



THE NARROW PATH

HOW THE
SUBVERSIVE WAY OF JESUS
SATISFIES OUR SOULS

RICH VILLODAS

Bestselling author of *The Deeply Formed Life*

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WATERBROOK

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For New Life Fellowship.
It's a joy to be on the narrow path with you.

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

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INTRODUCTION

I have come to love the world of Harry Potter. (For those of you who don't share this sentiment, please don't close this book.) One of my favorite scenes is from *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. A wizard named Mr. Weasley borrows a tent from a friend named Perkins while attending a larger-than-life sporting event. From the outside, it looks like a regular backyard tent that could fit two or three people. But Perkins, a fellow wizard, has charmed the tent, making it drastically larger on the inside. When Harry walks with Mr. Weasley's children through the narrow entryway, they find themselves in a three-room flat, with bunk beds, a kitchen, and a bathroom to boot. It's far more spacious than anyone expected.

When I think about the teachings of Jesus, especially in the Sermon on the Mount, this charmed tent comes to mind. The path of Jesus is most certainly narrow, as we will

come to see, but it has been charmed, so to speak, with the ever-expanding life of God. At first Jesus's words seem constraining and restrictive, but—like with Mr. Weasley's tent—hidden within them is unimaginable power. As we enter, we discover a spaciousness for the soul that is difficult to experience from the outside. Yes, the path is narrow, but as we walk on it, we find ourselves living the kind of life we yearn for: one filled with love, joy, and peace.

In our culture, *narrow* is a negative term. It's used to describe closed-minded, stubborn, holier-than-thou people. You've encountered them, yes? Maybe you've seen them shouting at people at the local park who are holding picket signs that have John 3:16 on them. Or maybe the shouting comes in the form of an ALL CAPS Facebook tirade. To be narrow is not something we aspire to; it's a characteristic to avoid. Not so with Jesus. Please hear me out.

The narrow way of Jesus gets to the core of what it means to be human, what it means to love well. It focuses our energy on what truly leads to the good life: a spacious kind of existence that makes room for God and others.

Admittedly, the narrow path is rarely taken because it demands much of us. As the renown German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die."¹ But you and I also understand something intuitively: Things that matter most never come easy. The greater the demand, the deeper the payoff. The greater the challenge, the more profound the joy when it is met. The higher the mountain, the deeper the satisfaction when it is summited. The more we die to ourselves and yield to Jesus, the more we come alive. This is the paradox of the Jesus Way.

Jesus wants you to experience the thrill and satisfaction

of the narrow way. The question is, Are you settling for less? This book aims to do two things:

1. Remind you that Jesus's narrow path offers the life you truly desire.
2. Help you stay on the path so you can experience the deep fulfillment Jesus alone offers.

If there's one place in Scripture that explains the narrow path, it's the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus's most famous set of teachings in Matthew 5–7. For the duration of this book, we will unpack the major teachings of his sermon. Let's pause briefly to reorient ourselves to this well-known (but often misunderstood) message.

The Sermon on the Mount

Eye for an eye. Salt of the earth. Light of the world. Let your yes be yes. Do not judge. Lead us not into temptation. Daily bread.

If you survey the average person walking down a street and ask them if they've ever heard these phrases, most will say yes. But if you ask where these phrases are found, you might hear crickets.

All these words and phrases are found in the Sermon on the Mount, which is essentially the best TED Talk ever given. The great leaders, preachers, and poets of history have been shaped by this message—everyone from Gandhi to Martin Luther King, Jr.

Name any historic speech and you'll find that Jesus's sermon outweighs them all. It's what the Declaration of Inde-

pendence is to the United States, what Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech was to the civil rights movement, and then some. Everything that's been written or spoken pales in comparison to these soul-healing, world-changing, God-glorifying words of Jesus.

