

Bad News
RELIGION

The Virus that Attacks God's Grace

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DISCOVERING THE REAL JESUS

“The society Jesus founded has been so unlike Jesus. Think of the blood-thirsty Crusades, the cruel Inquisition, and the history of religious persecution. The church is still so unlike Jesus, and we may well have been scarred by its hypocrisy or bored by its blandness. We recall, maybe, that dreary local church to which we were dragged, protesting, when we were young. Or we reflect on the divisions in the church, the failures of its leadership, and the small difference it seems to make in the lives of its members. Is that why we don’t want to know about Jesus?”

—*Who Is This Jesus?*, MICHAEL GREEN

FOR US TO CLEARLY UNDERSTAND and avoid *Bad News Religion*, we must first understand the Good News of the gospel—what authentic Christianity looks like. The real, grace-filled message of the gospel is personified in Jesus. Christianity is a Person, and it is the real Jesus that *Bad News Religion* has failed to proclaim. In *What’s Wrong With the World*, G.K. Chesterton said, “Christianity has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and left untried.”

In many cases the real Jesus has been recast into a religious icon that serves the goals of religion. As a result the majority of human beings who believe in God visualize him as difficult to please. They’ve come to believe he is harsh, unyielding, judgmental, and ungracious. Ironically, this flawed picture of God is a product of Christendom whose fundamental assignment has been to communicate the real Jesus to a world that desperately needs him (Matthew 28:19–20).

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Jesus came to reveal the Father (Matthew 11:27). The Eternal Son of God “became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (John 1:14). Jesus said, “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). “God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him” (Colossians 1:19). Jesus is “the exact representation” of God (Hebrews 1:3). Discovering authentic Christianity is based upon understanding and knowing the real Jesus. Authentic Christianity reflects the real Jesus, the one whose image has been besmirched and clouded by religious legalism’s misrepresentations. The real Jesus, and the authentic Christianity he gives, are buried, like barnacles on a boat, by layers of religious rituals, rules, and regulations.

Christendom has organized Christianity into a regimented system, obscuring the real Jesus with its authoritarian dictates and rites and rituals. The truth is that Jesus constantly opposed the primary religious institution of his day. Christians have often assumed, and in some cases have been assured, that it was the Jewish religion with which Jesus was upset. But this assumption and the resulting false assurances are far from the truth of Scripture. The truth is that the real Jesus always conflicts with religious legalisms of any variety, including permutations of Christianity that appropriate the name of Jesus Christ.

The real Jesus has a message for our world today—a world that is increasingly voting with its feet against the oppressive, rules-dominated overbearing religious culture that claims to speak for God. The real Jesus is a Jesus who is the very antithesis of *Bad News Religion*.

Here’s one of the many passages that record Jesus’ unequivocal opposition to religious legalism:

While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew’s house, many tax collectors and “sinners” came and ate with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disci-

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ples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and ‘sinners?’” On hearing this, Jesus said, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”

—MATTHEW 9:10–13

According to Jesus the religious establishment had declared themselves spiritually healthy and assumed they were beyond need of any of the services of the Great Physician. It happened then, and it still happens today. Jesus did not accept their spiritual self-diagnosis. Jesus declared that the unqualified would be freely admitted to his new church, rather than membership granted on the basis of merit—the prevailing status quo of religious admissions policies. Those who had determined that they were immune from the spiritual disease Jesus came to heal did not respond to him. On the other hand, those who were acutely aware of their need flocked to him.

Jesus’ life and ministry continually reached those who accepted their vulnerability and their need. One factor that enabled them to clearly see their sorry state was that legalistic religion had rejected them and thus they had not received the full spiritual conditioning that religious legalism offered. They were not as legalistically indoctrinated as religious insiders.

Jesus ministered to these spiritually marginalized religious outcasts. He reversed all the standards of the religion of his day, just as authentic Christianity challenges the prevailing notions of religious traditions and conventions today.

Jesus reserved his most fiery rhetoric for the debilitating impact of performance-based religion. Let’s step back and see how Jesus defines *Bad News Religion*. As a way of discovering the real Jesus we

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can look to his words for direction about the treacherous and subtle devices of legalistic religion and to his example for a role model of authentic Christianity.

