

PLAIN TRUTH®

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CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION®

The Narrow Way of Grace

By Greg Albrecht

As we enter through the gates of a New Year, and as we continue to follow Christ, let's take a moment to remember—The Narrow Way of Grace is the road less travelled.

Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it (Matthew 7:13-14).

These words of Jesus are not only well-known and often-cited, they are also widely misunderstood.

Here's what Christ-less religion says: **the difficult, narrow gate and road** to which Jesus invites us is the path of earning God's love by our obedience. Legalistic Christianity

says that the narrow gate and road is our blood, sweat and tears that earn us God's favor, blessings and the final reward of entrance into his kingdom.

BUT that is a completely upside-down interpretation of what Jesus is saying.

The entire context of the Sermon on the Mount, in which we find this passage, and for that matter the gospel of Jesus Christ, and beyond that the new covenant at large, is about God inviting us to receive the very righteousness of Jesus by his grace, which he gives to us when we accept and embrace that grace.

Grace is not forced. Grace is offered, without price. Acceptance and participation is the only "price to be paid" on our part.

Those who realize and surrender themselves and their pride to the grace of God are on a narrow, less traveled road. Those who surrender themselves and voluntarily die to the way they once lived (which includes former allegiances to the laws of Christ-less religion) are now alive in Christ, a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17) in whom Jesus lives (Galatians 2:19-21).

Those who follow Jesus on **The Narrow Way of Grace** know they surrender and die to their love affair with Christ-less religion.

The vast majority of the world at large, whether its religion is called Christian or otherwise, **chooses the wide gate and travels on a broad boulevard of Christ-less religion.** The wide gate and broad road is an attempt to please and appease God as a result of dedication to ceremonies, rituals, observances, holy days and times.

The wide and narrow road is a choice to prioritize the value of human achievement and abilities over against the grace of God.

Billions of people, via their religion and its systems, restrictions and regulations are, according to Jesus, on the way to destruction—because anything that is opposed to the grace of God leads to destruction.

The difficult, narrow gate and road of God's grace is the way of self-sacrifice and service to others, in the name of Jesus. Jesus is telling us that neither he, nor we, if we are



Let the Past Be the Past

Past and future veil God from our sight; let them both be burned up with fire.—Rumi, 13th Century Persian Poet

Life can give us such precious moments—a wedding day, closing on a first-home purchase, the birth of a child, a high school or college graduation—all of these events can remain with us as some of the best memories we experience in life.

Life can also present us with such difficulty and heartache at times—a bitter and contentious divorce, a financial mishap, parenting missteps which may have led to strained relationships with our children, health challenges and accidents—these types of events can reside with us, as well, and do so as some of the most difficult situations we may be forced to face.

I'm thinking of my dear friend, Pete. Pete fell in love with and married a great gal from his Midwestern hometown and began a family not long thereafter. Pete and Emily (I've changed their names for the sake of privacy) raised two children through both a high school and a college graduation. Pete and Emily "married both children off" to spouses from families they knew well, and became grandparents within a few years. While one of their children thrived in both personal and professional life, the other child battled with years of drug addiction and an eventual drug overdose.

As one might imagine, Pete and Emily struggled greatly with what had happened to their second child. An endless torrent of regrets,

soul-searching, second-guessing, torturous *if only* and *should-a, could-a, would-a* scenarios haunted them continually. *Where did we go wrong? What should we have done differently?* they often asked themselves. One child had done extremely well within the love and support of their family, home environment and parenting style. The other child had not. Pete and Emily were at a total loss.

Letting the past be the past means we exercise a choice. We can choose to remember... our losses without remaining stuck in the pain of them.

Recovery begins the second we let go of all hopes for a better past.
—12-Step Teaching and Practice

How many of us have faced one, if not more of life's most challenging events/circumstances? How many of us have felt stuck in the pain of our past? If we've lived long enough, we all have.

As it turns out, Pete and Emily learned firsthand that they were not alone in the pain of their loss. Within the community of a local support group, Pete and Emily learned how to work through the pain of their loss.