Invitation and Inventory

How you approach this sermon changes everything. If you see it as an instructional manual for salvation, every time you fail to live up to Jesus's words, you will question whether God is for you. Don't miss this: The sermon is not how we *achieve* salvation; it's how we *demonstrate* it. Those who have truly been transformed by Jesus resist the cultural norms around them. Thus, this sermon is a litmus test to help us assess whether we are following Jesus or someone else. In this way, the sermon is invitation and inventory. It invites us into a different way of seeing, hearing, and being. We were called to confound, confront, and convert a world out of darkness and into the peace-giving, love-animating, joy-fulfilling reign of God—not in our effort alone, but in the grace of God so generously poured out for us.

This sermon also prompts us to take inventory of our thoughts, words, and actions to see if they align with Jesus's glorious vision. Consider some of the sermon's major themes:

- *How can I forgive someone who hurt me?*
- *Am I serving God or money?*

- *Is trust or anxiety shaping my life?*
- *Can my word be taken at face value?*
- *Do I bless those who curse me?*
- *Do I have sexual integrity?*

As we examine these teachings, you might conclude that Jesus's path makes no sense. And you would be right. In the eyes of the world, Jesus's wisdom is nonsense—totally counterintuitive to cultural norms. But for those like me (and billions of others) who are weary of anchoring their lives in the unfulfilling promises of the surrounding culture, Jesus offers a better way. A narrow path. The life you and I desperately want but struggle to attain.

Choosing the narrow path requires trusting that Jesus knows what's best for you, even when it conflicts with your assumptions and expectations. Like the prophet Isaiah once said,

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways,”
declares the Lord.

“As the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.”
(Isaiah 55:8–9)

The Journey Ahead

Unless we begin to take Jesus's words to our hearts and bodies, the faith we profess will not lead to the wholeness we desire. This book, then, is my attempt to narrow our vision once again, to help us set our lives in a particular direction, to strip off what has weighed us down, and to rediscover what it means to follow Jesus.

We will explore ancient themes that show up every day of our lives. In the process, what we will discover is that the key to a fulfilling, vibrant life is found in a radical narrow path—one that is not usually taken. We will discover that as we get on the narrow path, a new kind of spaciousness will be experienced: a spaciousness that can be realized only by stepping into what seems like a confined space.

We will also discover how subversive the way of Jesus is. His teachings undermine the prevailing notions of wisdom and power in his first-century context, and in ours as well. We will be surprised to learn that what the world prizes, Jesus devalues, and what Jesus applauds, the world rejects. As we pay close attention to his surprising perspectives, we will find ourselves living in a freedom that the world can't give, or take away.

All right, let's dive into the best message ever preached by the wisest human who ever lived.

Part One

**UNDERSTANDING
THE NARROW PATH**

UNEXPECTED DISASTER (THE BROAD PATH)

Have you ever been scuba diving? I haven't. But—and I say this with more enthusiasm than I should—I have snorkeled a few times, thank you very much. On one of our wedding-anniversary trips, Rosie and I looked up various excursions in Hawaii. I did extensive research, hoping to get in touch with the risk-taking part of my personality. I watched a bunch of scuba videos on YouTube, finding inspiration and giving myself pep talks under my breath. This was short-lived when I found a simple chart outlining the differences between scuba diving and snorkeling. Suddenly I was jolted back to reality as the risk-taking version of myself hid like a frightened cuttlefish.

I learned that scuba diving can cause something called nitrogen narcosis, which is essentially like being drunk underwater. Or your equipment can fail. While diving, you're also at risk of pulmonary embolism, which occurs when a

blood clot blocks the arteries in your lungs, causing dizziness, shortness of breath, and chest pain. Yeah, no thanks.

So I decided to snorkel. When you snorkel, you get sunburned, and, of course, I forgot to apply sunscreen and ended up with a scalded back. But at least I lived to tell the story.

The snorkeling excursion went well. I saw a handful of fish at a safe distance and came up for a quick break when I swallowed a bit of water through my tube. A few days later, I watched more scuba videos, hoping to muster the courage to take the dive. But my internal resistance was real. Cognitively, I knew a beautiful world awaited me in the depths, but I chose life on the surface, where things felt safe and predictable.