JESUS IDENTIFIES *BAD NEWS RELIGION*

If you are at all familiar with the Gospels, the first four books of the New Testament, you will know that Jesus was popular and well liked by virtually all who knew him (with the exception of the religious establishment). Jesus was God in the flesh, grace personified, a compelling personality, a breath of fresh air. But religious professionals intensely disliked him, and eventually it was this segment of society who saw to it that he was crucified in the prime of his life.

The Pharisees and teachers of the law were highly respected men in the Jewish world to which Jesus came. But it was this group with which Jesus constantly clashed. Virtually every Gospel reference to the Pharisees and the teachers of the law is negative. Jesus called the Pharisees names—he used them as examples of what not to do and how not to behave. Matthew 23 is the one chapter that summarizes Jesus' precise and definitive objections to the religion of the Pharisees. The teaching of the Pharisees was the *Bad News Religion* of Jesus' day—and while the Pharisees he addressed died long ago, the same *Bad News Religion* is enslaving, abusing, exploiting, beguiling, and entrapping millions today.

Verses 2–12 of Matthew 23 are addressed to Jesus' disciples and the larger group who originally listened to Jesus' exposé of legalistic religion. In this first part of the chapter, Jesus speaks of the malicious and toxic teaching of the Pharisees and teachers of the law in the third person. In verses 13–36 Jesus gets up close and personal as he directly confronts religious leaders of that day. The subject that Jesus passionately attacks throughout the chapter is *Bad News Religion*.

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Isaiah has a message we would do well to consider as we ponder Jesus' scathing denunciation:

This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word.

—ISAIAH 66:2

We do not wade into Matthew 23 for the purpose of throwing stones, but to allow the words of God to penetrate our world and reality. We seek his truth, and we search for his heart and mind. As Christians we yearn for Christ's mind to live in us (Philippians 2:5) and for his light to shine in our lives. The more I study this portion of Scripture the more amazed I am at the outrage that Jesus expressed toward religiosity.

**The Real Jesus
is a Jesus who is
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Bad News Religion.**

Matthew 23 is a disturbing chapter—these words are of grave concern to me. This is an indictment of the way I was—reading it propels me to continually yield to Christ so that I may never be found guilty again, as indeed I have been in the past, of proclaiming a *different gospel—which is really no gospel at all* (Galatians 1:6–7).

After all, here is God in the flesh, very man and very God, expressing indignation in the strongest possible terms toward my profession. He is not talking primarily about plumbers, soldiers, clerks, accountants, or salespeople. He is talking about pastors, ministers, denominational administrators, church boards, and ministry leaders. He's talking to Christian authors, theologians, and evangelists. Of

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course he's talking to the entire world, and then more specifically to all of us who bear the name of Christ, warning us about *Bad News Religion*. But he's directly speaking to the purveyors of *Bad News Religion*.

The line from the old *Pogo* comic strip is ringing in my mind as I type these words on my keyboard—"We have met the enemy and he is us." We should ask Jesus to help us apply these words to ourselves rather than assuming that he is talking about others.

Here's a summary of our Lord's piercing no-holds-barred invective in Matthew 23 that is directed at legalistic religion. Practitioners and proponents of *Bad News Religion*:

- Do not practice what they preach. They are hypocrites who insist on impossible standards, which neither they nor their followers can satisfy (v. 3).
- Oppress those they "serve" by requiring heavy spiritual burdens while excusing themselves from such tyranny. They multiply religious rules as a means of controlling the masses (v. 4). The heavy burdens they impose are in direct contrast with the easy yoke and light burden offered by Jesus (11:28–30).
- Wallow in the adulation of the crowds who defer to them and heap religious honor and accolades upon them (v. 5).
- Love to hear their full religious titles, scholarly accomplishments, and academic degrees and to experience the respect that accompanies them. They are status seekers, not servants (v. 7–12).
- Actually prevent people from entering the kingdom of heaven, the absolute antithesis of their job description (v. 13). They place a price on admission to the kingdom of God, a kingdom that God gives by his grace.