They saw how the endless cycles of soul-searching, second-guessing, regret and *if only* thought processes only made their recovery more difficult. One day at a time, Pete and Emily experienced how to feel their loss fully, without remaining stuck in it—they discovered how to *let the past be the past*.

No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.
—Luke 9:62, NIV

Jesus gives us perspective on how the past can impact our lives. As I read his words in this passage, I don't read them as saying that we shouldn't remember our past or the losses and difficulties therein. Of course, we should and we do. It's only human to do so, and even to memorialize some of our losses. Rather, I read Jesus' words as helpful advice. I read his words as guidance not to live continually with a *looking back* focus, staying painfully stuck in the challenges we've faced.

As we know, life is just life. What happens, happens. Sadly, we don't have as much control over our lives as we'd like to believe we do.

Letting the past be the past means we exercise a choice. We can choose to remember, to honor and even memorialize our losses, without remaining stuck in the pain of them.

Despite the difficulties of our past, Jesus is our present comfort. He is our present and future hope. Although a preoccupation with the past, *looking back*, can sometimes veil us from what Christ in us is doing in our lives, we can be assured.

Christ lives his resurrection life within us and helps us to *let the past be the past*. Christ gives us the courage to look forward, to look to him. When we do stay in touch and keep up with what is happening around us, we can do so from our rest in him. □

—Ed Dunn

Continued from page 1

actually his followers, can avoid the cross. It was true for Jesus and it is true for us as well.

Here's how Eugene Peterson, in *The Message Bible*, translates Matthew 7:13-14:

Don't look for shortcuts to God. The market is flooded with surefire, easygoing formulas for a successful life that can be practiced in your spare time. Don't fall for that stuff, though crowds of people do. The way to life—to God!—is vigorous and requires total attention.

You can't order God like pizza, guaranteed to be delivered to your home in 30 minutes or less. God cannot be ordered online and delivered to your home through Amazon Prime or UPS. God is not for sale.

God is in your life on his terms, by his grace, or he is not. You accept him on his terms or you do not. You are either dead to religion, something you must earn, or you are alive in Christ, a relationship no money can buy because it is by God's grace.

God, in and through Jesus Christ, offers us everything. By his grace we are made heirs of his kingdom. But grace is no easy road—grace

is no primrose lane. If it were, then the vast majority would take this so-called "easy way."

Those who feel they may purchase God's love and favor via the currency of their hard work are barking up the wrong tree.

Only Three-Dollars-Worth of God?

Wilbur Elton Rees (1925-2018) wrote "Three-Dollars-Worth of God" in 1971. Fifty-one years later 1) consider its wise and prophetic message while 2) understanding his usage of "black" and "migrant" in the context of that era.

I would like three-dollars-worth of God, please.

Not enough to explode my soul or disturb my sleep,

But just enough to equal a cup of warm milk or a snooze in the sunshine.

I don't want enough of him to make me love a black man or pick beets with a migrant.

I want ecstasy, not transformation.

I want the warmth of the womb, not a new birth.

I want a pound of the eternal in a paper sack.

I would like to buy three-dollars-worth of God, please.

If the gospel of Jesus Christ is based on a transaction, then we would be justified in trying to purchase a limited amount of God at the local religious supermarket. Of course, many do go to religious supermarkets for their "God fix" and attempt to purchase three-dollars-worth of God—not too much, so that he doesn't become a burden to their lives, but just enough to be there if and when they need him. "*Just three-dollars-worth of God please.*"

Many fear law and the wrath of God, so they choose the broad road that leads to destruction and continue trying to purchase three-dollars-worth of God because they fear what they have been told God will do to them and where he will "send" them if they don't.

If the gospel of Jesus Christ amounted to what we work for and deserve then we could buy a small god we could place and display in our living room, a god who would listen to our prayers and be available for an emergency when we need him, but otherwise mind his own business. In fact, many have just such a small god!