What does any of this have to do with the narrow path of Jesus? Many of us *want* to go deeper, but we find ourselves spiritually treading water on the surface. We try to live like Christian amphibians—half in, half out—but Jesus wants *all* of us, or, put differently, to give us all of himself. However, he knows nothing of half-hearted discipleship. His invitation is to follow him fully or not at all, using the metaphor of a road: “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).

As profound as Jesus is, I love his simplicity. There are two paths to take: the narrow path or the broad one. The narrow path is the cruciform way of Jesus that leads to renewal and healing. Naturally, we’re interested in the “road that leads to life,” so what holds us back? If we’re honest, it’s the cost. As G. K. Chesterton wrote, “The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been

found difficult; and left untried.”¹

We’re afraid following Jesus will summon us to a new way of life we don’t prefer or can’t sustain.

We keep Jesus at a “safe” distance because we assume following him leads to a joyless, confined existence of repressing our desires and taking on a mechanical, religious persona.

We avoid Jesus’s narrow path because we believe we will have to deny our yearning for sexual intimacy, surrender all our dreams, and go to multiple church services a week.

We’re afraid of what others will think if we *really* follow Jesus. We don’t want to be religious fanatics.

We avoid the narrow path because it requires facing ourselves—looking in the mirror with honesty and vulnerability.

I’ve wondered these things too.

To journey through a narrow path takes time. It requires you and I to slow down. At some point, we all must face the parts of ourselves we don’t like. And you know what? Sometimes it’s easier to avoid this invitation altogether. Maybe you’re afraid of going deep because seeing more of Jesus means him seeing more of *you*. If that’s what you’re feeling, you’re not alone.

As I’ve carefully observed Jesus’s interactions with people in Scripture and felt his presence in my own life, I’ve discovered time and time again that Jesus isn’t repelled by human brokenness; he’s attracted to it.

As a nineteen-year-old, just a few months into my relationship with Jesus, I read a book on his holy presence. For the first time, I realized I could set aside the self-protective façade that ensnared me into a performance-driven life and addictive behavior, and I wept. I wrote in my new leather-bound journal the various secrets I’d been carrying. After

each sentence, I'd look over my shoulder, fearing someone was hovering over me like a schoolteacher during a final exam. In what felt like holy angst, I sensed the presence of God within me. I recalled the tenderness of Jesus in the gospel stories, which I was learning for the first time. I continued to name the places in my soul I'd been hiding from God, others, and myself. And I found grace and mercy. Tenderness and compassion. Peace and joy.

Despite that powerful experience, I still lose my way from time to time. Maybe, like me, you've had seasons when you've been busy or distracted, content to give God the leftovers. In such seasons, Jesus invites you and I to return to the narrow path.

Only Two Paths . . . *Really, Jesus?*

Jesus's teaching about two paths—a broad way that leads to destruction, and a narrow way that leads to life—is a bit intimidating. It immediately prompts various questions:

What does the narrow path look like?

What does the broad path look like?

How do I know which path I'm on?

We will spend ample time exploring these important questions, but before we do, can we take a moment to name the elephant in the room? What I mean is, isn't Jesus oversimplifying life when he gives us just two paths? Isn't life more nuanced and complex than this? It sounds reductionistic. It confounds us. It even offends us.

In other places in the Gospels, Jesus masterfully outmaneuvers all kinds of ethical and theological conundrums by responding to questions from an angle no one was expecting. But there's no nuance here. There are two paths: broad or narrow. But before we set aside this teaching, let us acknowledge that Jesus is in good company when he suggests two ways.

He's in the company of Yahweh in the Old Testament when two paths—death and life—are placed before the people of God (see Deuteronomy 30:19).

He's in the company of Master Yoda, who preached on the two paths of the Force: the light side and the dark side (kidding, partially).

He's in the company of Morpheus, who offered the blue pill and the red pill to Neo in *The Matrix*. Plenty of teachers, religious or not, present two divergent paths and invite their followers to choose one.

When Jesus offers two paths, he's being clear, not cruel. He's leading us to life—freeing us from the paralysis of decision fatigue.

