

# Faking the Gospel

2 Timothy 3:1-9

9 September 2018 | Grace Bible Church Corinda | Ben Shannon

**Big Question:** How do you recognise a fake Christian?

**Big Idea:** Don't fall for fake Christianity.

## Introduction

Frank Abignale Jr is one of the most successful con artists the world has ever known.

He was a master of cheque fraud, coming up with a new scam that allowed him to steal over \$2.5 million.

You might know his story from the 2002 movie *Catch Me if you Can*.

The movie had the tagline, "The true story of a real fake."

The *New York Times* has described Abignale as "The Great Imposter".

Not only was he a successful counterfeiter, he also created eight identities and as he himself pointed out, that was all before he was legally able to buy alcohol at the age of 21.

He got away with pretending to be a Pan Am pilot.

The company estimated that he travelled to 26 countries, scamming over 1,000,000 miles of travel on 250 flights.

And then when he got to his destination, he'd charge his hotel room and all his meals to Pan Am as well.

As Dr Frank Connors, he spent eleven months working in a hospital supervising paediatric interns

You might wonder how he managed to get away with it.

He almost didn't.

Usually, he got one of the interns to do most of the clinical work, but one day a child almost died in his care.

Recognising that he was a real danger, he quit before he killed someone.

Perhaps my favourite is that he posed as a lawyer and was employed by the Louisiana Attorney-Generals' office as an Assistant District Attorney.

He got the job by faking a law degree from Harvard, although he managed to pass the bar exam himself, on his third try.

He was only forced to flee after 8 months when a colleague got suspicious of his credentials and began investigating him.

Frank Abignale is an example of an extremely successful fraud.

Eventually though, his luck ran out.

He was outed on a flight in France by a flight attendant he'd dated and jilted.

He managed to escape again, but he was recaptured because he happened to walk past a some plain clothes detectives in an unmarked car.

Obviously, the apostle Paul didn't know anything about Frank Abignale's frauds.

But he was very familiar with religious imposters, especially leaders with a counterfeit faith.

People who appeared to be very pious and religious, yet were anything but.

So in this final letter, he warns his young apprentice Timothy to be on the lookout for these charlatans.

What about today?

Has anything much changed over the last 2,000 years?

Are there still imposters, fakes, in the church?

Paul warns us that they're not just coming, they're already here.

And they're very persuasive, so you've got to be able to spot the fakes.

Are you any good at spotting a Christian fraud?

## Outline

If you're joining us this week, we're working our way through the letter of 2 Timothy.

It describes what it means to be entrusted with the gospel.

Last week, we had a break – wasn't it great to have E.Z. with us?

I really appreciated his challenge to think about Jesus' compassion and for that to be our motivation to share Jesus with others.

This morning we've reached the beginning of chapter 3.

Chapter 2 ended on a very positive note.

Paul expressed his hope that "[T]he Lord's servant must... be kind to everyone," verse 24,

*2 Timothy 2:25b–26 (NIV11) in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth,<sup>26</sup> and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will.*

He follows that with a warning at the start of chapter 3.

This is how I'd summarise it my own words: **Don't fall for fake Christianity.**

That's quite simple and easy to remember, isn't it?

Don't fall for fake Christianity.

This warning comes in two parts:

- The Character of a Fake Minister (vv1-5)
- The Danger of Fake Ministry (vv6-9)

## **The Character of a Fake Minister (3:1-5)**

How do you recognise a phony Christian?

How do you spot a Christian fraud?

It's not always easy, but the giveaway is always their character.

I imagine Paul as he was writing this letter and I have this mental picture of a crotchety old grandfather-type figure hunched over a parchment.

"You just mark my words, son – know this:"

*2 Timothy 3:1 (NIV11) There will be terrible times in the last days.*

When are these "last days" that receive such a ringing endorsement?

Are they sometime way off in the future?

We might think so from the way that he describes what people will be like in the future, in verse 2.

"The last days" is a phrase that turns up a few times in the Old Testament – Isaiah 2:2; Hosea 3:5; Micah 4:1.

In each case, the prophet looks forward to a time in the future when things will be different.

On the other hand, in verse 5, Paul's clearly talking about the now, which of course for him was way back then.

The New Testament describes the "last days" that the Old Testament looked forward to.

The resurrection of Jesus was era-changing event.

A new chapter of history began when Jesus rose from the grave.