But God's grace is not available for purchase. *God's grace is the narrow gate—grace is difficult and hard and not at all as easy as the broad boulevard where bumper to bumper traffic is jammed in a frenetic search for a god of their own size and creation.*

God is not found in shopping expeditions. God's grace is not transactional. It is an undeserved gift. We earn wages—we receive grace as a gift.

However, grace is difficult. Grace is hard. Grace is not the easy way out—serving Jesus in his name is the way of service and sacrifice. It's either God or nothing.

You can't order God like pizza, guaranteed to be delivered to your home in 30 minutes or less.





God offers his love, grace and mercy lavishly, and he asks us to accept his grace on his terms. Embrace his grace...accept the inclusive love of God who loves you right now as much as he ever has or ever will.

It's all too human to be afraid of grace, because grace is out of our control. We humanly prefer predictable laws (or so we would like to assume).

We want life without sacrifice—we are willing to work hard as long as we still have control, or the illusion of it at least. Control is the drug of Christ-less religion, and many are sadly addicted to it.

Most religious people are afraid of grace. They are afraid if they believe and practice grace, they might be compromising with law. ***The Narrow Way of Grace*** is all Jesus all the time or not at all.

It's either living in faith and trust by grace, alive in Christ, following him, or it's being a spiritually dead person walking by laws and commandments and regulations that Christ-less religion promises will earn you God's good pleasure.

God offers his love, grace and mercy lavishly, and he asks us to accept his grace on his terms. He doesn't tell us that we will be good enough after we have done enough. God doesn't tell us he will

give us his grace once we qualify—on the contrary, he gives us his grace because we are unqualified.

God doesn't give us laws that once we obey, achieve and master them, we will have purchased enough of him (three-dollars-worth, if you will) to get by. God's grace is not measured by a scale or a yardstick. God's grace is not counted or recorded as one might deposit and withdraw funds in a checking account.

God's grace is without measurements, limitations, schedules or bookkeeping. The grace of God does not vary—it doesn't increase nor does it decrease depending on our behavior.

The grace of God is not measurable—we can't order a pound or a gallon or three-dollars-worth of it. It's God's grace or nothing.

An Amazing No-Strings-Attached Gift

Of course God's grace seems too good to be true.

Of course God's grace means that he is putting himself "out there"—he is vulnerable, because he loves us first, and we just might not return his love. In human terms, he might get his feelings "hurt."

Of course God's grace is scandalous because it seems like God is a bad businessman, a permissive parent and an indulgent grandparent.

The law makes sense—but God's grace just seems too good to be true. When we reduce God to a bunch of laws and ceremonies and rituals that we believe confine and define him, we have just remade him in our image—and we are then living an idolatrous life as we seek to please and appease God through religious legalisms.

When we seek satisfaction and meaning and a way of life that is pleasing to God in anything and everything but the grace of God, we will constantly wear ourselves out.

We will always fail, and we will find that we live life like a hamster on a wheel—endlessly going around and around and around, but never getting anywhere.

We are then living a spiritual way of life that most people do—***the wide and broad boulevard that leads to destruction.***

When we seek satisfaction and meaning and a way of life based on anything and everything but the grace of God, we are setting our sights on something or someone that is inconsequential and meaningless—we are setting our sights on something or someone that is less than Jesus.

The Way of Grace is All Jesus All the Time!

Embrace his grace—surrender and yield your life to Jesus, who can and will do all that you can never do—accept the inclusive love of God who loves you right now as much as he ever has or ever will.

May we all walk through the Narrow Gates of this New Year, continuing to follow Jesus on ***The Narrow Way of Grace.*** □



Getting Past Your Past

Brad Jersak

"I just can't take it anymore," she cried.

"When did this start?" I asked.

"When I was a child. When my parents..."

"Can we 'go there'?" I asked.

"I've already dealt with it!" she sobbed.

"Then why is the pain still so fresh?"

How many times have I had that conversation? Perhaps hundreds! We often imagine we've dealt with our past and yet when faced with it, find those old memories are storehouses for residual pain. We might wonder if we'll ever get past our past. I'm no guru on the subject. I only write about it because I'm so familiar with the battle myself.

