

How to Tell if You're a Fake

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[0 : 00] Well, it's nice to have plants in church, isn't it? Have you noticed our plants? Have you ever even taken a moment to look at our plants?

! I mean, maybe that's not what they're there for. Maybe it's just to be in the background. But it does. You know our plants in the corner there? Those ones in the pots? They look nice, don't they? I hope so.

I mean, that's the point. It adds a bit of color to the church. A little bit of life, you know. So it's not just all constructed things.

It's nice to have plants in a church. But I wonder if you knew something about those plants. They are 100% fake. They're not real.

Which is great. We don't have to water them. We can just leave them there and they look exactly the same. Week after week. They don't have any life in them. Those plants may not be the only things here today that look alive but aren't.

[1 : 03] You see, in any given church gathering, there are bound to be fake Christians. And it's not just me that says that.

Jesus says that. Back in Matthew 7, verse 21, I wonder if you remember when we were there. He said these words, and they are very sobering words. He says, Not everyone who calls me Lord, Lord will enter the kingdom of heaven.

So Jesus himself is making the point that there are many people who will call him Lord, Lord, i.e. come to church and take the name Christian. They will look the part, but they aren't really Christians.

Now that's a truth we have to deal with. That if what he said is true, there will be some, even in this gathering this morning, who are not real Christians.

And if that's true, we've really got one of the most important questions we need to be able to answer is, Well, how can we tell? Right? Right. That's a really important question.

[2 : 12] How can I tell I'm really a Christian if what Jesus says is true? How can we tell what a true Christian really is? That's the question we're going to look at this morning, because that's the question Jesus tells us this parable to be able to answer.

This parable about two sons. And he tells it to the religious leaders of their day, which he's already implied last week we saw in the passage, are not the real thing.

And now he uses this parable to explain the difference between looking like one of God's people and really being one. So let's listen soberly and carefully to what he says this morning.

We start at verse 28. He says this, What do you think? There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, Son, go and work today in the vineyard.

I will not, he answered. But later he changed his mind and went. Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, I will, sir.

[3 : 17] But he did not go. Which of the two did what his father wanted? The first, they answered. So what we get from this parable, the point Jesus is trying to make is this.

True Christianity is not what you say, but what you do. That's the first of two criteria we're going to see this morning. To answer that question, how can we tell what a true Christian really is?

True Christianity, first of all, is not about what you say, but about what you do. That's the point of this parable. So we've got these two sons, right?

And they both work in a vineyard with their father, which is a normal Middle Eastern practice. You know, you didn't go off to college to study computers or whatever. You generally didn't have a choice.

You did what your father did, and your son will do what you do, typically, in that world. And so the father works in the vineyards. His sons come of age, and they're going to work in the vineyard with him.

[4 : 18] And he's essentially their father, but he's also their boss. And then he tells his first son that it's time to work. But his first son comes back and says, no.

Now this, just that, would have been shocking in that culture for a son to be so blatantly disobedient to his father. I imagine, as Jesus was telling this to the Middle Eastern audience, when he got to that point, and he said, the first son said, I will not.

There was like a, there was like a, in the crowd. How dare he say that? It's a capital offense to be so blatantly disobedient to your parents in that culture.

I bet many parents wish that was the case today. But maybe many parents wish they actually had the second son, because the second son was the complete opposite, right, of the first son.

Not only did he say yes, but look how he said yes. Look in verse 30. He said, I will, sir. Very respectful, isn't it?

[5 : 21] Now this is the kid who always immediately answers in the affirmative when their parents ask them to do something. It's the kid who, when you say, go tidy your room, and they don't go, oh, do I have to?

They say, yes, of course, Father. I will go at once, sir. It's that kid. I wish, as you know, I bet parents wish they had that kind of kid. But maybe they don't, because look what happens.

The problem is that the second kid didn't actually do what he said. Well, the rebellious one did. And so the question that Jesus asks is, who is actually obedient?

The rebellious child or the good one? And the answer, even his opponents have to admit, is, well, it's the first one. It's the rebellious child that was actually the obedient child.

And so the point of this parable is to highlight the difference between what we say and what we do. There is a big difference between saying something and doing it. And even Jesus' opponents have to admit here that words mean nothing if they're not accompanied by action.

[6 : 36] And you might have come across this situation in the workplace. Everybody has come across that person in the workplace who's always the yes man. You know, he always says, yes, of course, I'll do that.

I'll get to that report right away. Yes, I'll do that right away. And then they go off. But they don't actually do it. And then you follow them up and, yes, I will do it. I will do it. I said I would do it. I would do it. But they still don't. You would actually much rather them just say, no, I won't do it. At least they're being honest. At least you know where you stand then. But words mean nothing if they're not accompanied by action.