We are living in the last days – the time between the first coming of the Messiah and when Jesus Christ returns again.

The future that Paul talks about is the now.

There's lots of speculation about the last days.

We don't want to get into speculation, especially after 2:23, but one thing is clear: the last days will be evil, Ephesians 5:15-16.

What Timothy needed to know, and what we need to know too, is that we live in times that aren't plain sailing.

We live in an age of struggle, which will be savage and stressful at times.

That doesn't mean that every moment is going to be tough, but life's not going to be easy either.

This's the new normal, so don't expect it to be any different.

There's no point hiding, pretending or thinking that you'll just be able to wait it out.

There's going to be struggle and strife until Jesus comes back because that's the mark of this age.

How does that make all you optimists feel?

Not too deflated, I hope.

I think another Timothy, Timothy Keller, has something really helpful to say that stops us from being too negative:

*Christians should not be optimists; we know too much about sin.*

If we take the power and grip of sin seriously, then we shouldn't be taken by surprise when we see the ugly effects that sin has on the world.

However, he goes on to say:

*We should also not be pessimists, for we know the living God.*

The reality of sin isn't the end of the story because hope for a better future is found in the gospel.

We look forward to the day when justice is rightly dispensed and we are completely freed from the power of sin.

In the meantime, we shouldn't be surprised when we come across people like the ones in the portrait that Paul describes in verses 2-4.

One of the main reasons this age will be ugly is because of people, more specifically sinners.

Let's call it for what it is – that's a list of ugly sins (there are nineteen of them).

It describes the kind of person you don't want your kids to be friends with or you don't want as a mate.

But it's an interesting list because you don't find the usual list of suspects on it.

Notice that all the biggie sins are missing – there's no murder, or adultery, or rape, or theft.

That's because it's largely a list of attitudes rather than actions.

We're not going to spend the time working through this description word by word, but there are a few things that I want to point out.

Look at how the list starts and ends.

In the last days there will be people who have a love problem.

It's not that they don't love, but they try to find love in all the wrong places.

They love themselves and they love money, verse 2.

They love pleasure, verse 4.

But they don't love God.

In other words, in the last days expect to find people who are driven by selfishness.

That, at least, hasn't changed in 2,000 years, has it?

Frankly, they couldn't give two hoots about the two greatest commandments.

When a religious leader asked Jesus what the greatest commandment is, he replied:

*Mark 12:29–31 (NIV11) <sup>29</sup> “The most important one,” answered Jesus, “is this: ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. <sup>30</sup> Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ <sup>31</sup> The second is this: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.”*

As we'll see in a second, these people pretend that they're very religious but they miss the essence of right living.

This selfishness is expressed in the way that they relate to others.

They boast about themselves and are proud of their achievements.

Full of themselves at the same time they treat others poorly.

Abuse is the result. They wipe others out of their way or deliberately hurting them for their own pleasure.

'Disobedient to their parents' really stands out on this list.

Does that surprise you that it's there? Not very fashionable, is it?

After all, presumably we're talking about adults.

In Western culture, disobedience isn't really that much of a big deal, certainly not compared to the Old Testament Law which says that disobedience deserves the death penalty, Deuteronomy 21:18-21.

It takes a particular breed of selfish arrogance to place yourself above those who are older, more experienced and wiser, whom God has put in place to teach, train and protect us.

There's a list of "un" characteristics that describe the very opposite of what we'd expect a Christian to be: ungrateful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving (they won't even try to reconcile by coming to the negotiating table).

Nor can they be trusted – they're treacherous and rash.

At the middle of the list (to highlight it) is 'slandorous' – or more literally, 'devilish'.

We should expect sinful people to be morally depraved in this age.

I don't expect my friend who doesn't have Jesus as his Lord to act like Jesus is his Lord.

When we don't recognise God as our moral compass, our ethics become subjective and arbitrary.

Each person does what they see as right in their own eyes and more often than not, that means we only looking out for ourselves.

We find out in verse 5 that people Paul has in mind aren't just sinners in general, they're a more specific group: phony Christians.

They have all the attitudes that he's outlined, but they also have the "form of godliness".

Outwardly, these people have the morphology of piety and devoutness.

They present themselves as being godly: they're the ones who talk about fearing God and they often do it from the pulpit.

They think they're righteous because they're religious.

But these people are only pretending to be godly because they don't actually know the transforming power of the gospel in their lives.