When most people read Jesus's words about the narrow and the broad paths, it's through the lens of good morality versus bad morality, or perhaps the afterlife. The narrow path is the path “good” people take; the broad way is the preferred route of “bad” sinners. The narrow path is the avenue toward heaven, while the broad way is the road to hell. But that outlook is not what Jesus has in mind. Naturally, the path you choose now has a bearing on eternity, but Jesus also desires to form us *today*. To bear witness to the radical nature of life in his kingdom. The broad path is life outside Jesus's rule and way; the narrow path is life submitted to him and his subversive wisdom.

Am I on the Broad Path?

The question burning in our minds is likely this: *How do I know I'm on the broad path?* The Sermon on the Mount helps answer that question, letting us see that it's possible to serve God without walking with him. In other words, we can be on the broad path without knowing it. Jesus's words are a penetrating analysis of the human problem. I can't say it enough: God wants to form the entirety of us, and a large part of that formation requires us to name our false assumptions about him and the "good life." Let's simplify the problems before us in three statements. You may be on the broad path if . . .

1. You believe God cares about only your behavior, not your heart (moralism).
2. You have a superficial vision of what "the good life" is (success-ism).
3. You see spirituality as just you and God (individualism).

The convergence of these three problems serves as the root of our spiritual brokenness. They constitute the broad way—the path taken by most.

Moralism

I remember offering a series of pastoral counseling sessions to a member of our community. Let's call him Jeremy (not his real name). Jeremy, a thirty-seven-year-old high school teacher, found himself caring for his aging father. He shared

about his growing fatigue and simmering resentment due to all he was carrying at work and at home. His father needed *some* extra help, but, realistically, if Jeremy scaled back a bit, things would have been fine. Jeremy lamented that he couldn't take a Sabbath, and the notion of self-care felt impossible. He wanted guidance on practices of prayer to help him better carry this weight. So far, so good.

By the third session, I started to dig deeper. I asked if he would be able to take a weekend off from supporting his dad to get some needed rest. He immediately listed all the reasons that wouldn't work. I pressed him.

"Jeremy, what if you told your father that two weeks from now, you'll be away?"

"I can try, but I don't know if that will work," he responded. I pressed in further. I stood up with a dry-erase marker in hand and walked to the whiteboard.

"What internal messages might be fueling your actions?" After seven to eight minutes of silence, we started capturing what was swirling inside him. We ended up naming three internalized messages:

1. *If I don't help, I'm a bad son.*
2. *My needs don't matter.*
3. *Saying no to my father means I'm violating the fifth commandment about honoring father and mother.*

We looked at the whiteboard together, and I offered some alternative perspectives that challenged his internal messages. Two weeks later, he took a weekend off and was miserable. We processed some more a week later, and we both noticed some positive shifts in his perspective.

We summarized the lesson we'd been slowly discovering

with these words on the whiteboard: “Focusing on my external behavior without interior examination creates resentment.” (By *interior examination*, I’m referring to the prayerful practice of examining the values, messages, motives, and feelings we harbor.)

Jeremy could have lived his entire life in bondage to a set of internalized messages that compelled him to unrelentingly serve his parents. And this possibility of bondage lives in all of us.

Jesus is never about adjusting behavior alone. He cares about *who we are becoming*, not just what we do. He rejects a spirituality that doesn’t transform our hearts. To adjust our behavior—even in positive directions—without interior examination will enslave us.

Said differently, we can do all the right things but never examine why or how we should do them. I know what it’s like to help others not out of deep concern but to avoid their displeasure. I’m familiar with speaking truth not because I’m compelled by God to do so but because I’m afraid of being rejected by people I respect. I’ve been an expert at saying yes to all kinds of invitations not because I feel led by God but because I’ll be seen in a positive light.

The broad path is content with believing the “right” things and doing the “right” stuff, assuming that’s all Jesus wants. But a deeper look into our motivations is necessary for cultivating life with God.