So Jesus is saying, you know, don't be that guy at work. Don't be the guy who says, yes, yes, yes, of course. I'll do it right away, but doesn't do it. Jesus told us back in the Sermon on the Mount, be people whose yes is yes.

Whose actions match their words. And be people whose yes is yes with the people around us. That's one of the ways we show that we're kingdom people.

[7 : 39] Our yes is yes. But with other people, but even more so with God. That our yes is yes when it comes to God.

But Jesus says that was the exact problem with the religious people of his day. Is that their actions didn't match their words.

They were the good son. The second son. They claimed, these religious leaders that he came to in Jerusalem, claimed that they loved God. And they followed his law very, very stringently.

But behind all their good words and their religiosity and coming to the temple and their work as priests. And all the religion that was going on there.

Despite all of that, they were actually hiding a heart of disobedience. And it was almost as if the more religion they did, the more they could actually not think about the fact that they're not really obeying God.

[8 : 39] And that's why last week you'll remember Jesus likened them to a fig tree. Remember the fig tree? He's coming across a fig tree in the road. And it was leafy. It had full bloom of leaves.

But then when he went to find fruit, there was no fruit. And he says that the religion of his day is like that. That they looked the part, they had the leaves, but they weren't producing what God wanted.

And sadly, the same can be said of much Christianity today.

Many people who call themselves Christians who are in church right now. The same as what Jesus is saying to the people of his day can be said today. Jesus is saying here that being religious, going to church, talking the talk, even knowing the right doctrines is not the same as doing what God wants.

And yet many, many people who take the name Christian will still use their Sunday religion. Right? And they'll be regular at church.

And they'll use that Sunday religion to hide the fact that they're still not living how God wants Monday to Saturday. But true Christianity, we see here, is about what you actually do when you leave church.

[9 : 59] True Christianity is about what you do. But wait a minute. Wait a minute. I thought that we're saved by faith alone.

Not by works. Right? Isn't that the whole point? Isn't that what we hear over and over again? Isn't that what Dylan reminded us earlier? That by faith in Jesus alone we're saved and we're forgiven. Not by works. Isn't that true? And let me tell you, undoubtedly that is absolutely true. That is a glorious truth. And we must never forget it. That we will never be right with God, in right relationship with God, by anything we can do, by any good lives we can live.

And that is why Jesus came. That is why Jesus died on the cross. To take our place. To take our sins on Him. And to give us His righteousness. For all who believe in Him. Through faith alone we receive His righteousness that is credited to us.

By grace. Undeserved favor. Something we haven't earned. That is the Christian gospel. And it is glorious. And we must never forget it. But as C.S. Lewis rightly said, God does not love us because we are good.

[11 : 19] But He makes us good because He loves us. And that's what Jesus is saying here. He's saying that the evidence that you are saved, the assurance, and assurance is a wonderful thing for a Christian.

But how do we know? How do we know that we're saved? What is the evidence? Well, how do we know that a person has actually experienced the grace of God and that they're truly saved? Well, they start becoming what God saved them to be. Right? So, imagine you were going to one of those dog rescue kennels.

You know, people do amazing work taking dogs out of terrible situations and helping them to find nice new homes with a family that's going to love them.

Imagine you go to one of those rescue shelters and you find a dog, you choose a dog. And it's a shelter dog. So, it's a bit skittish. It's a bit nervous.

[12 : 18] It's lived in a small sort of cage. And you take it home. And then you give it a new bed and new toys and a garden to run around in and a family that loves it and meals, nice food every day.

Now, what's going to happen to that dog in that new situation? It'll change, right? It won't happen immediately. But as it experiences the love of that new family, it'll start to live appropriate to its new home and it will start to obey its new master, not reluctantly, but happily.

Joyfully. You know, I've got a dog, Finn, and he, when I say sit, he joyfully sits. Sometimes not right away, but he does it joyfully because he thinks he's going to get a treat.

But that's the... And he's happy. He's a happy dog. That is the picture of a creature that is in an environment where it's loved and accepted.

And it changes, especially if it's come from a bad environment. And you see, in the same way, proof that you have been saved by God out of this world and you've been brought into His kingdom, proof of that is that you start to live a life that is appropriate to that kingdom and you start to obey your new master, even though that might not happen right away, and even though you may stumble, and even though you might not do that very well at all yet.

[13 : 49] And that is why we need to hear the second criteria for determining true Christianity this morning. And that is that true Christianity is not how little you sin, but how much you change.

Now, this is a vital truth that we need to get into our heads. True Christianity is not about how little you sin, but about how much you change. And that's what this parable goes on to show us.

So look what Jesus says in verse 31. So He says, Which of the two sons did what their father wanted? The first, they answered.

