. We would rather gain righteousness, like the commercial says, *"the old fashioned way."* Righteousness *"the old fashioned way"* in the old covenant (before the new covenant in Christ) was "credited" (Romans 4:3) by faith. But righteousness *"the old fashioned way"* was transactional according to law, by/under/through the law, not by faith in Jesus Christ.

- **The righteousness of God, by grace through faith**, is not of ourselves, but of God. A gazillion lifetimes of human effort cannot acquire the righteousness of God. The righteousness of God is apart from any law, not derived from law, but freely given by God's grace.

- God's grace goes head-to-head with our human, religious and legal sense of justice and fair play. When most people talk about the justice of God they are actually talking about their desire to see other people "get what they have coming to them."

- Even when people are inclined to accept and embrace God's grace for themselves, they find his same grace applied to other people to be soft-hearted and even permissive.

One of the huge problems we have with God's grace is that it confounds our every expectation of who and what God "should" be—which is an incredible statement on its own, isn't it?

So, God should consult us to see how he should behave and act and react??

God's grace proclaims that ALL our attempts to achieve righteousness are, as Isaiah proclaims in Isaiah 64:6, "...like filthy rags." The Hebrew word for "filthy rags" is probably the same word used for a menstrual cloth. How useful to God or anyone is a "filthy rag"?

Some respond, "Wait just a minute God! Are you saying after all I have done for you, after all my efforts, my sacrifices and hard work to earn your love and approval, they amount to a menstrual cloth?! But I don't display menstrual cloths in my trophy case where I keep certificates about all my religious accomplishments. What are you saying God?"

God answers, "Yes, my child! I think you are beginning to get the picture. That picture doesn't fit, does it? I have a better deal for you."

Along with its twin, the book of Galatians, the book of Romans is the bedrock of the gospel, for Christ followers the core of their convictions and the foundation of God's amazing grace.

Romans, more than any other book of the Bible, is a logical, careful deconstruction of human religion and a step by step construction of the righteousness of God bestowed as a gift, upon those who believe.

The book of Romans lays siege to human notions that our task in life is to please and appease God via our righteous deeds. God is already in

love with us—the righteousness of our Lord Jesus Christ has been given to us, by the grace of God, if we wish to embrace and accept it.

Christless religion is a lie because its primary faith is based on the steps that must be taken, tests that must be passed, regulations that must be adhered to, and rituals and ceremonies that must be performed to make God happy and keep him happy.

Christless righteousness is a cheap counterfeit, an addiction that leads to slavery and misery.

Romans demolishes Christless religion and all of its deceptive ideas—it takes Christless religion and buries it as Paul carefully places and hammers in one nail after another into the coffin of Christless religion. Paul's case for grace is air tight.

Romans is the case against religion. It is written much like a legal brief, as an attack on the stronghold of religion and all of its lies, misrepresentations, deceptions, prevarications, snipe hunts and wild goose chases which enslaves all who follow its teachings and practices.

This case against religion in the book of Romans is the precedent and summation that we humans need not live under condemnation, for we are set free.

Christless religion is bad news—the gospel of Jesus Christ is incredibly, almost too-good-to-be-true news. Romans 8:1 says, **THOSE WHO ARE IN CHRIST JESUS ARE NOT CONDEMNED.** □

Join us for "Romans: Whose Righteousness?" at the audio teaching ministry of Christianity Without the Religion, the week of November 10, 2019.

Continued from page 1

eyed young people seem to feel they will have a happy marriage if they just **find** the right person, but they are ill-equipped and woefully unprepared to consider a happy marriage involves **being** the right person.

Ideally, the wedding day officially launches the first stage of marriage—a stage that is overwhelmed by idealized notions of romantic love, sex, attraction, sex, infatuation, sex, desire...and...did I mention sex?

Young married couples often think they know all about love but really, they have no idea. They are infatuated. They are often *in love with the idea of being in love*. They are in love with who they want their spouse to be/become.

