

Counterfeit Gospels • Session 1

The Deadly Power of a Counterfeit

Modern society lives in an age of terror. Unstable nations build weapons of mass destruction. Misguided religious extremists plant bombs and attack embassies. The threat of a nuclear attack constantly lurks in the background of our national consciousness.

But imagine a quieter weapon of mass destruction, a weapon that, when unleashed, can do as much damage to a nation as explosive acts of war. Did you know that for more than 2,000 years, countries have sought to destabilize their enemies by spreading counterfeit money? Just think of what would happen if counterfeit bills flooded America. There would be massive confusion. It would take millions of dollars to educate the populace in becoming experts at seeing the truth in order to spot the fakes. By imitating the genuine, the counterfeit money creates confusion and typically distorts the value of the real currency. The counterfeit works because it mimics the real deal so well that customers and businesses spread the fake money until even governments are affected.

In the same way, at even greater cost, Christians and non-Christians are often drawn to counterfeit gospels. Even those of us who have walked with the Lord for many years may be inclined to accept cheap imitations of the truth. **In your own words, what are counterfeit gospels, and why do they attract the attention of so many?**

Take the time to read Galatians 1:6-10, 1 John 4:1-6, Jude 1-4, and Revelation 2:12-17. What should we take away from these passages about the danger of counterfeit gospels?

Having read Acts 16:11-15, Romans 1:16-17, 1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5, and Colossians 1:3-14, why is continued confidence in the power of the gospel vital?

Practically speaking, when there is a lack of clarity in understanding and applying the gospel, what dangers arise?

Devoid of gospel confidence and clarity, disciples of Christ can begin to lose their distinctiveness. Why and how do entire churches tend to lose their focus on the gospel and unite around other things?

Counterfeit Gospels • Session 2

Equipping Ourselves with the Real Deal

From the time we can put together syllables and comprehend what other people are saying, we are fascinated by stories. Something deep within the human soul hungers for narratives and the truths they convey. In a profound way, we not only come to live *for* stories, we live *by* them. How we understand the story of our world affects how we live.

The Bible is a library of books that contain many different types of literature. Taken as a whole, the Scriptures provide us with a grand narrative—a great story in which every person is invited to take part. God has chosen, through his Word, to tell his children *the* Story, not a bedtime story that rocks us into a gentle sleep, but the story that we wake up to in the morning that explains why we exist. God’s Story tells us who we are, what has gone wrong with the world, what God has done to redeem and restore his broken creation, and what the future holds for his people, those who accept his offer of salvation.

The fundamental questions that define our existence find their answers in the biblical narrative. And if we are to live *by* the biblical story, it’s important that we rightly understand it and the good news at its heart. **Take the time to read 1 Corinthians 15:1-4, one of the clearest descriptions of the gospel in the Bible.** Using that passage and your own grasp of the Story, how would you describe the gospel?

Consider these primary “scenes” of the Story. How would you summarize them in your own words?

- Creation –
- Sin –
- Covenant –
- Law –
- Prophecy –
- Jesus –
- Redemption –
- Gospel –
- Return –

Counterfeit Gospels • Session 3

The Therapeutic Gospel

A woman comes into an emergency room, coughing uncontrollably. As one of the doctors eventually talks with her, he finds out that she's been a smoker for decades. He prescribes some medicine that will temporarily relieve the worst of her coughing, but he tells her that the cough will not completely go away as long as she continues smoking. A few weeks later, the lady comes back, complaining that the medicine is no longer working. What will the doctor say? "I'm only addressing your symptom. The real problem is that you continue to damage your lungs."

Every doctor knows that getting the diagnosis right is vitally important for giving the right prescription. It isn't enough to treat symptoms; doctors must identify the root cause of a patient's problem. As Christians, we should be no less vigilant in searching the Scriptures for the true diagnosis of our spiritual state.

The "therapeutic gospel" answers a key question like, *What are we here for?* by pointing to our desire for personal happiness. Another important question, *What has gone wrong?* is answered by pointing to our feelings of emptiness. Sin is recast as an obstacle to finding happiness. It's whatever gets in the way of our becoming all that we ought to be. God wants to patch up the hole in our hearts, and he does this by sending Jesus to fill our hearts with love to bless our pursuit of happiness. The church is then transformed into a place to help people find personal fulfillment.