This deeper look can be accessed through some simple questions: *Why do we do what we do? Why do we pray? Why do we serve others?* It’s possible to live many years without taking time to explore the complex motives that energize our decisions and ways of life. When we do, it’s common to unearth fear, shame, pride, and performance.

Unfortunately, few people take the time to sift their own motivations.

It's easier to tackle addictive behavior without exploring the deeper woundedness we seek to soothe. It's easier to work nonstop without pausing to examine the ways we are trying to secure love or attain status. Slowing down—looking within—is difficult. Jesus, however, calls us to search our own hearts.

You can't know God deeply while being a stranger to yourself. I meet many people who say they know God but who don't know themselves. When Jesus addresses matters of lust or anger in the Sermon on the Mount, he's naming this reality. He doesn't let us live on the surface. He calls us deeper. Behavior modification without interior examination eventually leads to spiritual desolation.

Success-ism

We also avoid the narrow path of Jesus because we believe there's a better option out there—one that offers more fun, freedom, and fulfillment. Close your eyes for a moment and reflect on what the "good life" looks like. What comes to mind? Chances are, for many of us, the good life means health, a beautiful home, a successful career, a loving family, lots of time for leisure, and the absence of pain. It's certainly what *I* think about!

These indicators of the good life are wonderful. We all want good health, a nice home, success in vocational ventures, loving relationships, and time for relaxation. But is the good life we envision drawn from the American dream or from the kingdom of God? To orient one's life around

God (in our case, the message of the Sermon on the Mount) doesn't mean that this vision of the good life must be totally set aside. However, it does require us to ask ourselves honestly, *What is really shaping the trajectory of my life?*

The broad path is the path of our own making, which is why it's the preferred route. We set the course. We determine what success is. We create the scorecard. But Jesus doesn't leave us on our own. He confronts us and invites us onto a path that most people aren't excited to choose. And why are they not likely to choose it? Because it doesn't come with the bells and whistles of our cultural notions of what's good.

Jesus understands this personally.

Immediately after his baptism, where the Father affirms, "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased" (Mark 1:11), Jesus enters the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. Each temptation—turning stones into bread, bowing to Satan, and jumping off the temple—is designed to warp Jesus's view of the good life. The devil offers a vision that prizes instant gratification over disciplined dependence, power over servanthood, applause over humility.

The devil, in his own way, tries to divert Jesus from the narrow path. Jesus must choose: Is he a messiah who thinks about himself over others? Does he live for power, or does he lay it down for others? Does he live for the applause of people, or rest in the affirmation of his Father? Jesus chooses the narrow path, which deprives him of food, power, and approval—at least for a time.

What's your vision of the good life? What is your family's summary of a life well lived? What's your understanding of a good world? If you're not sure, look at how you spend your money and time. What are you perpetually chasing?

What are your deepest desires and goals? Where does your ambition surface? These questions help show if you're being formed into the image of Jesus or a copy of the fallen world around you.

Jesus invites you and I to reimagine what a good life truly is. Look at the lives transformed in the Gospels because of Jesus's alternative road. Observe the freedom that came from his generous forgiveness. Contemplate those who found solace in him—people who had spent their whole lives feeling spiritually and socially homeless. Picture the multitudes who were healed because of his compassion.

Just think what you, in the power of his Spirit, can accomplish throughout your life! Redefining the good life may seem like a loss at first, but it ultimately yields the kind of significance you yearn for—a life that blesses others and avoids the popular trappings of our world.

Individualism

“You gotta do you.” That’s the advice I overheard from a young man talking on the phone, strutting along a sidewalk in Queens, New York, where I live. His words capture a maxim adopted by many: Just be yourself. “Doing you” can be a necessary correction for someone too tangled up in what others think. It can be an expression of self-care for someone who has neglected their own needs. But many times, “doing you” is just another way to choose the broad path of spiritual individualism.

This problem might be the most deceptive, convincing us that we love God even while we neglect our neighbor.

As an example, consider the notion of American free-

dom, which says, “My freedom is *mine* to enjoy.” Contrast this with Christian freedom, which implies, “My freedom is for the purpose of serving my neighbor” (see Galatians 5:13).