Though the lyrics of an old song implore a loved one to “*make the world go away*,” marriage doesn’t dissolve or shrink the world—if anything marriage makes the world more complex and challenging. Newly married couples soon discover that marriage is far more than a solitary relationship with another person and that marriage does not make “the world go away.”

Marriage isn’t just about two people. Marriage is like the pebble thrown into the still waters of a pond, causing concentric circles to radiate from the core, until the entire pond is impacted. Marriage affects and impacts lots of people. Marriage is all about others who are supporting the couple and living around this new marriage—parents, children, friends and community.

In marriage, one doesn’t merely marry another person—one gets a “package deal” which is often a “deal” far more than one had bargained for.

Not long after the newlyweds say “I do,” one day they wake up and find themselves on stage, living out a part in a drama they never auditioned for, reading a script it seems someone else wrote.



Report Cards

We are introduced to formal report cards when we start school and we co-exist with those reports for many years of schooling. When we finish school and start work, we discover performance evaluations and annual reviews given to us by our employers. Life is filled with grades and reports and reviews. When we get married, we soon realize that spouses are free to give performance reviews whenever they feel such critiques are needed!

When couples marry, they may have graduated from college or graduate school, but they soon realize marriage means their education is just beginning. Many a young man marries a woman and hopes she will never change, while a young woman marries a man armed with a detailed architectural blueprint about how she will change, fix and repair him. Both wind up disappointed.

The arrival of children means a husband and wife start learning how to be parents. For those married couples who are able and wish to share their lives with children, little do they know when they first bring children into the world, those children will soon be starting to compile a parenting report card they will later present to their parents.

After they have poured their heart, energy and treasure into their children, when their children

become adults, husbands and wives enter the stage of marriage when they learn how to be parents of adult children. All parents eventually have to learn how to “let go” of their children. Parenting is not defined as owning children—it’s really more about leasing or renting them and preparing them to face the world on its own terms.

Couples enter another stage of marriage if and when adult children marry. Then fathers and mothers learn how to be a mother-in-law and a father-in-law. This is another chapter in the book of love and marriage filled with drama and expectations and pitfalls and shortcomings. As parents we receive a grade for this stage as well.

Over 50 years later, I look back. What kind of a grade on my report card do I give myself? There were many failures...many times in which I was far less than what I had hoped to be and give. Is there any advice I have learned...or any wisdom I can pass on to others? I am thankful that as I grew up spiritually, by the grace of God, Jesus enabled me to be more of the kind of husband and father I really wanted to be in the beginning.

I never did win father or husband of the year. I have apologized to both of our children on a number of occasions, but I have also cautioned them that as clearly as they can see my own faults, they are well served

to be aware that their own children (our grandchildren) have razor sharp vision about their own parents' deficits and shortcomings, and they may not be inclined to grade "on the curve."

As I look back on my role in 50 years of marriage, I realize that there are many wounds and hurts Karen and I endured. I have regrets, as indeed most couples who are still married will admit. In the case of the wounds I suffered during these 50 years, I also know that many, if not most of them, were self-inflicted.

I do not consider the fact we have enjoyed and endured 50 years of marriage to be a victory I achieved—it is a celebration of the grace I have been given. I am thankful that Karen, Cherie and Scott stuck with me, and that we all survived.

Fighting and "Being Right"

All marriages involve fights, squabbles and disagreements. In a healthy marriage the partners do not do not keep a record of how many fights one wins and how many one loses and how many end in a tie. From the perspective of my gender, many a young husband feels he has won an argument—little does he know it is not over. Nobody wins arguments and fights within marriage.

Studies demonstrate the obvious—newly married couples who insult each other infrequently have

a far greater chance of remaining married. On the other hand, couples who persist in flinging negative, nasty comments at each other are headed for the rocks, unless one or both mature and cooler heads prevail.

