

FAKE Christianity

10 Traps of an Inauthentic Faith (and How to Avoid Them)

Introduction

The story of the prodigal son (Luke 15) is one of the most recognized in Scripture. The term “prodigal” is still present in modern language and dialogue, and always denotes someone who, like the biblical character, turns from his upbringing, his values, his family, or the truth in general.

But when Jesus tells the story of this rebellious young man, He also invites His listeners to meet the prodigal’s older brother. Outwardly, that brother didn’t run away from home, blow his inheritance, or shame his family. But inwardly, the older brother shared a level of guilt with the younger. Both claimed their father’s name, but neither centered his life around genuinely loving him.

This book will explore ten warnings that Jesus gave us in Matthew 23 about genuine faith and love for the Father versus what Jed Coppenger calls “fake Christianity”—false, hypocrisy-filled habits and practices that masquerade as authentic faith. He encourages us to not just look out the window at culture but to look in the mirror at ourselves. Jed says,

“I’m praying that God would use this book to help Real Christians identify and overcome the various ways Fake Christianity can trap them, causing them to miss out on the fullness of the abundant life that God has for them. I’m also pleading with God that He would use this meditation on Jesus’ words to free Fake Christians from Fake Christianity, enabling them to live out a daily, authentic faith. And I hope every reader will be better equipped to join Jesus as He pushes back hypocritical darkness with the light of the gospel.” (p22)

Study Questions:

- The following ten chapters in this book will highlight ten characteristics of “fake faith” that Jesus warns us about in Matthew 23. Without looking at the chapter titles, can you think of 3 or 4 hypocritical behaviors that might be covered in *Fake Christianity*? (Now look over the chapter titles. Were any of your answers in the list?)
- What definition of hypocrisy is used in the intro? How would **you** define hypocrisy?
- Jed Coppenger uses the example of hypocrisy growing in us, unrecognized. Can you think of a time when you saw someone after a long absence and immediately noticed something about them that they themselves had grown oblivious to?
- Have you ever been guilty of self-deception? What happened? (If you’re going through this study with a group, are you comfortable sharing your story?)
- Why do you think Jesus spent so much time addressing the “fake faith” of the religious as opposed to the blatant sins of the godless?

Fake Christianity: Fails to Practice What It Preaches

Chapter 1 (pages 23–35)

Have you ever heard someone say, “Do as I say, not as I do”? Would you respect a person who asked that of you? In Matthew 23:2–3, Jesus warned about people like that. He told His disciples and the listening crowds, “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat, so do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do. For they preach, but do not practice” (ESV).

This first chapter of *Fake Christianity: 10 Traps of an Inauthentic Faith and How to Avoid Them* includes a focus on the book of James and its discussion of faith and works. Works don’t create a saving relationship with God, but they do demonstrate one. James is emphasizing the importance of avoiding an all-talk Christianity. He doesn’t want his readers to “believe” in the way demons “believe,” with only a head knowledge of biblical truths. That fake faith doesn’t save. (p30)

James’ letter is short, but he devotes a lot of time to the “sins of the tongue.” Why? Because it was a major area upon which he knew Christians needed to focus. From James’ perspective, if you were going to be a “doer of the word,” you had to work on controlling your tongue. James also called them to be pure, peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, humble, prayerful, honest, and generous. James was burdened by a desire to see his people live more fully like his Lord and Savior (and half-brother) Jesus Christ. (p32)

Jed Coppenger asks us to consider if we share James’ burden. Are we committed to being unmistakably consistent in all of life?

“The question isn’t if you might struggle with all-talk Christianity, it’s when and where. By God’s grace, let’s fight this Fake Christianity tendency and choose the way of authentic faith.” (p35)

Study Questions:

- Have you ever considered what it might have been like for Jesus’ siblings to be told, “Why can’t you be more like Jesus?” What advantage does Jed suggest that growing up with a sinless sibling might have provided?
- Have you ever believed something in your head but not in your heart? What did your actions reveal about the level of your belief? (Did your “walk” match your “talk”?)
- Are there failings in your life that you need to “identify, confess, and turn from for fresh grace to walk in newness of life”? (p33)
- On page 35, Jed closes the chapter with this question: “Where are you most likely in danger of having an all-talk Christianity?” Then he offers several habits and practices to consider when answering. Are any of these problem areas for you?

Fake Christianity: Mandates Higher Standards for Others

Chapter 2 (pages 37–47)

Grains of wheat. A withered hand. A sheep in a pit. It's hard to imagine what these three things have in common until you read Matthew 12. Chapter 2 of Jed Coppenger's book features the story of Jesus and His disciples pinching off heads of grain as they walked through a farmer's field on the Sabbath. Though this was legal, the Pharisees accused Jesus and His disciples of breaking the Sabbath law.

