



It takes humility and courage to face the error and deception within us. Coppenger exposes ten traps of inauthentic faith and provides a gospel-centric response. If we want to understand what's true and good, we must look to Jesus. And we must listen to Him.

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# CONTENTS

*Introduction: Truth Be Told* 9

Fake Christianity...

- 1 ... Fails to Practice What It Preaches 21
- 2 ... Mandates Higher Standards for Others 35
- 3 ... Is Motivated by Human Attention and Affirmation 47
- 4 ... Gets People to Reject Real Christianity 61
- 5 ... Is Marked by Misdirected Passions 75
- 6 ... Plays Games with the Truth 89
- 7 ... Majors on the Minors, While Forgetting the Majors 101
- 8 ... Focuses on the Outside, While Neglecting the Inside 115
- 9 ... Condemns Others' Mistakes, While Denying Its Own 129
- 10 ... Fails to Receive God's Offer of Mercy 141

*Conclusion: Endless Grace for an Enduring Fight* 153

*Acknowledgments* 159

*Notes* 161

# Fake Christianity . . . Fails to Practice What It Preaches

*One act of obedience is worth a hundred sermons.*

UNKNOWN

*But be doers of the word, and not hearers only,  
deceiving yourselves.*

JAMES 1:22

“Just wait until Bobby comes in here,” my friend John said to me as we waited in the barn at the farm where we worked.

“What are you going to do?” I replied.

“I’m going to let him know what’s up.”

Letting someone know “what’s up” didn’t mean John was going to give him an update. It meant he was going to confront him.

“Oh yeah?” I answered, with an unbelieving smile. I’d heard John voice bold plans like this before.

Sure enough, when Bobby came in, John didn’t do anything.

There was plenty of time for John to carry out his courageous plan. But he didn't.

When Bobby left, I jokingly remarked, "What happened back there?"

"Oh," John said, "I'll get him next time."

"Sure, John, sure," I replied.

Many of us knew of a guy like John growing up. Perhaps we've even had our own "all talk" moments. These are moments when our bark is bigger than our bite.

One of the sad realities that occurs with an all-talk type of person is that over time, you believe what they say less and less.

I think that's one of the reasons why Jesus warns His listeners to avoid the all-talk tendency of the Pharisees and scribes in Matthew 23:1–3. Matthew writes, "Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, '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.'"

Did you catch that? After Jesus tells the crowds to do what the Pharisees and scribes *say* to do because they sit on Moses' seat, He says *not* to do "the works they do." Why? "For they preach, but do not practice."

Isn't that interesting? On the one hand, Jesus' followers are to do what they are told by the scribes and Pharisees because those religious leaders "sit on Moses' seat." Some say "Moses' seat" was akin to what we would call the "chair of the committee." Others say it was an actual chair in the synagogues that signaled that the leaders were Moses' authoritative successors in interpreting the Torah (Deut. 17:10). Either way, the point that Jesus makes here is that there *are* legitimate aspects to their ministry—when, that is, it is aligned with the Old Testament.

"But on the other hand," Jesus says, "don't do the works they

do.” Why not? Jesus’ phrase literally means “they speak and do not do.” They’re like my teenage friend whose words didn’t line up with his actions. They’re “all talk.”

\* \* \* \* \*

It must have been hard growing up with Jesus. Most siblings grow up around brothers or sisters who are imperfect. Because of this, it’s not hard for a child to criticize the behavior of their brother or sister.

But not James.

James and his siblings grew up around Jesus—a brother who always did the right thing. He said the right words and acted in the right way. The only accusations the siblings could have hurled at Jesus were untrue.

I’m sure they heard “Why can’t you be more like Jesus?” when they were growing up. It had to be tough.

Yet while there were challenges to growing up around perfection, I’m sure there were advantages too. After all, every one of them knew exactly what perfect consistency looked like. They had a front row seat to glorious perfection in the everyday, mundane stuff of life.