- In a healthy marriage forgiveness is lavished on the beloved by the lover.
- Marriage is too intimate and sacred to be all about always being right.
- Marriage grows and is sustained when love, mercy and grace triumph over judgment.
- Marriage is more about wanting to love and receive love than needing to be right.
- Marital love is active and dynamic. In the words of an old song, "the love you take is equal to the love you make."
- Marital love does not keep accurate books, balancing good and bad deeds, carefully measuring assets and liabilities of one's spouse. Love lavishes grace, overlooking the desire for revenge.
- Love that enables a marriage to survive and thrive will not always seek to balance the scales or tilt them in one's favor.
- In a healthy and growing marriage, love is not quick to judge



and condemn. Rather, it soberly realizes that one will be judged by standards one uses to repudiate and criticize.

• Marriage and family grows and matures on the battlefields of selfishness, ego, lust and pride.

Marriage and family do not magically happen as the pixie dust of love sprinkles down on two people who blissfully stroll through carefully manicured and groomed rose gardens. Marriage does involve roses, but as it has often been observed, the beauty of a rose is firmly attached to a stem that features many thorns.

Over 50 years I have learned many things about arguments and disagreements in marriage. I have learned that huffing and puffing can blow the house of marriage down.

On the other hand, serving and sacrificing and swallowing one's pride will build the house of marriage. Marriages become beautiful when they are no longer best described as a duel, but as a duet with both partners striving to sing in harmony.

Marriage teaches how to love, give, support and sacrifice. Marriage teaches us how to serve and respect our beloved. In the words of Paul marriage is about submitting one to another.

Marriage reveals selfishness and stubbornness and dishonesty. When a couple is first married, they celebrate their physical love—they share their bodies and become one





flesh. But sharing one's body does not expose and uncover the soul and spirit that lives in that body, either to oneself and certainly not to one's beloved spouse.

Marriage humbles us because it lays bare who we really are—sadly, *many people who get married refuse to ever admit who they really are and they refuse to admit to anyone that they are ever, ever wrong about anything.*

Our human nature is addicted to a comfortable and pleasing, yet false image of who we really are—a fixation on that false image is a difficult addiction to kick.

In 50 years, marriage teaches many lessons...the lessons are not automatically learned or even listened to by others with whom one might wish to share them, but they are lessons nonetheless.

Lessons Learned

Here's a few of the favorite things I have learned in 50 years of marriage. I thank Karen for helping me learn them:

1) *50 years have taught me* love can take a licking and keep on ticking. Sickness, mistakes and financial hardships can challenge and threaten love.

Love is tough and resilient and it needs to be because there are many enemies that threaten marriage and family. The love of God can heal, redeem and reconcile the mess and brokenness that can and does happen in a marriage.

Love is both a verb and a noun.

Love receives and love gives. Love is the subject and object. Love is a force and dynamic that involves all kinds of feelings, actions and reactions. Love is not a permanent state of excitement or ecstasy.

2) *50 years have taught me* time will never heal all wounds—time might help bad memories fade, but time does not heal.

Acting like wounds don't exist, blaming one's spouse for all the hurts and pains while refusing to accept personal responsibility will never heal wounds. Love alone will heal all wounds. 50 years have taught me that we imperfect humans have a "gift" of always hurting the ones we love, but the gift of divine love will heal those hurts.

3) *50 years have taught me* it's true—all you need is love. All you need is a hand to hold and a heart that understands—all you need is compassion that puts up with you and mercy that forgives you.

All you need is that little fist of a newborn child or grandchild holding your finger, and you're in love for life.

4) *50 years have taught me* words can wound and even destroy. Words are best shared and served soft and tender, because we often have to eat them. Words can and must be forgiven.

Words are cheap. Words are here today and gone tomorrow. Love is expensive, treasured and lasts forever.

5) *50 years have taught me* there are many mortal enemies of love and marriage. Religion can separate and divide a home. Other people can and do, for a variety of reasons, attack the sanctity of marriage and cause enormous grief.

Bitterness, pride and the desire for revenge may be the most toxic of all the enemies of love and marriage. Forgiveness, humility and mercy are true friends and allies of love.

6) *50 years have taught me* idealistic expectations can be a mortal enemy of love—because expectations are idealized notions and they wind up being dashed when the rubber meets the road.