They don't have the Spirit of God that gives us power when we come to God in repentance and faith, 1:7.

They think that the power to be godly comes from themselves, rather than as the gift of God's grace, 1:9.

The power of the cross and the resurrection are lost on them, 1:10.

In other words, they're fakes because they deny the core truths of the Christian faith.

There are places that we expect to find fakes and for many of us the church isn't one of them.

If you're on the streets of Bangkok and you get offered a Louis Vuitton bag or a Rolex at bargain basement prices, you know it's probably a fake.

If you're really lucky, it might even be a genuine fake.

Christians are meant to be holy though and so it takes us a bit by surprise to find that there are Christians who are phony.

Which is the very reason that Paul writes – because we shouldn't be surprised.

On the other hand, many people outside the church don't have the same rose-coloured glasses.

In the mind of many people, the reputation of the church stinks, all Christians are morally bankrupt and the church is full of hypocrites.

Christians claim to be good people, but the Royal Commission into Institutional Child Sexual Abuse has shown that's far from the truth.

In fact, in many cases the church has actually covered up their crimes.

And they're keen to call out the hypocrites.

ScoMo hasn't been backwards in telling of his Christian beliefs.

Did you notice that one of the first things the media did was try and discredit him as a hypocrite?

The point isn't whether he is or not, but as they saw it, he stood for Jesus on some things and not on others.

So they immediately took the moral high ground and described a number of his policy positions as "unchristian".

One of the reasons people outside the church often think that it's full of hypocrites because they misunderstand the gospel.

They think that being a Christian means being a good person.

And so they call "Hypocrite!" when we fail to live up to the perfect standard God proclaims.

It's a common belief that we think we're morally superior to other people and that it's our high ethical standards that impress God.

And so they call "Hypocrite!" when we fail to meet those moral standards.

That's the opposite of the gospel.

A Christian is someone who recognises that they are a sinner, someone who falls short of God's standards.

But a sinner who's been saved by grace.

Salvation is found in Jesus, not in anything that we can do.

God declares us to be righteous, holy, because of what Jesus has done not because of what we can do.

And by his grace we continue to grow into being the holy people he's called us to be as we put sin to death by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Christians aren't perfect and cannot think that we're better than everyone else.

We're sinners saved by grace.

There are probably some characteristics on that list that ring true with your life.

I know that at times there are certainly some of those things that I see in my own life.

You might feel weighed down by your sin and it makes you depressed.

That list shows you that you're not good enough and so you know that you can't earn your way to God.

If that's you, there's nothing fake about your faith.

Just because you see a tendency to some of those things, it doesn't mean that you're a fake Christian.

It may well mean that you're a struggling saint – a struggling holy one.

Keep trusting in the gospel which is the power of salvation.

Friend, God's grace is sufficient for you.

At the same time, we need to realise that there are others who are faking it.

The look godly to everyone else, but look under the hood and they don't really care about these sins at all.

They think that by talking the religious talk, they're making it.

They think their own moral purity is enough.

Actually, the real thing, ridgy didge Christians actually make the fakes stand out.

When you compare them, they're like chalk and cheese.

If Paul was just describing pagans who act as pagans do, there'd be no need for the second half of verse 5.

We need to recognise those people, and have nothing to do with them.

Paul's making the same argument that he makes in 1 Corinthians 5.

He doesn't mean that we should have anything to do with any sinner, because "In that case you would have to leave this world."<sup>1</sup>

He's talking about "*anyone who claims to be a brother or sister[.]*"

Don't have anything to do with a religious fake.

And if they're a teacher, don't follow them.

Friends, where do you stand in relationship to the Lord, Jesus Christ, this morning?

Do you turn up at church so that God will be pleased with you?

Do you think your good morals make you okay with God?

Are you constantly trying to look godly on the outside without knowing the forgiveness that is found in trusting Jesus?

Do you present to everyone else like you've got it all together when on the inside, nothing much at all has changed at all?

If that's you, it could be that you're a fake Christian.

Please, please, please don't hear me saying, "Clean up your act and stop doing these things so that God will be pleased with you."

That's not the right response because without the power of God's Holy Spirit, you can't.

You need to stop trying to make yourself squeaky clean on the outside when what you really need is to be clean up from the inside.

What you need to do is repent and trust in Jesus.

Come humbly to God and confess your sins.

Ask him to forgive your sins and give you the power to conquer them.