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- Exhaust all resources in enlarging their spiritually perverse domain and dominion by winning new converts. Growth of their church or ministry is for the purpose of elevating and exalting themselves, with little or no concern for the spiritual well being of proselytes who become *twice as much a son of hell* as they are (v. 15).
- Have distorted values, obsessing upon monetary matters that may materially enrich their own lives while missing justice, mercy and faithfulness (v. 23, see also Micah 6:8). They are narrow-minded, blind spiritual guides who miss the big picture.
- Are exclusively focused on externals while failing to address internal spiritual needs (v. 25–28).
- Fight, persecute and kill true messengers of God (v. 33–34).

FIVE HALLMARKS OF AUTHENTIC CHRISTIANITY

Authentic Christianity looks like Jesus. Christ is the head of his body of believers, and the authentic body of Christ obviously bears a striking resemblance to its head. Consider five hallmarks of the life of Jesus, the founder of Christianity, the risen Lord who continues to empower believers everywhere. These five hallmarks are of course not a definitive list but they are five Christ-centered signposts that stand in stark contrast to legalism. As we contrast God's grace with religious legalism these five hallmarks can help us to focus on the central and foundational issues of Christianity.

1) *Love*. Jesus' life, teachings and ministry were characterized by love—by unselfish, unconditional love. To be in the presence of Jesus meant to be accepted, ministered to, comforted, directed, instructed, and provided for. Love was, and is, the primary distinctive of

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authentic Christianity. God's love, exemplified in Jesus, is a new kind of love, an extra-human kind of love. It's not the love of self-gratification or human emotion. God's love does not rely on human feeling. God's love is not subject to or defined by human criteria. It is a love that we can know and give only through Jesus who lives his life within us.

Love is perhaps the supreme attribute of God. God's love springs from the very essence of who he is. Two Greek words for love are frequently used in the New Testament—*agape* and *philia*. *Philia* is a love of affection and friendship that is earned, given on the basis of merit and worth. *Agape* is a love that is given without regard to right, entitlement or merit. God extends *agape* to us without qualification, in spite of the fact that we are unworthy of it.

A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.

—JOHN 13:34–35

Paul tells us how the love of God was expressed through Jesus at great cost:

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.

—2 CORINTHIANS 8:9

2) *Grace*. In some way all of these five hallmarks of authentic Christianity are subsets of God's love. But grace is not merely another way of understanding God's love, it is an avenue or vehicle through which God's love is given. Grace is all about God's generosity, his

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unfaltering, unlimited, extravagant giving. The unbelievable riches of God's grace are further underlined by the fact that God's grace is costly on his part and undeserved on ours. Paul refers to God's grace as an *indescribable gift* in 2 Corinthians 9:15. Authentic Christianity is characterized by gracious acts of mercy and love.

Jesus, who was the very personification of grace, did not lead anyone to believe in what some today call "easy-believism." Jesus told the woman who was taken in the act of adultery, after saving her from being stoned to death, to "Go now and leave your life of sin" (John 8:11). Jesus himself faced temptations as we do, battling sin without ever once giving in (Hebrews 2:18).

But Jesus never yelled, forced, coerced, or bullied people into changing their lives. We search in vain for any example of intimidation or manipulation on the part of Jesus. He didn't quarrel or cry out (Matthew 12:19), he released the oppressed and proclaimed liberty to those who were enslaved (Luke 4:18–19). Jesus wooed people, he drew people and he won them by his gracious and compassionate nature. This is authentic Christianity.

Mercy is often used as a synonym for grace, but while they are related they are two different sides of the same coin. God's grace allows us to receive something that we do not deserve, while God's mercy ensures that we do not receive punishment or a penalty we do deserve.

3) *Service*. No human life has ever come close to producing the level or degree of service that typified the life of Jesus. People flocked to Jesus because they sensed his attentiveness to their concerns. Jesus listened. He nurtured. He cared. Jesus provided physical food and spiritual food. He delivered and healed those who suffered physically, and provided the ultimate Answer for those who were tortured and enslaved by *Bad News Religion*.