We all have expectations—of ourselves and for our loved ones. Love involves the acceptance of reality when our expectations fail. No husband or wife should ever get tired of seeking forgiveness and assuring their spouse of their love, and no husband or wife should ever tire of saying "sorry" and expressing their love.

7) *50 years have taught me* every couple wants to make it to the top of the mountain, to see their children do well, to enjoy healthy grandchildren, to pay off the mortgage, to retire and enjoy the golden years.

Not everyone will make it to the top of the mountain they are climbing, and that's fine because satisfaction and happiness lie in the journey, not on the top of the mountain. □

Gratitude:



One Key to Recovery

By Brad Jersak

As a toddler learning my first prayers, my parents taught me the importance of gratitude. Not that they explained exactly why gratitude was important—just that it was. And so, at every meal and every night at bedtime, I made a habit of identifying ways that I experienced God’s goodness and I thanked him.

While we’re all prone to reducing gratitude to a lifeless exercise in inane religiosity, I now notice that others religiously avoid it. I’m intrigued when other Christ-followers scorn prayers of thanks as a show of their non-religious spirituality.

I find this odd in the context of a high-stress, grumpy world after modern psychology has confirmed Paul’s instincts about the two-fold importance of fixing our minds on positivity and giving thanks to God in all circumstances:

Positivity: “...Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—**think about such things**” (Philippians 4:8).

Positivity is not naive optimism. Rather, it is attentiveness to the quiet melodies of God’s goodness in a cacophonous world. As a realist prone to jadedness, I know the value of spotting signs of hope and using them as anchors for my mental health. I have much to grieve and much to celebrate every day, so it’s important that I feed my soul with nourishing spiritual

thoughts, words and images as often as I eat actual meals.

Gratitude: “... *give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus*” (1 Thessalonians 5:18).

I don’t give God thanks for evil and tragedy as such, but through every trial of life—in every circumstance—I can be grateful that I’m never alone. I can surrender my life to the care of a loving God. I watch for both the surprising and the unremarkable ways that care plays out, especially through those Christ sends as angels of mercy, whether they realize it or not. An encouraging message from someone who cares can change the course of my day and lift me from despondency to gratitude. Often, these boosts come through friends who are extending their own practice of gratitude to bless me.

Faith Practice

One might regard the simplicity of giving thanks to God and others as *banal*. “Banality” is defined as “unoriginal, obvious and boring.” But after 30 years of walking with others drowning in the symptoms of extreme trauma and/or addiction, I see gratitude as a *first-order necessity* for a life of recovery. Gratitude (along with surrender and forgiveness) is a daily stepping stone on the pathway to wholeness. Often, gratitude is the best lifeline for those tottering on the brink of insanity or relapse—even if they can only “act as

if” they are grateful in the beginning.

For that reason, I’ve come to believe gratitude is an essential *faith practice*. No, it doesn’t earn us points in heaven or make God love us more. We’re way past that, right? Then what do I mean by “faith practice”?

First, thanksgiving sometimes springs naturally from a full heart. But far more often, especially for those passing through dark valleys, expressing gratitude requires a leap of faith. When life is hard, praying “God, thank you for your goodness” is not hypocritical. It’s a prayer of faith like the “even though” prayers of the prophet Habakkuk:

“Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior” (Habakkuk 3:17-18).

Second, gratitude is a *practice*, because developing a habit of giving thanks when we’re doing okay gives us the spiritual muscle memory to reach out when we’re struggling. A consistent faith practice of gratitude is not “religion”—it’s a mark of Christlike maturity amid volatile times. Gratitude doesn’t open the taps of heaven’s mercy—it opens our hands to heaven’s already flowing mercy. Gratitude orients receptive hearts to our all-merciful God! □

Brad Jersak serves on the PTM and CWRpress editorial team.



In Control

You know how events happen in groups of three, don't you? It happened to me just last week. Well, two things anyway. That's almost three. I learned that some dear friends had traveled multiple thousands of miles to visit an alternative healing center. As I understand it, their ills will be diagnosed by special sound waves. Then they will undergo a three-week healing regimen, including more therapeutic sound waves. This is obviously not conventional medical science, but they are convinced it will be helpful.

