



REAL: AUTHENTIC CHRISTIANITY IN A WORLD OF COUNTERFEITS

## Get Real! Why *Real* Really Matters

Matthew 13:1-30

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<sup>1</sup> That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. <sup>2</sup> And great crowds gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat down. And the whole crowd stood on the beach. <sup>3</sup> And he told them many things in parables, saying: "A sower went out to sow. <sup>4</sup> And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them. <sup>5</sup> Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil, <sup>6</sup> but when the sun rose they were scorched. And since they had no root, they withered away. <sup>7</sup> Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. <sup>8</sup> Other seeds fell on good soil and produced grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. <sup>9</sup> He who has ears, let him hear."

<sup>10</sup> Then the disciples came and said to him, "Why do you speak to them in parables?" <sup>11</sup> And he answered them, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. <sup>12</sup> For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from

the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. <sup>13</sup> This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. <sup>14</sup> Indeed, in their case the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled that says:

""You will indeed hear but never understand, and you will indeed see but never perceive." <sup>15</sup> For this people's heart has grown dull, and with their ears they can barely hear, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and turn, and I would heal them.'

<sup>16</sup> But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. <sup>17</sup> For truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.

<sup>18</sup> "Hear then the parable of the sower: <sup>19</sup> When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is what was sown along the path. <sup>20</sup> As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, <sup>21</sup> yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away. <sup>22</sup> As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of

riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful. <sup>23</sup> As for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it. He indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.”

<sup>24</sup> He put another parable before them, saying, “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field, <sup>25</sup> but while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and went away. <sup>26</sup> So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared also. <sup>27</sup> And the servants of the master of the house came and said to him, ‘Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have weeds?’ <sup>28</sup> He said to them, ‘An enemy has done this.’ So the servants said to him, ‘Then do you want us to go and gather them?’ <sup>29</sup> But he said, ‘No, lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. <sup>30</sup> Let both grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.’”

## Introduction

The Parable of the Sower is one of the scariest stories Jesus ever told. The outline for the parable is simple. A man sows seed. The seed is the message of the kingdom. There are four different soils, each representing a different kind of response to the message. Yet, Jesus says, only one of the four responses is what we’d call real. The other three aren’t.

The seed sown on the first soil hardly gets started. Satan comes and snatches it away immediately. And while tragic, that’s not necessarily scary. What’s scary is the response of the seed sown on the second and third soils, because they both have a certain kind of response; in fact, there’s the appearance of the seed taking root and growing into something real. But in the end, they’re not real and thus don’t last.

In the case of the one, there’s no root and so there was no perseverance when things got difficult. There is that initial burst of enthusiasm for Christian things, like fellowship and forgiveness, but there’s no real taste for the beauty of God’s holiness, no actual regeneration by God’s Spirit, no new sight of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ; and thus no reality—nothing real. Only the appearance of real; it’s but a counterfeit. In the case of the other, we can assume a similar joyful response to the message. Yet this soon dissipates, because of revived interest in the things of this world, so that in the end these things choke out even the appearance of being real.

Why does Jesus tell us this very sobering and even scary parable? Why a story about authentic Christianity as distinct from its counterfeits? He tells us this parable because he wants us to get real. The Parable of the Sower is Jesus’ invitation to the church to get real. He’s concerned that his followers, as well as the world, know the difference between real and not real. In fact, everywhere we look in the Gospels, we find Jesus confronting would-be followers with what it means to be real. He’s constantly calling us to get real: Beware of counterfeit faith. Understand what’s authentic Christianity. Discern between what’s genuine and what’s only imitation.

## The Visible Church is a Mixed Bag

You see, for Jesus getting real really matters. It matters to Jesus that we get real because Jesus understands, first of all, that *the visible church is a mixed bag*. Jesus recognizes that the church, in this fallen world, will always be a mixture of true and false, genuine and fake, authentic and counterfeit. Wherever you find followers of Christ gathered together, there you will find a mixture of the real and the not real.

It's not Jesus' intention for the church; nor is it the blueprint of the church we find in the New Testament. But both Jesus and his church have an enemy. And this enemy's chief weapon is to mix the not real in with the real, so that you can't tell which is which. This is why Jesus moves from the Parable of the Sower, with its call to get real, to the Parable of the Weeds, with its caution about the mixed nature of the church:

The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field, but while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared also. And the servants of the master of the house came and said to him, 'Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have weeds?' He said to them, 'An enemy has done this.' So the servants said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?' But he said, 'No, lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. Let both grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn (Matt. 13:24-30).

This parable teaches that both Jesus and the church have a common enemy: the Devil. He is the father of lies, the master deceiver, the one who can even disguise himself as an angel of light and teach others to do the same (cf. 2 Cor. 12:14). And this enemy's primary purpose is to destroy clarity and create confusion; and he does so by mixing the not real with the real, the false with the true, the counterfeit with the authentic.

You see, the Devil is in the forgery business. In fact, he runs a very aggressive counterfeit currency operation; every single day he pumps false currency into the Christian economy we call the church. And the end result is a visible church that is a mixed bag, a field where tares and wheat grow up together.