- Is the "therapeutic gospel" a counterfeit gospel? If so, in what ways?
- Why is the "therapeutic gospel" so attractive and, as a result, so popular?

Consider how, whenever the "therapeutic gospel" takes hold, certain results are bound to follow. These results leave us spiritually anemic at just the time we need to be spiritually empowered.

- Disillusionment when suffering comes. Why?
- A shrunken view of sin. Why?
- People who desire what God can give us rather than God himself. Why?

If the "therapeutic gospel" is a counterfeit, does it need to be countered? If so, in what ways?

Counterfeit Gospels • Session 4

The Judgmentless Gospel

John Lennon's 1971 song "Imagine" encourages us to imagine there is no heaven or hell. Instead, we should embrace the need to live for today. The song was a big hit when it was released and is now recognized as one of the greatest rock/pop songs of all time. The lyrics summed up the mood of the post-1960s era, a time in which people were questioning religious claims and traditional morality.

Forty years later, many—even those who claim to be followers of Jesus—are fully following Lennon's advice. We are told that the gospel is not really about the afterlife. The gospel answers much bigger questions than a person's eternal state. It's all about life today—not so much about tomorrow. In fact, there may not even *be* a great Day of Judgment that is coming.

In reality, the "judgmentless gospel" championed by some segments of the religious world isn't big enough to include the full picture. Of course we should see the gospel as speaking to life today. And yes, the gospel is not only about going to heaven when we die. But we must take care that, as we are surrounded by so much religious confusion, we hold together *all* the components of the gospel story.

The "judgmentless gospel" shows up in many forms. In your own words, why are these dangerous counterfeits?

- "Everybody is going to heaven" –
- "The afterlife isn't nearly as important as making the most of life here on the earth" –
- "God wouldn't ever send anyone to hell. People choose to go there" –
- "God knows my heart" –

Why is the "judgmentless gospel" so attractive and, as a result, so popular?

If the "judgmentless gospel" is a counterfeit, does it need to be countered? If so, in what ways?

Counterfeit Gospels • Session 5

The Good Morals Gospel

Be pleasant. Help others. Be polite. Don't lie. Don't cheat. Don't steal. Say you're sorry. Use your manners. Treat other people the way you would want to be treated.

The “good morals” gospel sounds a lot like the gentle admonitions of a grandmother. Millions believe that as long as they have some “good, clean morals,” that’s what matters in the eyes of God. The ultimate goal of religion? To promote moral, upright behavior. The ultimate purpose of the church? To function as a bastion of morality and encourage churchgoers to be hard workers and kind neighbors. All the while, subscribers to the “good morals” gospel can exhibit “good, clean morals” in the eyes of the secular society around them, yet never recognize their desperate need for a Savior.

In what ways do these characteristics and tendencies of the “good morals” gospel ultimately produce a counterfeit?

- “Getting right” with God without defining who God is –

- Thinking of God in human terms, almost like a doting grandparent –

- Treating the “good news” as good advice –

Why is the “good morals” gospel so attractive and, as a result, so popular?

If the “good morals” gospel is a counterfeit, does it need to be countered? If so, in what ways?

Counterfeit Gospels • Session 6

The Prosperity Gospel

Proponents of the “prosperity gospel” or the “health and wealth gospel” teach that the more money you give away, the wealthier you’ll become. “Following God” can serve as a formula for abundant possessions and prosperous living. “If you can dream it, God can work it in your life.”

What distinguishes “prosperity theology” from secular materialism is that it professes to be built on God’s Word—precisely what makes it such a dangerous counterfeit.

- Does God promise to make us prosperous if we obey him? Is there a direct cause-and-effect relationship between righteousness and prosperity? If not, why not?

- We read of many exceedingly wealthy followers of God, particularly in the Old Testament. What then should we make of God’s warning about wealth in Deuteronomy 8:7-20?

- Can you think of some examples from the Bible to demonstrate that even when people love God with all their hearts, they may suffer?

Why is the “prosperity gospel” so attractive and, as a result, so popular?

If the “prosperity gospel” is a counterfeit, does it need to be countered? If so, in what ways?