The character of the fake Christian is pure hypocrisy.

They look like they're near to God when they're far from him.

## **The Danger of Fake Ministry (3:6-9)**

Secondly, fake ministry is dangerous.

Fake Christians aren't just a danger to themselves, they're a danger to others too.

They don't just lead themselves into trouble, they lead others astray as well.

Fake Christians do fake ministry on the sly, verse 6.

In Ephesus, the church usually met in private homes.

Paul warns Timothy about the sneaky way false teachers will try to infiltrate those gatherings.

They work the back room – making phone calls during the week to rally support to themselves.

If you want to undermine someone, you damn them with faint praise, “Joe is a really genuine guy, but he misses the point which I understand correctly.

If you want to know how to be godly, follow me!”

Their goal is to win people over to following them.

As the passage was read, I’m sure you noticed that their victims are described as “gullible women” in verse 6.

Other translations say “silly women”<sup>2</sup> or “weak women”.<sup>3</sup>

I’m not sure that they’re great translations.

It’s more literally “little women”.

To be clear – he’s not saying that only women are gullible or that all women are gullible.

I don’t think Paul’s saying that blokes can’t be gullible either.

It’s quite possible that Paul has a specific situation in Ephesus in mind.

The sense is that these women are vulnerable.

They’re weighed down with their sin.

They’re burdened sheep, weak and guilty.

What they desperately want is some relief from their troubles.

Along comes someone who’ll offer to be their saviour.

It’s a perfect storm – you’ve got the predators and the prey, fake teachers and vulnerable Christians.

Instead of being protected, they’re preyed upon.

Perhaps they like the attention they’re being paid by someone who’s important.

Rather than being freed by these false ministers, they’re enslaved into being false Christians too.

These victims are fed false doctrine and prevented from knowing the truth of the gospel.

They're malnourished – it's not that they're not eating spiritual food, but it's the wrong spiritual food.

The fake Christians prevent them from knowing repentance – 2 Tim 2.25

They miss out on the truth that will set them free.

Verse 7:

*2 Timothy 3:7 (NIV11) <sup>7</sup> always learning but never able to come to a knowledge of the truth.*

What a sad situation.

The true gospel gives life.

The real gospel won't weigh you down.

The gospel is a gospel of grace that sets us free from our enslavement to sin.

It releases us from being trapped in slavery to anything other than Jesus.

*Romans 6:18 (NIV11) <sup>18</sup> You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness.*

Only Jesus can rescue us from our moral depravity.

He came to die for us, so that we can be free from our sin.

Writing to the Galatian churches, Paul describes Jesus like this:

*Galatians 1:4 (NIV11) <sup>4</sup> who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father,*

False Christians oppose the truth at every step.

Although these teachers look like very religious, they're opposing the gospel.

They deny the very pattern of sound teaching that was passed down from Paul to Timothy – 1:14.

Why? Because they're corrupt in their minds.

Paul compares them to Jannes and Jambres in verse 8.

Who are these two people?

They must be some blokes from the Old Testament, right?

Sort of.

Your Bible might have a cross-reference back to Exodus chapter 7.

Turn there with me and you'll find that there's no mention of these two people.

In fact, you won't find their names anywhere else in the Bible.

What you do find is pagan magicians with fake signs of power opposing Moses.

Have a look at Exodus 7:11.

God told Moses that his staff would turn into a snake as a sign that he was a messenger from God.

So, Moses goes before Pharaoh, takes his staff and it turns into a snake.

*Exodus 7:11 (NIV11) <sup>11</sup> Pharaoh then summoned wise men and sorcerers, and the Egyptian magicians also did the same things by their secret arts:*

The same thing happens with the plague of blood.

The magicians oppose Moses and perform the same sign.

But the magicians can't keep up and as the Egyptian gods are defeated one by one, they're shown to not be as powerful as Moses or his God.

The Jewish Targums – commentaries on the Old Testament – said that the names of these magicians were Jannes and Jambres.

They're also referred to in a number of other, non-Jewish writings.

Paul is comparing the fake teachers to the magicians.

And he's comparing himself to Moses.

He sees the same situation playing out in his own time as happened in Egypt.

As far as the truth is concerned, these fake Christians are to be rejected.

Don't follow fakes.

That doesn't mean that they're beyond God's saving love.

This doesn't actually change anything that Paul said at the end of chapter 2.

But don't follow them, because they oppose God.