The Apostle Paul also understood that the visible church was a mixed bag. The church he founded in Corinth certainly was. Just read Paul's two letters to that church and you'll see what I mean. No wonder he says: "Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves" (2 Cor. 13:5). So too was the church in Ephesus. Recall Paul's tearful parting words to the elders of that church: "Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers" (Acts 20:28). Why? "I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and *from among your own selves* will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them" (vv. 29-30).

Even the church in Philippi, otherwise exemplary in many ways, was susceptible to this mixture of true and false, authentic and counterfeit. So, Paul exhorts them to fix their eyes on

what's real, so that they're not duped by what's false. "Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us. For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ" (3:17-19).

Evidently, there are many who walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. Perhaps they know it; perhaps they don't. But either way, there are counterfeits sitting in the pew next to you. They attend church, but aren't real. They profess faith, but are fakes. They wear the cross around their necks, but they have no love for the cross in their heart. In fact, they're enemies of the cross.

## **We Ourselves are Easily Confused**

We need to get real, first of all, because the visible church is, sadly but inevitably, a mixed bag. But Jesus challenges us to get real for another reason, a more immediately personal and practical reason. Jesus calls us to get real because he understands that *we're easily confused about who is real*. We're just not that skilled at discerning the difference between true and false, genuine and imitation, authentic and counterfeit. Even mature believers have a hard time distinguishing between authentic Christian experience and its many imitations; identifying what counts as a genuine work of God in your life as opposed to what's only the result of the overly-caffeinated latte you just drank.

Jesus knows we have trouble discerning who's real. That's why he warns: "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves" (Matt. 7:15). We're so easily confused about others, Jesus says, we'll even mistake wolves for sheep. But Jesus also knows we struggle to tell *whether we ourselves are real or not*; and he recognizes that people can easily think they're real, when in fact they're not. This is why Jesus also warns: "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 7:21). Evidently, professing Jesus as Lord doesn't necessarily mean you actually know Jesus as Lord. A profession of faith isn't sufficient proof that you in fact possess faith. It's very tempting, however, for us to think that it does.

But it's also easy to confuse Christian activity for genuine conversion. And so Jesus similarly warns us: "On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' and then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness'" (Matt. 7:22-23).

You see, part of the problem is that we can easily *deceive ourselves* into thinking we're something we're not. The fallen human heart is a flatter-factory. It mass produces nice thoughts about ourselves, sometimes at such a furious pace we lose track of who we actually are! C. S. Lewis describes the disappointment he faced when trying to meditate, only to find that every third thought he had was one of self-admiration. The prophet Jeremiah understood how self-deceiving flattery can work on a national scale, as it did in the Israel of his day; it caused him to cry out: "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?" (17:9).

You see, it's not hard to tell yourself you're a Christian—perhaps even a good one—even if you have very little scriptural support for thinking you belong to Jesus. No wonder Paul calls us to get real by challenging us: "Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test

yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you fail to meet the test!" (2 Cor. 13:5). Get real, the Bible says, because we can easily convince ourselves we're real when we're not.

## **A Day to Get Real**

But getting real really matters to Jesus for a third and even more important reason. Jesus is zealous to see us get real because he understands that *a Day is fast approaching when we will all have to get real*. The Bible calls this a Day of revelation, "when God's righteous judgment will be revealed" (Rom. 2:5); when "God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus" (Rom. 2:16); when the Lord "will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart" (1 Cor. 4:5); when outward appearances will no longer fool anyone, but only inward spiritual realities of the heart will count (Rom. 2:25-29).

On that great and final Day, no one will be able to avoid the Lord's penetrating and omniscient gaze, the probing force of his living and active word; nor will anyone be able to cover the nakedness of his unregenerate heart and unchristian life with the little fig leaf of a profession of faith (Heb. 4:12-13). Yet here's the thing: if you at last realize on that Day you're not real, it will be too late to get real. Your surprise at your own spiritual state will only serve to seal your eternal fate.

You see, this new series on *Real: Authentic Christianity in a World of Counterfeits*, ought to really matter to you, because you will one day have to give an account to your Maker and Judge as to whether or not you are real. But, listen, *Real* also really matters to me, not only as a professing Christian myself, but also as a pastor—your pastor. Why? Because one day I will have to give an account to Jesus Christ as to how well I've done in preparing you to face your Maker and Judge. And, like the Apostle Paul, I don't want your blood on my hands. I would think every pastor, who loves the word of God and the flock that's been entrusted to his care, must surely covet for himself these words of the Apostle Paul, which he spoke to the Ephesian elders: "I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all of you, for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:26-27).

Because God has called me to be your pastor, to care for your souls and prepare you one day to meet Him, I am personally accountable to God for you. "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will give an account" (Heb. 13:17). I will give an account to King Jesus for you! And I can think of nothing more dreadful than for one of you to realize that you're not real, never have been, even though you and everyone else perhaps thought you were. How horrific for you to cry out against me on that Day, as your pastor, for failing to have ever plainly taught you what it means to be real, or firmly called you to examine yourself to see if you're in the faith. What a travesty it would be for me to have left you in a state of self-contented self-deception, never having called you to get real. It would like letting you continue cozily napping on the couch, even though I could see your whole house was on fire.