OUR PAST

Our past can haunt us in many ways, but the three biggest categories are:

- (1) what others have done to us,
- (2) what we have done to others, and
- (3) what we have done to ourselves.

The common factors in all three scenarios are *me* and something that is *done*.

Wouldn't it be nice if past events truly were *done*? In one sense, what is *done* no longer exists. Yesterday has passed into non-existence. It's over. And yet what has happened is not simply *done* and *gone*, is it?

We store the past as memories in our hearts today—as narratives we reconstruct and retell ourselves over and over. And as stories, they are recollections—interpretations that vary in accuracy, in which we may paint ourselves much better or worse than we actually were.

Here's the hitch: even though the events of bygone days are many miles behind us, the emotions associated with the past remained housed within our minds in the present.

Unlike brick-and-mortar banks with airtight safes, our "memory banks"—even the "dark closets" we hoped to lock shut forever—may spill open when triggered by current events, by sounds and smells, by familiar places and faces.

We may find ourselves reliving our painful past again and again, stuck in a moment that we just can't get past. The most severe cases are diagnosed as *post-traumatic stress syndrome* (PTSD) but

the stubborn fact is that every one of us has some past to get past.

GETTING PAST

This begs the question: what does "getting past" our past even mean? And what needs to happen for us to do so?

Since Sigmund Freud coined the term "psychoanalysis" in 1896, modern psychology has developed many valuable treatments that help patients process their past. In Christian circles, there are also numerous schools of "inner healing" that introduce Jesus and prayer into the mix. I've been both a practitioner and grateful client of inner healing myself.

But long before our time, a Great Physician and Wonderful Counselor came onto the scene. No one before or since ministered the way he did.

Of course, I'm speaking of Jesus. Christ himself is the Key to the healing of our broken hearts. Others mimic him, some very effectively, but there is no one quite like Jesus.

He is the One who bore all our sins and all our sorrows. He is the "man of sorrows, acquainted with grief." He was the One who announced for all people in all times (and all memories), both

“Father forgive them” and “It is accomplished!”

LET IT GO

It will be no surprise when I say that the #1 ingredient to Jesus’ therapy is *forgiveness*—forgiving others for how they’ve hurt me, receiving God’s forgiveness for how I’ve hurt others and myself, and forgiving myself for the wrongs I’ve done.

We get past our past by forgiveness. That’s it.

But if that’s all there is to it, why is it so hard? I suspect we don’t really know how. I can only share my own process and hope it serves others.

1. Confession: I make an honest confession of my story and my feelings in the presence of God and someone safe who embodies his kindness. What I won’t reveal does not heal. Said another way, I *let him in*. I welcome Jesus into my memories to cleanse them of what torments me and replace it with himself.

2. Letting Go: The New Testament word “forgive” literally means “let go.” Specifically, I *hand over* the burdensome emotions of my past and all the people involved to Jesus. I actually picture opening my hands and releasing them to him.

3. Receiving: Having released the burden of guilt, shame, hurt, grief or anger—along with anyone who hurt me (or vice versa), I keep my hands open for a gift, a trade, an upgrade. I watch and listen in my heart for the good gifts Jesus has for me. I receive them with thanks and allow them to reshape my story. I no longer think of my past as if Christ were absent from it. And if he is there, maybe I don’t even need to get past it. □

Brad Jersak is a professor and author of numerous books, including his latest, “A More Christlike Word,” which is available at ptm.org/books.

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Plain People Doctor

Bless the Lord who crowns you with tender mercies (Psalm 103, NKJV).

I grew up in Burnett County, northern Wisconsin, where one January in the early 1950s the temperature dipped to 40 below zero. Sometimes the concern was snow. I have a photo of my father shoveling a path to the barn, both sides piled above his head. The cows had to be milked, manure shoveled out, and always a path to the outhouse. The one-room school would temporarily close. Days like that were filled with dreams of spring. These days I dream of our three scheduled 10-day winter road trips, hiking and biking in warmer southern climates.