Christian freedom is about service. The freedom so often espoused in our culture is about self. Christian freedom is found in God, my neighbor, and myself (in that order). Modern freedom is oriented around the unholy trinity: me, myself, and I.

Our love for our neighbor—especially the neighbor who is very different from us—is proof of our love for God. Our theology, no matter how good, becomes irrelevant and idolatrous when it’s not used in service of loving God and neighbor.

No one understands this better than Jesus. In one scene, he is approached by the Pharisees, a group of rigidly devoted religious leaders in Jesus’s day: “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” (Matthew 22:36).

Jesus, sensing a verbal trap, quotes from Deuteronomy 6, “*Hear*, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength” (verses 4–5). Then, right after referencing this well-known scripture, he adds something to it: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these” (Mark 12:30–31).

The question was, “Which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” Jesus cites two. “There is no *commandment* greater than *these*.” Now, for you English teachers out there, you may notice the grammatical problem with that sen-

tence. A single commandment should have a singular modifier. We expect Jesus to say, “There is no commandment greater than *this*.”

It’s grammatically incorrect but spiritually perceptive.

In Jesus’s mind, these two commandments are inseparable. It is impossible to separate loving God and loving others. It is impossible to separate our personal relationship with God from our personal relationships with those around us. I’m aware of this multiple nights a week at our family dinner table.

Before every meal, we offer a word of loving thanks to God for the food we are about to eat (you know, standard Christian stuff). We also pray for those in our neighborhood who might be homeless and hungry. To pray for those who are hungry can be an act of love but also a subtle way of escaping the harder work of practical love. One way I’m trying to help my children live into Jesus’s commandments is to point them to simple ways to be generous, like donating money or volunteering time to serve the poor. It’s a simple way to help them (and ourselves as their parents!) see the connection Jesus makes between love for God and love for neighbor.

These two commandments mirror one another. How you love God is how you love your neighbor, and how you love your neighbor is how you love God.

Let me say it again: How you love others is how you love God. This is one of the reasons many are giving up on the church. A faith that purports to love God but mistreats others is a farce. Evidence of whether our character is being formed by Jesus is found in the quality of our love.

Throughout the Sermon on the Mount (and in multiple places elsewhere in the Gospels), Jesus defines the broad

path as a lifestyle that doesn't see love of God and love of neighbor as a singular thread. Tragically, there are many Christians on the broad path. When the church refuses to love our neighbor—whether it be our gay, black, white, immigrant, poor, Democrat, or Republican neighbor—we are traveling on a path that doesn't lead to life.

Although it's easy to drift onto the broad path—to succumb to moralism, success-ism, and individualism—there is good news. There is another path available to us. Jesus invites us onto the narrow path, and no matter how long we've deviated from it, we're always welcome. That's what this book is all about.

The Promise of the Narrow Path

The narrow path is not about the number of people who will end up in heaven; it's about the number of people who will allow themselves to be formed by the subversive and, ultimately, redemptive way of Jesus.

To the world, this path seems rigid, impractical, and uncomfortable (to be sure, it will be at times), but like a sea diver adjusting to the heavy pressure of an underwater existence, if we submit to the process, Jesus will show us a world of wonders we never thought possible! We can stay on the surface, safe and dry, peering into the water, catching blurry glimpses of the beauty underneath . . . *or* we can dive in and immerse ourselves in a glorious realm.

I know firsthand how terrifying it is to take the deep dive, so let's go on this journey together. Thankfully, the narrow path is for the spiritually hungry, not the elite. If you choose to follow Jesus down this path, he will meet you

in unexpected ways. Yes, he may tear down the false self you've built, but rather than your identity being erased, you will become your full and true self. You'll discover life as an easy yoke and light burden. You'll encounter the grace of God that empowers you to live a truly significant life.

Is this easy? Not one bit. Is it worth it? As Jesus puts it, you'll discover life "to the full" (John 10:10).

Are you ready? One step at a time. Here we go.

THE NARROW PATH

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