Counterfeit Gospels • Session 7

The Marketing Gospel

The first rule of successful marketing? Give the consumers what they want. If they want bigger burgers, make their burgers bigger. Designer bottled water in six fruit flavors? Done. Minivans with ten cup holders? Given them twenty. **You've got to keep the customer satisfied.** You've got to modify your product and your message to meet their needs if you want to build a brand and get ahead of the competition.

Today, this same marketing mindset has invaded much of what claims to be "Christianity." The church service is too long, you say? We'll shorten it (one "pastor" guarantees his sermons will never last more than seven minutes!). Too formal? Wear your sweatsuit. Too boring? Wait'll you hear our band!

And if the message is too confrontational, or too judgmental, or too exclusive, scary, unbelievable, hard to understand, or too much anything-else for your taste, churches everywhere are eager to adjust that message to make you more comfortable. This new version of Christianity makes you a partner on the team, a design consultant on church life, and does away with old-fashioned authority, guilt trips, accountability, and moral absolutes.

Why is the "marketing gospel" so attractive and, as a result, so popular?

Should 2 Timothy 3:1-5 have any input on the validity of the "marketing gospel"? If so, what sort of input?

What should we make of Jesus' words in Matthew 16:24-28 and Luke 9:23-27? Should they play a role in our consideration of the "marketing gospel"? If so, what sort of role?

If the "marketing gospel" is a counterfeit, does it need to be countered? If so, in what ways?

Counterfeit Gospels • Session 8

The Social Gospel

Social is defined “as pertaining to, devoted to, or characterized by friendly companionship or relations”: *a social club*; “seeking or enjoying the companionship of others; pertaining to, connected with, or suited to polite or fashionable society”: *a social event*.

To *socialize* is “to associate or mingle sociably with others”: *to socialize with one’s fellow workers*.

There is by no means anything wrong with the social aspect of human relationships or socializing with others. But history documents a number of attempts to fuse the gospel of Jesus Christ (Rom 1:16) with appeals, opportunities, and gimmicks centered on the social needs and wants of men and women, young and old. Examples abound—gymnasiums and physical fitness opportunities, therapy and recovery programs, community recreation, political activism, the entertainment of teenagers, dramatic presentations, the providing of handy conveniences, etc.

Why is the “social gospel” so attractive and, as a result, so popular?

Should churches organize programs to serve social needs, finance social causes, and use social programs as a means of community outreach? If so, why? If not, why not?

Should Jesus’ words in John 18:36 play any role in this discussion?

Is it important for brothers and sisters in Christ to spend social time together? If so, why? If not, why not?

Counterfeit Gospels • Session 9

The Political Gospel

Politics is the science or art of political government; the practice or profession of conducting political affairs; exercising or seeking power in the governmental or public affairs of a state, municipality, etc.

How should we think of God in relation to human governments and political affairs?

Is there any danger attached to the fusing of politics and the gospel? If so, what sort of danger?

What should we make of God's documented interaction with the Old Testament nation of Israel?

What do Jesus' words in Mark 12:13-17 have to contribute to this discussion?

Is there any such thing as a Christian nation? If so, in what way? If not, why not?

Counterfeit Gospels • Session 10

The Churchless Gospel

“I’m interested in Christ, but not the church” is not an uncommon thing to hear in our modern context. Some don’t understand the importance of the church’s existence. Others would say they “belong” to a local church, but they rarely participate in the life of the church.

The author of Hebrews speaks of the great honor it is to meet together with other believers. And at one point, he warns against “neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some” (Heb 10:23-25). Passages like this let us know that the problem of Christians neglecting corporate worship is not new. If the author of Hebrews saw this problem as important enough to address, it must mean that even back in New Testament times, some Christians were neglecting what God designed for their good.

Why is the “churchless gospel” attractive to many?

Is the church important? If not, why not? If so, why?

Is membership in a local church merely an option for the modern Christian?

What principles can we learn from the many “one another” passages in the New Testament? (*John 13:14, 34-35; 15:12, 17; Rom 12:10; 15:14; Gal 5:13; Eph 4:2, 32; 5:19, 21; Phil 2:3; Col 3:13, 16; 1 Thes 4:18; Heb 3:13; James 5:16; 1 Pet 3:8; 4:9; 2 John 5*)

If the “churchless gospel” is a counterfeit, does it need to be countered? If so, in what ways?