The Pharisees answered. But look what He says to them next. Jesus said to them, Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you.

That would have been another moment with those listening. How on earth could He say that? That is a shocking thing. And what Jesus does here is He deliberately chooses the two worst sins in that society for a male and a female.

[15:02] A tax collector was worse than being a murderer because a tax collector meant you were a traitor to your country, you were serving the Romans, and you were the lowest of the low. And a prostitute is a woman, you know, selling her body for sex.

Again, lowest of the low. He deliberately chooses the two worst things you could be. And He says to these religious people, they are going to get into the kingdom ahead of those who have technically sinned much less in their lives and obeyed God's law much more.

How can that be? You see what He's saying here? We've got to get the gravity of it. He's saying these people who have sinned much more are going to get into the kingdom ahead of these people who have sinned much less. How can that be?

Well, the reason that can be is because of the lesson that this teaches us. It tells us that salvation is not about how righteous you are now, but about how willing you are to change when you hear God's Word.

That is the proof. That is the evidence of salvation. Not how righteous you are now, but how much you're willing to change when you hear God's Word. And that is why the sinners were getting in.

[16:16] Look at verse 32. For John, Jesus says, John the Baptist, he's the last of the Old Testament prophets that we find at the beginning of all the Gospels, right? For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe Him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did.

And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe in Him. Literally, that word for repent is not the normal word for repent. It means change. You did not regret and change your behavior. Okay, so that is why, that explains why these terrible sinners were getting into the kingdom ahead of them because of their response to God's Word when they heard it through John the Baptist. They heard John the Baptist bringing God's Word and they responded to it. They came and they did something, whereas the Pharisees didn't. They didn't think they needed to. And so that, Jesus points out, is the difference between entry to the kingdom or not.

Not how righteous you are, but how much you are responsive to God's Word when you hear it.

What matters to God is not your present level of righteousness.

[17:34] What matters to God is your responsiveness to His Word when you hear it. You know when the paramedics attend an emergency scene?

Maybe there's been an accident or someone's had a heart attack or whatever it is. One of the first things they do, do you notice, is they take out a torch and they open the patient's eyes and they shine the torch into the patient's eyes.

Why do they do that? Well, the reason is they want to check whether the eye contracts when it's exposed to light. And that shows that there's brain activity. When there's responsiveness, then there's brain activity.

That's one of the first and vital ways they check that there's brain activity. When they shine the light and there's a response. Well, that concept is exactly true in our spiritual lives as well.

This right here is the light. This is the light. And when this shines upon our hearts, if we respond to it, that is the sign, the primary sign of spiritual life.

[18:44] When we do something, when this shines on us and it actually does something in our lives practically, it changes us. Only then can we know that there's evidence of life.

So, one of the letters that the Apostle Paul writes is a letter that is one of the most comfortable letters when it comes to understanding God's election of His people and His saving them.

It's Ephesians. And I want you to hear what he says to the Christians in Ephesus. He says this.

Something he knows about them. He says, As for you, you were dead.

You were dead in your transgressions and sins in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts.

Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath. But, because of His great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ.

[20 : 01] Even though we were dead in our transgressions, it is by grace you have been saved. Amazing words. We were dead. He's telling these Christians, you were dead, but God made you alive.

But how does He know? How does He know that they're alive? What is the evidence of life in the Ephesian Christians? Well, turn to chapter 4.

He's already mentioned, I've seen your love for all the saints, but look at 4, verse 22. He says, you were taught, they were exposed to God's Word, you were taught with regard to your former way of life to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires, to be made new in the attitude of your minds and to put on the new self created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.

You see what He's saying here? An indicator that they are alive, an indicator of spiritual life is that they are changing. Not that they changed just initially, which they did when they heard God's Word. Amazing things happened. The Holy Spirit came down and they started to do different things, but that they continue to change. That is, this continued process of putting off. As we hear God's Word, as the light has shone, we respond to it and we keep putting off and we keep changing and we keep putting on.

[21 : 25] That is an indicator of spiritual life. That is the key indicator that you're actually really a Christian. So the question we should all ask ourselves this morning is not how righteous am I today?

Do I come to church regularly? Do I do my quiet time every day? Do I have no major sins in my life? That's not the right question to ask. Because actually anybody who was raised in a Christian home would pretty much be able to tick those boxes or anybody who's been a Christian for an extended period of time will be able to say that.

Rather, the question we should be asking ourselves is am I changing? Have I changed from January 2025 to January 2026?

How have I responded to God's word in my life over the last year that I can actually point out and notice? What has this word done in my life to change me over the past month?