Jesus reminded them that because of the disciples' hunger, no sin was committed in pinching off the kernels for sustenance. In a second incident, He also challenged the hypocrisy of forbidding the rescue (healing) of a man from a physical affliction on the Sabbath but not thinking twice about rescuing an animal from a pit.

The Pharisees were creating religious rules for others but not keeping those rules themselves—a characteristic of "fake faith."

Do you see where you tie up heavy burdens, rules that you hold to religiously, and place them on others? Often times these rules are good preferences that are turned into ironclad rules. Maybe it's a particular approach to schooling children, a style of music, or something along these lines. Jesus doesn't want you to be burdened by these things or for you to be a burden to others with these things. Instead, He wants you to foster a burden-relieving love. He desires for your life to look more like His life—one where He actively takes on burdens at great cost to Himself, in order to relieve others' burdens. (p46)

Study Questions:

- If you had been with Jesus and the disciples during the grain-picking incident, how do you think the Pharisees' reaction would have made you feel?
- Jed Coppenger asserts that holding someone to a higher standard than yourself is like "adding to their burden". Do you agree with that analogy? Why or why not?
- Have you ever had a "you are the man" moment in your life . . . a time when someone admonished you to see how you were appalled or offended by someone else's behavior but oblivious to your own? What happened?
- This chapter includes a mention of the missionary work of Jim and Elisabeth Elliot, who risked everything and put the needs of an unreached people group above their own. Can you share a story of someone who inspired or influenced you because of their selfless example(s) of love and service to others?

Fake Christianity: Is Motivated by Human Attention and Affirmation

Chapter 3 (pages 49–62)

In the New Testament, the Pharisees are often the target of Jesus' rebukes and correction. As leaders of the Jewish people, they should have been living examples of authentic humility and servanthood. Instead, Jesus often warned the crowds to avoid imitating the Pharisees and scribes, who "do all their deeds to be seen by others." Being "seen by others" isn't just being visible; it's being praised, admired, and affirmed by people. (p51)

The Pharisees had a performer mentality. They did a good thing in commending the believers, but they didn't do it with a godly motive. They didn't do it to encourage the people; they did it to garner praise from them. It was a performance. (p54)

This chapter takes a focused look at how easily we can be motivated by human attention and affirmation—not by a desire to serve God and our neighbor in humility and love.

Moment by moment, the Spirit of Christ leads us to the servant mentality and away from the performance mindset. Every day we can choose to follow His leading or oppose it. Will Real Christians always be authentic servants? No. All Real Christians are a mixture of unintentional inconsistencies, righteousness, and sometimes intentional failures. (. . .) Jesus didn't shed His blood to produce a Fake Christian world of praise-hungry performers. Rather, His Spirit creates Christ-imitating servants. Jesus saw the depths of the Pharisees' and scribes' hearts, and it wasn't pretty. What does He see when He looks at yours? (p62)

Study Questions:

- In chapter 3, Jed shares his personal story of "fame" as the star of his kindergarten play. Have you had any childhood (or adult) experiences with any kind of fame? How did it feel to be "center stage," even for a short time?
- Jed shares, "As a Fake Christian in my early years, I knew how to say the right line at just the right moment. (. . .) I knew how to play the role of a Christian. I wasn't always intentionally deceitful, but many times I was." Have you gone through a time of simply playing the role of a Christian? Share an example.
- Do you agree with the statement that, thanks to social media, "everyone is a performer now"? (p51) Why or why not?
- In pages 52–54, Jed outlines three examples of how the Pharisees garnered praise for themselves. What are they? Can you think of three modern practices that might correspond to these ancient ones? (For instance, today, we wouldn't "make our fringes long," but we would . . . do what?)

Fake Christianity: Gets People to Reject Real Christianity

Chapter 4 (pages 63–75)

In Matthew 23:13, Jesus warns, “But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut the kingdom of heaven in people’s faces. For you neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in.”

That’s a powerful statement! Imagine being responsible for closing the door to heaven so that others can’t enter. This chapter looks at ways that people use confusion, misdirection, lies, and even emotions to derail the faith of others. Many of Jed’s examples show how the name of God and the words of Scripture can be twisted to make something false appear to be true. Even Jesus was subjected to lies and manipulation like that.