Jesus was the prophesied Suffering Servant of Isaiah who

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a) voluntarily suffered on our behalf (Isaiah 53:4), b) endured indignities and contempt (Isaiah 49:7; 50:6), c) justified the entire world (Isaiah 42:6; 53:11), d) was pierced, crushed, oppressed, and afflicted for us (Isaiah 53:5-8), and e) extended justice for all nations (Isaiah 42:1,4).

The night before his crucifixion Jesus served his disciples at a meal that has become a sacrament for Christians—Communion, the Lord's Supper. The same night he washed their feet, they were not asked to wash his. And then, as the Lamb of God, he voluntarily went to his cross as the supreme and unmatched act of love.

Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked them. "You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.

—JOHN 13:12-17

The mother of two of the disciples once asked Jesus if her sons could have the two top executive-level positions under Jesus in his kingdom. The rest of the disciples were, needless to say, unhappy about this request that, if Jesus granted it, would have effectively relegated them to lesser positions. Jesus used their indignation to teach them about service. The Good News of the gospel is not about power and privilege, it is about service.

You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over

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them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

—MATTHEW 20:25–28

4). *Humility*. Here's an attribute that stands out in our world of self-promotion and pride. Jesus' birth, the watershed event of all human history, was remarkably unheralded. No marching bands and no pageantry. It all took place in a backwater town, far from the center of downtown Jerusalem. Jesus arrived in Jerusalem riding on a lowly colt. No procession of chauffeur driven limousines, just a lowly colt. No chariot with prancing war horses, just a lowly colt.

God requires that we walk with justice, that we love mercy, and walk with humility (Micah 6:8). Religious pride opposes humility, for apart from authentic Christianity religion is fueled by power and performance. Humility accepts our human dependence on God, and is grateful for his grace. Jesus taught that only those who become like little children would enter the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 18:3–4).

If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose.

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to

the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus

—PHILIPPIANS 2: 1–5

5). *Joy*. Authentic Christianity is filled with happiness and joy. Christians have, after all, been given the pearl of great price (Matthew 13:46). We have stumbled upon a treasure hidden in a field (Matthew 13:44). We are heirs of God's kingdom and his glory (Romans 8:17). We have been saved and redeemed, and we are given the riches of his grace (Ephesians 2:7). Deep, abiding joy characterizes authentic Christianity, for we have been given victory through Jesus Christ our Lord (1 Corinthians 15:57).

Joy is produced in us by God the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22). Joy is centered in God rather than human self-interest. Joy that is a gift of God runs deeper than mere human pleasure and gratification. In fact, God's joy can exist in spite of external, physical problems that bring pain and suffering.

Empowered by joy, authentic Christians don't take themselves too seriously, but they are resolute and unyielding in their worship of Jesus Christ. Authentic Christians are not lifeless killjoys who oppose fun and laughter, but are people who have the assurance of salvation, given to them through the presence of the risen Lord. Authentic Christianity is filled with joy because its focus is on the Savior, rather than on *Bad News Religion*.

Jesus did not stand aloof from sinful humanity, he engaged himself in his society and culture. He loved everyone, finding joy and purpose in helping and reaching out to all who were in need. As the Light of this world, he radiated joy and happiness. His teachings were filled with humor, as so carefully explained in *The Humor of Christ*, by Elton Trueblood. Explaining Jesus as the *radiance of God's*

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glory and the exact representation of his being (Hebrews 1:3), the author of Hebrews says:

You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has set you above your companions by anointing you with the oil of joy.

—HEBREWS 1:9

In the following chapters, we will look at the many facets of God's grace—God's grace described by love, generosity, mercy, compassion, humility, service, and joy. We will examine and contrast grace with legalism from many configurations and perspectives. We will consider objections to grace and discover what happens when God's amazing grace collides with the requirements and demands of legalistic religion. As we compare God's amazing grace with religious legalism may God allow us to appreciate and "grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ..." (Ephesians 3:18).

The cross of Christ means that all that we do falls short of God's perfection, and that nothing we do, be it a vice or a virtue, changes his love for us or his willingness to accept us.