Perhaps that’s why James, Jesus’ half-brother, in his letter to the Christians of the Dispersion, was so adamant about the necessity of consistent living. He knew as well as any human (besides Jesus) what perfection looked like—how awesome life *could* be, completely surrendered to God’s will.

James wrote,

*But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face*

*in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing. (James 1:22–25)*

Why did James want his readers to be doers of the word and not hearers only? Because he wanted them to be “blessed.”

Think about how important these words were to James. He wrote his letter to Christians who were spread out all over the place because of the Dispersion. In the Old Testament, the Dispersion was the scattering of the people of God because of the sinfulness of the people of God. In the New Testament, Christians were scattered because of persecution.

Can you imagine having to move just because you were a Christian? What about moving to places where you don’t know anyone or the area? It wouldn’t have been easy.

Today it’s normal to move. People do it all the time. When they do, they know that there will be grocery stores, schools, homes, restaurants, and all the rest where they are moving.

That wasn’t the case back then. Moving was difficult. Mere survival was a real challenge.

And it would have been hard to guide people through it. James loved these people. He cared about them. When you are helping people follow Christ through a difficult situation, you have to pick and choose carefully what you say, how you say it, and when you say it.

That’s what James is doing. He’s writing to people at a time where their world has been turned upside down. He’s only talking about what matters most, what he knows they need to hear.

So when we read James’s words on the importance of being “doers of the word,” we should recognize that he is talking about

the essence of what it means to be a Christian. He's not describing a special class of "serious Christians," but basic Christianity.

James emphasizes what Jesus emphasized. He sharply criticizes all-talk faith. Why? He wants his listeners to be "blessed."

James wants for his listeners what he saw in Jesus from his childhood—consistent, blessed Christianity.

Do you view consistent Christian living the same way that James and Jesus do?

Not every person does, even professing Christians.

\* \* \* \* \*

Lewis Sperry Chafer had a massive impact on Christianity in America in the twentieth century. In 1918 he wrote a book called *He That Is Spiritual*. In it, he argued that there were two types of Christians, "carnal" and "spiritual." Carnal Christians made decisions to become "Christians" at some point in their lives, but they lived like lost people. Spiritual Christians were what historically had been identified as genuine Christians. These people weren't perfect, but they were genuinely and discernibly following the Lord.

Commenting on Chafer's approach about seventy years later, John MacArthur wrote, "Prior to this century, no serious theologian would have entertained the notion that it is possible to be saved yet see nothing of the outworking of regeneration in one's life-style or behavior."<sup>1</sup>

Chafer's novel approach had a significant effect on Christianity. It was so significant that MacArthur and others had to address it after seven decades in what was often referred to as the "Lordship" controversy.

In 1986, James Boice argued that this all-talk Christianity

movement advanced significantly in the twentieth century because of an increase in prosperity among Christians in America. In *Christ's Call to Discipleship*, he writes that the spiritual/carnal theology “separates faith from discipleship and grace from obedience” and “teaches that Jesus can be received as one’s Savior without being received as one’s Lord.”

Boice then notes that the effect is “a common defect” during “times of prosperity” but is much less prevalent when times are tougher:

*In days of hardship, particularly persecution, those who are in the process of becoming Christians count the cost of discipleship carefully before taking up the cross of the Nazarene. . . . But in good times, the cost does not seem so high, and people take the name of Christ without undergoing the radical transformation of life that true conversion implies.<sup>2</sup>*

Did you catch that? The greater the wealth and the less chance there is for persecution, the greater the chance that all-talk Christianity will flourish.