In Matthew 4, God shows us that Satan tries to tempt Jesus three different ways. Satan’s plan for ruining Jesus’ saving purposes is in getting Jesus to follow a twisted interpretation of the Bible that aligned with the enemy’s desires. First, Satan tries to get Jesus to satisfy His hunger for food by turning bread into stones. Second, Satan tempts Jesus to vindicate Himself by throwing Himself off of the temple so that all the angels could rescue Him. When people saw that, then they’d recognize who Jesus was. Third, Satan tempts Jesus with the gift of all of the kingdoms of this world, if He will just bow down and worship him.

Jesus would eventually get to eat, be vindicated, and be given possession of all of the kingdoms of this world. But Jesus understood that a good end doesn’t justify evil means. And stepping outside of God’s will and ignoring God’s timing were not okay. (pp73–74)

Study Questions:

- On page 65, Jed points out that even though this is the fourth example of “fake faith” in Matthew 23, it is the first time that Jesus uses the warning, “Woe to you.” Why do you think that might be?
- This chapter takes a close look at people who are “trying to throw believers off their Christian course.” Has anyone in your life ever done that? Did that person claim to be a believer? What happened?
- Name someone in your life who has been a godly spiritual “doorkeeper” for you. Are you a doorkeeper for anyone? Who?
- “Many are using the language of the Bible to lead people away from the truths of the Bible.” (p69) Why do you think someone might use the language of the Bible to lead people astray? Why not simply use anti-God arguments?
- This chapter begins and ends with a focus on understanding the truth of the gospel as a reference point for life. Can you explain what is meant by “the gospel”? (For help, see if you can find a description of the gospel on page 74.)

Fake Christianity: Is Marked by Misdirected Passions

Chapter 5 (pages 77–89)

“Without wax.” That’s a phrase that doesn’t seem to make much sense until you realize it’s where we get the word “sincere” (from the Italian: *sine cera*). Historians claim that ancient sculptors and pottery merchants would fill in cracks and imperfections in their work with wax. To reassure a potential buyer that a genuine product was whole and solid, it would be labeled “sine cera.” Without wax. Sincere.

Sincerity, authenticity, and transparency have become keywords in marketing. Users and buyers, we’re told, are looking for sincerity, for something real. Unfortunately, when sincerity becomes disconnected from the truth, the result is never good. We can be utterly sincere about something . . . and utterly wrong.

The apostle Paul warned the Christians in Rome about people of faith who had a misdirected passion. In Romans 10:2, he wrote, “For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge.” “Not according to knowledge” is another way of saying “not right.” Their spiritual GPS is off. (p78) Misdirected passions and misplaced sincerity can lead us off course and away from biblical truth. And we can drag others away with us.

Mature Christians will sometimes have a passion for something “good” that leads people away from Christ. Some Christians have a passion for a certain style of Christian music, but that passion leads them to condemn other legitimate styles of music and cause divisions where Jesus intends for there to be unity. Others might have a passion for a certain program at their church, but their passion leads them to do ungodly things when someone replaces it with another perfectly good program. (. . .) We must be very careful to not let differences over secondary matters derail the central purposes of Christ through the church. (p88)

Study Questions:

- This chapter begins with a discussion about “misdirected passions.” Based on what you’ve read in chapter five, how would you define “misdirected passions”?
- In the excerpt from 2 Timothy on page 79, Paul gives Timothy nine commands. What are they? Why do you think Paul chose these commands?
- On page 83, Jed tells us, “Passion isn’t what’s most important. The truth is.” Do you agree? Can you give an example of a person (or group) who is genuinely passionate about a cause, philosophy, or practice that is not based on truth?
- As the chapter comes to a close, Jed asks this very important question: Do you recognize where you are most prone to have a passion that leads you astray? What is your answer?

Fake Christianity: Plays Games with the Truth

Chapter 6 (pages 91–102)

There's an old story about an arrogant, vindictive ship's captain who didn't like his first mate. Plotting to have the first mate disgraced and removed, the captain would occasionally write in the ship's log, "The first mate was sober today." The first mate, a religious man who was humble and hard-working, never drank. He was sober every day. But the captain played a devious game with the truth. He twisted it to create a false and deceptive narrative about an innocent man.