With modern machinery, farmers in Wisconsin no longer endure such winter hardships—unless they're Amish. Vernon County is several counties south of Burnett, but the icy wind is just as bitter, stabbing right through coats and buggies. "It is 5 degrees below zero," Mark Johnson writes in *Plain People Doctor* (January 2020). "A few horses and buggies clop through the chill morning air, but Perry Hochstetler leaves his buggy at the family farm and has a driver take him to his doctor's appointment."

Amish communities rely on their own people for "health insurance," often with no doctors within buggy distance and little money to pay high medical bills. But in Vernon County that changed in 1983, when James DeLine set up practice in the rural village of La Farge, population fewer than 800. In the nearly four decades that followed, Dr. DeLine played a critical role among the "Plain People" in that county and beyond.

"Something of a throwback himself," Johnson writes, "DeLine, 65, is a short, bespectacled man with a walrus mustache, a doctor who carries a brown medical bag to house calls. For years, he carried his equipment in a fishing tackle box." Names, addresses and maladies are stored mainly in his memory. Indeed, he might

recognize a buggy as easily as most people recognize a neighbor's car.

He knows the families on every local farm and their medical histories. He knows who's been born, and calls on the mothers and infants to make sure they are healthy. He knows who's dying, and looks in on them in their final days, sitting by their bedside, talking in a gentle voice, making sure they have what they need for pain.

Just out of med school, DeLine could not have imagined he would find himself straddling old customs and cutting-edge science, often collaborating with geneticists in the study of rare diseases and their significance in isolated populations. During his long tenure, Amish in the region cultivated a deep trust in him, knowing he would not profit from their health records used to help others. Indeed, these "closed communities...increase the likelihood that when a rare, disease-causing mutation appears...it will take root and pass from generation to generation."

Though "not a religious man himself," the good doctor has high regard for the people and has assured them that they will make the final decisions on their own health.

Knowing that, his "clinic has become a magnet for "Plain People." Some travel eight hours from Missouri or Iowa just to see him," bypassing nearby "doctors who neither respect their beliefs nor understand their financial limitations."

Dr. DeLine in many respects lives an ordinary life of a country doctor. He takes vacations like most doctors do. But in the weeks before he leaves, he posts notices in the weekly newspaper. Word quickly spreads that lingering medical problems and other concerns should be checked before his departure.

At the same time, he has been known to delay his vacation for sudden illnesses—tender mercies for those who hardly know what a vacation is. □

—Ruth Tucker



Quotes & Connections



"The root of Christian love is not the will to love, but the faith that one is loved by God. The faith that one is loved by God although unworthy, or rather, irrespective of one's worth."—Thomas Merton

"Our main business is not to see what lies dimly at a distance, but to do what lies clearly at hand."—Thomas Carlyle

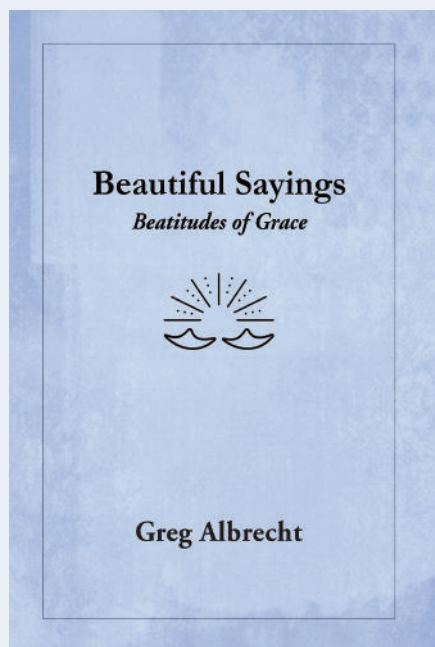
"The past is never dead. It's not even past."—William Faulkner

"Theology is the study of God and his ways. For all we know, dung beetles may study us and our ways and call it humanology. If so, we would probably be more touched and amused than irritated. One hopes that God feels likewise."—Frederick Buechner

"Yesterday is gone. Tomorrow has not yet come. We have only today. Let us begin."—Mother Teresa

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