A. W. Tozer, commenting on this issue, wrote that “the Lord will not save those whom He cannot command. He will not divide His offices. You cannot believe on a half-Christ. We take Him for what He is—the anointed Saviour and Lord who is King of kings and Lord of all lords! He would not be Who He is if He saved us and called us and chose us without the understanding that He can also guide and control our lives.”<sup>3</sup>

Bryan Laughlin and Doug Ponder, in an article titled “Christianity and Functional Liberalism (Or How Evangelicalism Denies the Faith),” identify a subtle version of this all-talk Christianity that they call “functional liberalism,” whose essence “is consent to doctrinal confessions *on paper* while subverting



them *in practice*—whether by downplaying their significance, reinterpreting their meaning, or rejecting the logical implications.”<sup>4</sup>

All-talk Christianity was a problem in James’s day, and it is still a problem today. But how serious of a problem is it?

\* \* \* \* \*

A little later in James’s letter, he drills down deeper into this topic. In James 2:14–17, he writes, “What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, be warmed and filled,’ without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.”

Strong words! James says that faith without works is dead faith. But not only that, in James 2:18–20, he says it is demonic faith. He writes, “But someone will say, ‘You have faith and I have works.’ Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder! Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless?”

James doesn’t leave open the possibility for a saving faith without works. True knowledge doesn’t equal saving faith, otherwise the demons would be saved. They have a knowledge of the truth, but they don’t love it. It hasn’t changed their heart, which changes their actions. That’s what James is getting at when he says “a person is justified by works and not by faith alone” (v. 24).

James’s statement here seems wrong at first. After all, the New Testament has a number of passages that emphasize the truth that the apostle Paul wrote about in his letter to the Ephesians,

which said, “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast” (Eph. 2:8–9).

So are Christians saved by faith or by works? Many theologians have pointed out that Paul and James are talking about different issues. Paul is talking about what *creates* a saving relationship with God. James is talking about what *demonstrates* a saving relationship with God. Works don’t create a saving relationship with God, but they do demonstrate one.

That’s why the apostle Paul, in the verse right after the one I quoted above, says, “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (Eph. 2:10).

Paul first says that we are saved *by* grace through faith, apart from our works. Then he says we are saved *for* good works, which God prepared beforehand. The order of this is the difference between Christianity and every other religion. Our works don’t earn salvation, good karma, or anything like this. Our works demonstrate the salvation that we received by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

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.

Getting this point right is important for every person who’s ever lived. But not just because of Christ’s desire that all be saved (1 Tim. 2:4), but also because of the means by which people become Christians. Jesus calls His followers to be “witnesses,” to share the gospel.

When people call themselves Christian but are “all talk,” they aren’t just deceiving themselves and missing out on the

fullness of the blessed life that Jesus offers; they're discouraging others from embracing it as well.

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A prominent congresswoman made headlines at a prayer breakfast for a presidential candidate. She started her speech by talking about how she had to tell her fiancé, whom she was living with, that she didn't have time to sleep with him that morning because she had to get to a prayer breakfast. She said there would be time for that later this evening. She thought it was a funny introduction to her talk.

Many Christians saw the problem with her admission. But she didn't quite seem to grasp the inconsistency. Later, defending her position on social media, things got worse. She said, "I go to church because I'm a sinner, not a saint."<sup>5</sup>

As is the case with an all-talk Christianity, the language of faith is often used in a way that is at odds with the teachings of Christ. While it's true that all Christians are sinners, the Bible says it's also true that all Christians are saints. And, further, the presence of ongoing sin in a believer's life is not the same as "living in sin," as she clearly was doing.

But as her situation illustrates, it's easy for moments like these to cast a shadow on the legitimacy of the Christian faith. Show after show, podcast after podcast, the critics didn't just go after her; they attacked Christianity. That's one of the reasons consistent Christianity is such an important priority for Jesus and James.

There are similar examples all throughout our culture. Politicians, social media influencers, athletes, and all the rest are doing and will be doing things like this. We need to be

able to identify them and take caution about allowing their perspectives to subvert our faith.

But we also need to be able to see where we contribute to the problem. Far from committing blatant errors like the congresswoman, most of us struggle with less inflammatory things.