In chapter 6 of Fake Christianity, Jed looks at verses 16 through 22 in the 23rd chapter of Matthew. Jesus calls the scribes and Pharisees "blind guides" here for the first time; He had been calling them "teachers of the law." Not only can they not see, but they're blind to their blindness. And the particular way that they act as blind guides here has to do with the way that they are making "oaths" or "swearing." (p93)

Jesus shows them that they are failing to do the right thing in making superficial distinctions. Why in the world would they do that? Because the distinction enabled them to tell people that they could give money that they otherwise wouldn't be able to give. It was about money. (p93)

It's obvious that telling the truth is a challenge, even among those who are supposed to lead people to the truth. And one of the major areas of struggle has to do with money. Jesus isn't a fan of playing games with the truth. He is the truth and calls His people to be committed to it as well—no matter the cost. But there will always be a temptation to want to trifle with the truth, especially when it could cost us financially. (pp94–95)

Study Questions:

- What two "swearing by" accusations does Jesus accuse the Pharisees of in Matthew 23:16–22? In each case, how do the first parts of each accusation compare to the second parts (temple and altar vs. gold and gift)?
- On page 97, Jed shares statistical information that "the average amount of money given to churches and charitable organizations has decreased as our standard of living generally has increased." Why do you think that might be true?
- Have you ever misrepresented your financial standing to impress people? (For example: at a class reunion, a family gathering, or even a job interview?)
- Can you share a story about a time when you sacrificed to help someone in far greater need than yourself and you later seemed to be blessed in some way financially? Conversely, do you have a story about a sacrificial gift that had a negative impact on your finances?

Fake Christianity: Majors on the Minors While Forgetting the Majors

Chapter 7 (pages 103–115)

In Matthew 23:23–24, we read, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel!”

Here, Jesus points His listeners in two directions, toward things they did and should have, and things they didn’t do but should have. They rightly tithed mint, dill, and cumin. Jesus said “these you ought to have done.” But they showed themselves indifferent to huge matters. (p105) Because of their failure here, Jesus says again, they are blind guides. He says that they are like a person upset about a small bug in a soup who nevertheless swallows a huge animal. (p106)

Even in Scripture, some passages show us clearly what beliefs are foundational to our faith while other beliefs are presented as subjective. Have you ever lost your temper over a policy that Christians can rightly disagree on (such as immigration, how involved America should be in wars around the world, and so on)? Maybe you are committed to helping the poor with a particular view on minimum wage (less clearly defined in Scripture), but you gossip about other Christians (very clearly something we shouldn’t do). Or perhaps you love arguing about your view on the millennium and when Jesus returns (less clear), but you don’t have a meaningful prayer life (very clearly something we should have). (p112)

I don’t know what you’ve just faced, are now facing, or are about to face. But in a broken world like ours, you’ll encounter situations that will test your ability to be just, merciful, and faithful. When they come, do your best to act like the EMTs I mentioned. Triage the challenge before you. Keep the main things the main things. Jesus said a lot is riding on your ability to do so. (p116)

Study Questions:

- Jed asks an important question on page 112: Where do you think you are most likely to major on the minors, while forgetting the majors?
- What guidelines could you use to ‘triage’ whether a belief or practice is critical and foundational . . . or something less than that? List two or three.
- Have you ever been a part of a church where a split occurred because of majoring on minors? What happened?
- This chapter cites two instructive passages in which Paul doesn’t seem to take equally decisive positions (1 Corinthians 5 and Romans 14). What topics are discussed in each passage? Why do you think Paul responds to them differently?
- Aside from the examples given in this chapter, can you name another instance in the Bible where something minor was prioritized and something major was ignored?

Fake Christianity: Focuses on the Outside While Neglecting the Inside

Chapter 8 (pages 117–129)

Jed begins this chapter with the story of his experience during a tribal meal in Nepal. Hoping not to offend his hosts (and hoping to be able to eat what was set before him), he chose a piece of meat that “looked just right.” Unfortunately, the piece was nothing but fat. It contained no meat at all.

Chapter 8 focuses on Jesus’ stern condemnation of the Pharisees who would “clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence” (Matthew 23:25). No one looking at these scribes and Pharisees would have thought that these things were on the inside of them. They looked as if they were the least liable for these charges in all of society. They seemed the most serious about turning away from these evils and pursuing righteousness. But looks, says Jesus, are deceiving. (p120)

Jesus tells His disciples that they don’t need to worry about ceremonially clean hands and food because it just passes through the body. Instead, they need to focus on what comes out of the mouth because that contaminates the person. He tells them that the heart controls what comes out of the mouth and what happens in a life. Jesus essentially says that “the heart of the problem is the problem of the heart.” (p124)

No one is harmed by ritually impure food. But impure hearts harm a lot of people. The Pharisees and the scribes were focused on the outside, neglecting the inside. Jesus warned them to beware of fixating on outward appearances while neglecting their inner spiritual health. Jesus criticized this form of fake Christianity, calling His listeners to an “inside-out” holiness. (p125)

Study Questions:

- Chapter 8 references Jesus’ accusation that the Pharisees are focused on the “outside” but have neglected the “inside” (Matthew 23:25). How would you define “inside” and “outside” in this context?
- What four characteristics does Jesus say the hearts of the Pharisees are marked by? (pp119–120) Do you or have you ever struggled with one of these behaviors?
- Jed explains the tradition of “Corban” being used as a way for people to violate God’s commands to honor and care for parents. (p123) Can you think of another example of using tradition to violate God’s law, either from Scripture or from something you’ve observed as part of a church or religious organization?
- As you look at your own life, was there ever a time when you outwardly appeared to be a follower of Christ but inwardly your heart was far from Him? If so, what happened to awaken you to your situation?