Even in the midst of this depressing situation, there is a bit of a silver lining.

Their foolishness will be clear to everyone, verse 9.

Over time, they'll be seen for what they are.

Sooner or later, it all comes out and it's clear to everyone.

Sometimes you can spot a fake immediately, but not always.

They don't walk around with it written on their forehead.

And their errors can be quite subtle.

You've often got to get to know someone to be able to see these things.

Which means that we need to be slow, careful and gracious.

But it doesn't make them any less dangerous.

A few years ago, Christian rapper Shai Linne released a song – can you call a rap a song? – that was called Fal\$e Teacher\$.

In the song, he seeks to draw attention to the danger of fake Christianity and the fake Christians who spread it.

Here are two lines:

*It's called self(ism) the fastest growing religion; they just dress it up and call it "Christian".*

*Don't be deceived by this funny biz, if you come to Jesus for money, then he's not your God, money is!*

It sounds like the same kind of phony ministry that Paul was describing.

Later on, he goes on to name names – calling out specific people as false prophets.

There was a lot of discussion about whether he should've done that.

I don't know about you, but naming names makes me personally feel deeply uncomfortable.

At the same time, some fake Christians are so famous and have such a following that their dangerous ministry does need to be called out.

Weak and vulnerable sheep need to be protected so that they don't follow them.

So, as much as I dislike it, there is good reason to call these people out.

It needs to be done slowly and graciously, but over time as it becomes clear what they're really like, we need to be clear about how dangerous they are.

Brad Knight, son of televangelist Paula White, wrote an open letter to Shai Linne in response to his song.

In it, he argues that Shai shouldn't have called his mother out because of how sincere his mother is, how loving she is and what a great mother she is.

Shai responded, also in an open letter.

*"My song was not about you, your financial status, the genuineness of your faith, your mother's prayers for you or the good things that Paula White Ministries does," Linne wrote in an open letter in response to Knight's criticism. "The song was about the false doctrine that Paula White and others have publicly taught for many years and continue to teach."<sup>4</sup>*

It's not a matter of what you look like on the outside, it's a matter of fake Christians and the danger of fake doctrine.

Fake ministry is dangerous, especially to those who are vulnerable.

## Conclusion

The right response to a passage like this isn't for us all to become heresy hunters.

Let me start with how not to apply this.

Don't go home and start a "discernment" website.

Nor does it mean that we should re-run the Salem witch trials where everyone is denounced.

We need to be aware that there are fakes out there and quite possibly in here.

And bogus godliness is dangerous to the person themselves and anyone who listens to them.

The best way we can respond is by focussing on the gospel, the life-giving message of what God has done.

If we focus on that, then we're much less likely to stray into false Christianity.

Seek to "know the truths, and truth will set you free".<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Corinthians 5:10

<sup>2</sup> KJV

<sup>3</sup> ESV

<sup>4</sup> Anugrah Kumar, Christian Post Contributor | Apr 28, and 2013 1:36 Pm, 'Rapper Shai Linne Explains Why He Named Names in "Fal\$e Teacher\$"', accessed 5 September 2018, <https://www.christianpost.com/news/rapper-shai-linne-explains-why-he-named-names-in-fale-teacher-94851/>.

<sup>5</sup> John 8:32

# Faking the Gospel

2 Timothy 3:1-9

9 September 2018 | Grace Bible Church Corinda | Ben Shannon

**Big Question:** How do you recognise a fake Christian?

**Big Idea:** Don't fall for fake Christianity.

## Discussion Questions

1. How would you describe 'the last days'?
2. Do you think Paul's being overly dramatic in his description of 'the last days'?
3. How would you summarise Paul's description of the people in verses 2-4?
4. Is there anything on the list that particularly stands out to you?
5. What does Paul mean when he describes these people as "having a form of godliness but denying its power"?
6. Would you be surprised if there are fake Christians in the church at large? Why? What about in our church?
7. Do you think that non-Christians would be surprised to know that there are fake Christians in the church? Why?
8. Who are the 'people' in verse 5 and what does it mean to "Have nothing to do with such people"?
9. What is the *modus operandi* of the fake Christian?
10. Why does Paul say that women, in particular, are gullible (v.6)?
11. Who are Jannes and Jambres and what do they show us about fake teachers?
12. Do you think we should name names when it comes to false teachers? Why/why not? If so, what are some principles that might guide how we do that?