The rest of the book of James points out many of these subtle struggles where we can be tempted to be “all talk.” James warns his readers about the sin of “partiality” (2:1) and then elaborates on the sins of the tongue (3:1–12). With the same tongue “we bless our Lord and Father” yet also “curse people who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so” (vv. 9–10).

James’s 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’s 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, fully 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.

Do you share this burden? Are you committed to being unmistakably consistent in all of life?

It won’t be easy. The apostle Paul talked about this ongoing problem in Galatians 5:16–17, when he wrote, “But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do.”

Paul says to the Christian, there is something in you that

keeps “you from doing the things you want to do.” He’s speaking about the presence of sin in our lives.

Perhaps, as you’ve read this, the Spirit of God has brought to mind areas where you have been all talk in your Christianity. Perhaps you aren’t living a life of personal holiness; you’re not gathering with God’s people weekly; you’re not serving; you’re not prioritizing God’s Word; you’re not helping those in need; or something else. Whatever it is, identify it, confess it, and turn from it for fresh grace to “walk in newness of life.” Do you understand the areas of life, the moments in a typical day, where you are most prone to be all talk in that moment?

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Dietrich Bonhoeffer vehemently opposed all-talk Christianity. He didn’t use that language, of course, but his resistance to the concept is undeniable. He lived in Nazi Germany. It was then, early in the 1930s, a group calling themselves German Christians seized control of the Lutheran Church, fueled by support from Adolf Hitler and his Nazi party. “This was a religious movement led by Nazi clergy whose goal was to bring the Lutheran church into line with the political and ideological goals of National Socialism,” writes Leonore Siegele-Wenschkewitz.<sup>6</sup> “They elected a federal bishop and began to govern the church on the Fuhrer’s principles.”

Bonhoeffer opposed these godless efforts through his teaching and writings. He helped launch what became known as the “Confessing Church,” which the Nazis saw as a resistance organization. While it did resist this evil reign, it sought to do more than that—to live out biblical Christianity.

Eventually, Bonhoeffer was captured and executed by the Nazis.

Perhaps Bonhoeffer understood the deadliness of unaligned, inauthentic faith. He most likely knew people who got caught up in that Fake Christianity. He heard clergy use biblical concepts like “grace” to justify ungodliness.

All of these things led him to distinguish between “cheap grace” and “costly grace” in his book *The Cost of Discipleship*. “Cheap grace,” he wrote, “is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. . . . [it is grace] without discipleship . . . without the cross . . . without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.”

Costly grace, on the other hand, is “the treasure hidden in the field; for the sake of it a man will go and sell all that he has.” It’s also “the pearl of great price,” “the kingly rule of Christ,” and “the call of Jesus Christ at which the disciple leaves his nets and follows him.”

The latter is not gained once and for all, Bonhoeffer asserted. Costly grace “must be sought again and again.” It is “the gift which must be asked for, the door at which a man must knock.”

It is this grace that beckons us come and die, surrender our very lives, give up everything—but gain so much more. “Above all, it is grace because God did not reckon his Son too dear a price to pay for our life, but delivered him up for us. Costly grace is the Incarnation of God.”<sup>7</sup>

Bonhoeffer fought against a new expression of the same all-talk Christianity that Jesus, James, and other biblical writers opposed. It’s easy to see the worthiness of Bonhoeffer’s cause, while failing to see that we all have an opportunity to do the same in our everyday lives.

Sure, our efforts won’t likely end up in any public forum like Bonhoeffer’s did. But the Bible says that they are urgently important.

Where are you most likely in danger of having an all-talk Christianity? For some, their social media posts are out of step with their Christian confession. For others, their internet search history fails the biblical standard for holiness. Sometimes, whether it is a Fake Christian or a Real Christian who is trapped by this element of Fake Christianity, the problem is a person's inability to engage politically in a way that is discernibly Christian.

Would someone who evaluated your financial statements be able to discern that you are a Christian? What about your schedule? How would those closest to you weigh your words on the balance of the Christian standard?

The list, of course, could go on. 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 Bonhoeffer's authentic faith.

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