[22 : 43] Over the past year? That's what we should be asking ourselves if what Jesus is saying here is true. Because real change is the only sure sign of spiritual life.

not that you believe the right doctrines but that you have more patience more kindness more graciousness that you have become a more Christ-like person and that you see and yes it goes and fits and starts but you can see growth.

That shows and that alone shows that you have spiritual life in you. And you know that is actually opposite to the world. Those without spiritual life through Christ the world around us what will happen is they will become over time as they grow older and you and I know this less patient less kind less gracious with the people around them.

That's the progress but for a spiritually alive person who Christ has come in and saved it's the opposite. As they go on in the Christian life they become more of those things.

And so that is the challenge of this parable. For us all to ask the question are we changing? Not to rest on our current level of righteousness that means nothing according to Jesus but to look at whether there is life whether there is ongoing change in our lives.

[24 : 12] That's the challenge of this parable and it is a challenge. I mean I read this this week and I'm challenged but I wonder if you noticed that it's actually also a great encouragement.

It's a great encouragement to Christians who struggle to be righteous. Maybe that's you this morning. Maybe you are not who you want to be.

Maybe you've messed up this week. Maybe you flew off the handle and you committed a sin and you reacted in the wrong way and you look at yourself and you go I'm just not a very good Christian.

Do you feel that? Is that maybe you today? Well I want to tell you if that happened if you have trusted in Jesus that doesn't matter because Jesus has already paid for that sin on the cross.

It is done. It is dusted. It is paid for. What matters is whether you're going to do better next week.

What matters is if you come to Him in repentance and confession of that sin and you use the powerful means that He's given to actually change you and you really can change if you've been saved from the power of sin.

[25 : 22] You know better better to be a plant that has brown leaves but is being watered and growing and pruned each week through the Bible than to be a perfect looking plant that's fake and

that watering it makes no difference.

and so it's an encouragement. What matters is change not how righteous we've been this week but are we being changed as we come and we are watered week by week by God's Word do we see that it's doing something in our lives.

But I also have something to say to those here this morning or those listening to the recording who are not Christians and you don't claim to be a Christian. You're the first son in the parable.

You've said no to God in your life and you've gone your own way. Well from the Bible's perspective if you look at you know God's standards you have sinned you would admit that but you still keep going your own way and you know that actually you've sinned far too much to be a Christian.

In fact you've done things that nobody knows about and you've sinned far too much now to change. [26 : 49] Well I want you to notice in this story again it's the worst sinners that got into the kingdom first. Because of what Jesus did you see entry into the kingdom is not based on how much you've sinned or not sinned but on whether you're willing to change today as you hear God's word.

To close I just want to tell you a bit of a story an anecdote we went camping this last New Year's which we go every New Year's we go camping and one of the mornings I got in the car with the camera and it was a beautiful morning and I wanted to take some photographs of kind of the scenery so I went driving on some of these farm roads that were around our campsite and then there's this one road I went driving on and very quickly it actually got quite narrow as I was driving along it and I didn't think much of it I carried on driving because I thought you know where's this going to go maybe I'll get a really nice place to take photos but then I drove like a few kilometers and I realized I can't actually turn around even if I wanted to and I was starting to get a bit more anxious because where's this road going to take me I could be driving for half a day and Gene and the kids could be worried about me and I won't have a chance to turn around do I just stop and try to reverse but I can't I've gone too far now and then

I was driving and I was worried and then as I take a corner there's this flat area on the side and there's a turning spot and I breathe a sigh of relief and of course what I do I take it and I turn around because I don't know when I'm going to be able to turn around again on this really narrow road why am I telling you this well maybe today as you hear this parable maybe this is your turning spot maybe you've been heading down the same road for a long time away from God Jesus is saying to you today you can turn now because of what he's done because he's come and died for sins and because he's come for the sinners and the tax collectors and the prostitutes and the worst of sinners and given them a way that can change you can change direction and you can go back home to your father just like the worst sinners of Jesus day could do because whenever we hear this word whenever anyone hears this word it's providing a turning spot on the road of your life this word as you sit under it and as it's open a turning spot comes and so

I want to do something and if you're not a Christian come to our course Discover Jesus which is starting in a couple of weeks sign up on our connect app that's something you can do to see who this man is who gives you a chance to change change your life and give you access to the kingdom and eternity it's too important to carry on driving to pass it up again because if you do pass it by you'll never know when another chance will come let's pray oh Jesus we thank you for this simple yet profound parable of the two sons that teach us that it's change that shows spiritual life and Lord as we consider this and we sit under your word again help us all no matter what situation we're in help us whenever we are sitting under your word to see it as a turning spot an opportunity to be transformed to new people and help us not to drive by help us all Lord to take on board what we've heard and may it change us to be more and more the people that you've saved us to be in Jesus name Amen