Then the very next day, as I was pondering this, I got an email from someone decrying the lack of physical healings. He said he hadn't heard of any healings (by his standards) in years, so he was setting aside a day to avoid food and drink to help convince God to heal more people—and he urged all to whom he sent his email to join with him.

I have no argument with alternative medicine or spiritual disciplines as such. People can engage in these things if they wish. Some alternative medical practices may have a basis in fact, although more valid research is often needed as to how or whether or in what context they work.

Faith healings, prayer and fasting are different matters, outside the purview of science. I just can't agree with the writer's assumption that there haven't been any "healings" lately. Healings are happening all the time—millions of them!

A close friend, after being given five weeks to live, was recently pronounced cancer-free after several months of rigorous conventional medical treatments. Did we pray? Of course we did, and we thanked God for his healing.

We have also prayed for many other friends and relatives who eventually died of cancer and other causes—including old age. If we believe they have eternal life, we also must believe that these people are healed in a time and context of God's choosing.

Sitting in our living room, my wife commented that some of our friends have

arrived at that place in life where they feel out of options—and that they take hope and comfort from alternative treatments and/or rituals. While that is certainly true, I suspect some folks may be looking for dramatic, spectacular, jaw-dropping "first-century" healings. But I see no indication in the New Testament that arcane medicine or collective avoidance of food will make any of that happen.

When we are confronted with life's big problems, we naturally seek solutions. Happily, sometimes the solutions are quick, easy and obvious. We take the right steps and boom! It's all under control.

When we're at the end of our rope— what if we just fall back on simple faith in God?

But other issues are stickier—especially health-related issues. As we exhaust ordinary solutions, we begin to feel our sense of control slipping away.

The problems are *out of our control*. At that point, we grasp at whatever is available, including unproven remedies, panaceas and magic bullets. Beyond that, we become open to various rituals, practices and protocols that we think might give us some leverage with God. Even though our problems may remain unsolved, we're *doing something*, darn it, and we feel like we're back in control again.

Here's a thought (about which I have to keep reminding myself). What if, when we are faced with situations beyond our control—when we're out of options and there's nothing left for us to do—when we're at the end of our rope—what if we just fall back on simple faith in God?

He's not a stickler for ritualistic protocols and procedures. We can sincerely and intently ask for his help—and then sit back and accept the fact that this is one of those times that we are not in control—but He is. □

—Monte Wolverton



Quotes & Connections



Iconoclast: one who destroys religious images; one who attacks established beliefs or institutions.

“My idea of God is not a divine idea. It has to be shattered time after time. He shatters it himself. He is the great iconoclast. Could we not almost say that this shattering is one of the marks of His presence? The Incarnation is the supreme example. It leaves all previous ideas of the Messiah in ruins. And most are ‘offended’ by the iconoclasm; and blessed are those who are not.” —C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*

“God is love because that love did not hunker down in God’s heart in the comfort of Paradise. Triune Love is a divine verb Who entered space-time history through the Incarnation. Divine Love necessarily appears and acts or it is not love at all. That act of love is Jesus Christ—the eternal Word enfleshed as perfect, cruciform Love.”—Brad Jersak, *A More Christlike Way*

“Gratitude is an essential part of a Christ-centered life. In marriage, gratitude can act like super-glue, bonding a couple. Gratitude in any setting, including marriage, can be infectious. Be an agent of gratitude and infect others!”—Greg Albrecht

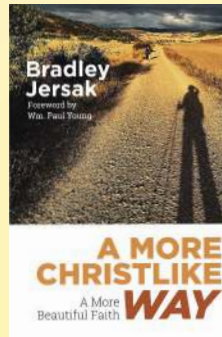
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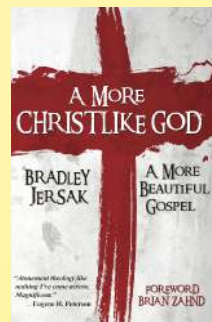


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