We should get real now, because we will have to get real later. And it would be infinitely better to be surprised about the actual state of your soul now, than it will be then. For now, in this life, you still have opportunity to become real; then, on that great and final Day, it will be too late, and the surprise you experience will only serve to confirm your fate.

## Chief Need, Purpose, What You Need To Do

I trust by now you can see why *Real* really matters; why Jesus was so eager to see you and me get real. And I trust you realize now why you should want to get real—with the Lord, with yourself, and with others.

I'm increasingly convinced that getting real is one of the greatest needs of our time; not just ours as a local congregation, though that's true. But ours as the Christian church in a post-Christian culture, where confusion over what it means to be a Christian abounds.

But more than that, I believe that this confusion over what it means to be real has been perhaps the main cause of the spiritual decline of the church over the last century, and one of the chief hindrances to the church's mission to the world. As a result of our own confusion and carelessness, we've blurred the lines between real and not-real; and whenever that happens, spiritual decline and mission ineffectiveness is guaranteed.

But listen, this series on *Real* isn't supposed to be a preacher's way of unleashing an attack strategy of 'shock and awe' on his church. For some of you, this series will have a bit of shock and awe to it; you'll be startled by what the Bible actually says about what it means to be real. But the purpose isn't merely to deconstruct anyone's faith; rather, it's to *challenge everyone* to grapple with what the Bible says about that glorious reality of becoming and being a real Christian. And I trust many of you will come away with your faith massively solidified in what the word of God teaches about what it means to be real.

## What Lies Ahead: An Overview of Real

Let me, then, give you a brief overview of what lies ahead. Next week, we're going to get to the heart of *Real*, which is the reality of a new heart. Then, we'll take several weeks to look at what the Bible has to say about Becoming Real, or How do you have a change of heart? Those messages are intended to celebrate the glorious reality of conversion—God-centered, sovereign-grace given, soul regenerating, new heart creating, and life-transforming conversion.

We'll then move from Becoming Real to Being Real, and for several weeks unpack what this new heart actually looks like inside a person. Here, we'll learn about what the Bible has to say about the marks of conversion, or the signs of God's Spirit genuinely at work in your life. The fourth and final part of this series is really the climax. It's about *Living Real*. The proof of the pudding is in the tasting, and the proof of being real is in the reality of a changed life: wholehearted obedience to Jesus Christ, sacrificial love to the people of God and the world, and joyful perseverance through the many hardships of life. This is the surest evidence that you're real, or that I'm real, or that anyone else is real: *Living Real*—a transformed life, which flows from a new heart given by the Spirit of God.

This will, then, take us right up to Easter, when we will bring this series to a fitting close with a celebration of the Jesus Christ's Resurrection, the foundational reality that undergirds everything that's truly real.

## What You Need To Do

Now, what do you need to do? Well, you need to be here, of course. Perhaps you should invite a friend who's curious about what it means to be a real Christian. But let me also

encourage you to be prepared to be honest. If we're going to get real, then we need to be honest; we need to be honest, first of all, with the Lord. Then, we need to be honest with the word of God, letting it speak. We need to be honest with ourselves, recognizing that we all tend to flatter ourselves. And we need to be honest with one another, recognizing that there's no shame in saying, "Hey, if that's what the Bible says is real, then I've got to admit that I'm not sure I'm real."

## **A Brief Description of a Real Saint**

That's a preview of where we're headed with this series *Real: Authentic Christianity in a World of Counterfeits*. But perhaps you're still wondering about a quick description of the person who is real, one who has genuine Christian experience, authentic spiritual life. Perhaps, in short, you're wondering what a true saint is. There's hardly a better definition than the one I came across earlier this week from one of my favorite dead preachers, Charles Spurgeon:

They are [real] whom the Lord has made holy by the power of His Spirit, whose nature He has purified, whom He has washed in the precious blood of Jesus and so sanctified unto Himself, whom He has filled with His Spirit and so set apart to worship. They [are real who] love Him, praise Him, bow before Him with solemn awe, lift their whole souls up in adoring love to Him. Their thoughts, desires, longings, confessions, pleadings, and praises are sweet to God. This is music to Him, perfume to His heart, delight to His infinite mind, and pleasant to His sacred spirit, for "God is Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and truth" (John 4:24).<sup>1</sup>

You're real if you've become real by the sovereign grace of God, causing you to be born again by the power of his Holy Spirit, granting you eyes to see and ears to hear—the gift of faith. You're real if God has given you a new heart and put a new spirit within you, causing you to love him and his ways. You're real if this new heart is pumping new spiritual desires into your life, so that you relish the glory of God, savor the beauty of Christ, delight in the mercy of the cross. And you're real if your ever-increasing delight is obedience to Jesus, sacrificial service in bearing your cross, and joyful perseverance in the way of faith for as long as he gives you breath.

When the word of God, the Bible, is your guide, you find this is what it means to be real. And this is what we're going to explore together, over these next many weeks together, in the hope that all of us, each and every one of us, can get real, be real, live real.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Spurgeon, source unknown.