Fake Christianity: Condemns Others Mistakes While Denying Its Own

Chapter 9 (pages 131–143)

We have no trouble reaching for a spiritual microscope or a magnifying glass (or even a bullhorn!) when we're examining what we consider to be the sins of others. But we hardly ever want to reach for a mirror.

In this chapter, Jed draws our attention to something that we are all guilty of in many ways. It's easy to look on the sins of others, especially from another time or era, and think we'd never commit similar sins. It's easy to condemn others' mistakes while denying our own mistakes. (p132)

While there are some elements of Matthew 23:29–36 that specifically apply to Jesus' original audience, there is a principle here that applies to all generations. Jesus emphasizes the seriousness of condemning others' mistakes while denying one's own. Their sin is blinding them, not from seeing sin everywhere but primarily from seeing their own sin. And the same problem exists today. Our culture is filled with people who claim to follow God but affirm things that God is clearly opposed to. (p134)

Someone asked me the other day what my greatest regret in ministry was in those early days. That's easy: prayerlessness. The fact that I could get so worked up about someone not living up to a standard I had for them, whether it was legitimate or not, and be so unaffected by my prayerlessness, showed that I struggled with the sin of condemning others' mistakes while denying my own. By God's grace, I'm getting better at identifying and turning from that sinful action. I pray that God's uses this chapter (and the rest of the book) to help you do the same. (p144)

Study Questions:

- In Matthew 23:34–36, Jesus reinforces His divinity—His equality with God. How does He do this? (p133)
- In the list of “tolerated” sins that Jed provides, he differentiates between gossip and slander. (p138) Give an example of both from current events/news. (If you're part of a group study of this book, did the examples you gave raise objections?)
- Chapter 9 opens with the A. W. Tozer quote, “A Pharisee is hard on others and easy on himself, but a spiritual man is easy on others and hard on himself.” Do you agree? Would you expand on or even alter this quote in any way?
- Jed points out that there are sins we seem to tolerate or even accept while other sins are clearly called out for their wrongness. Is there a sin in your life that you know you've been tolerating or accepting far too long? What is it? Name one step you can take today that will help you turn away from that sin.

Fake Christianity: Fails to Receive God's Offer of Mercy

Chapter 10 (pages 145–157)

In Matthew 23 beginning with verse 37, Jesus says, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!" (p146)

Chapter 10 opens with Jesus' analogy of a hen gathering her brood under her wings. With this picture of gentleness and maternal love, Jesus is showing God's grace and mercy toward His people. But tragically, He says, "You were not willing!" In the Greek, Jesus says, "I wanted," but also "you did not want." (p146)

What's Jesus doing here? He's showing us another characteristic of Fake Christianity—it fails to receive God's offered mercy. The offer of mercy was ignored by people who had an appearance of godliness. (p147)

Jesus shows us here that there was a great need for mercy, but it was ignored. But He also shows us that He had a great amount of mercy. Here, after all of His criticisms, all of their sin, His mercy was "more" all along. Here, Jesus provides the secret to making it out of the Fake Christianity that we're all caught up in. It's His grace and mercy. (p148)

Think about it. No one listening to Jesus speak the words in Matthew 23 thought they were within weeks of seeing the greatest outpouring of the Spirit in the history of the world. Let's keep praying, keep inviting, keep repenting, asking God to do a fresh work in our hearts and in our day. Though sins may be many, His mercy is always more. May it be so. (p157)

Study Questions:

- In Jed's focus on Matthew 23:38, he points out that the word "desolate" is the adjective form of what word? (p147) Has there ever been a time when your life felt desolate or like a wilderness? During that time, how do you think God might have been extending mercy to you?
- This chapter features quotes from C. S. Lewis on the sin of pride, something that he called "The Great Sin." Aside from pride, what else do you think keeps us from accepting God's offer of mercy?
- Reread Matthew Chapter 23 in its entirety and imagine yourself being one of the scribes and Pharisees who might have been listening that day. How do you think you would have reacted to Jesus' words?
- As you look back over the ten chapters of this book, choose two or three that you enjoyed the most or that had the most impact on you. Why did you choose these chapters?