

"Plastic Jesus"

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Genesis 22:1-14 • Luke 14:25-33

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Several years ago in Kentucky a man walked into a Dairy Queen, placed his order and then paid for it with a \$200 bill. The cashier gave him \$198 in change and he drove away. Some time later in the day I guess the manager noticed that something didn't seem right about this \$200 bill, maybe because it had a picture of then-president George Bush on one side or maybe it was the picture of the Whitehouse on the back with an oil well in front and funny signs in the lawn. Police were able to track down the man and he was arrested for theft by deception.

As you probably know, real U.S. currency has a number of features designed to make it harder to counterfeit. If you have a ten or twenty dollar bill you are welcome to take it out and look at it. If you hold it up to the light you will see that there's a strip embedded in the paper that has the denomination of the bill printed on it. That strip also glows under UV light. There are several features that you need a magnifier to see as well. All of these things are included to distinguish the real bills from the fakes and also to make it harder to counterfeit. The reason is that when you have that \$20 bill you need to be sure that it's real; that it's really worth \$20.

Here's another example. Companies that make the different products we use every day spend lots of money creating what's called "brand identity." That means they create a logo or identity for their company or product that is easily recognizable. Probably the most successful example of creating

this brand identity is the familiar shape of the Coca-Cola bottle or their red can. When you see a can or bottle of Coke, no matter what language it's in, you know it's Coca-Cola.

The same is true for most successful products. The idea is that when you see that logo or name, you know you're getting the real thing, the genuine product. So these same companies spend lots of money every year to keep others from duplicating their product or their identity. Today, however, one of the big problems is copycat products being produced in Asia that are trying to imitate the genuine product.

Up on the screen you can see some examples of knockoffs of some popular brands. Most of these are rather funny but these forgeries are not always funny. For example, authorities have found clones of a popular brand of down jacket for sale on the internet. When the jackets were tested, it was discovered that they were not filled with down at all but with all sorts of other things, like chicken feathers (and other parts) swept up from the floor of a poultry factory. This can pose a real health risk by carrying bacteria and disease. Another problem these days is the availability of counterfeit medications that people purchase hoping to save money. I think it's obvious how harmful those could be since they may not have any of the needed medication in them.

In the same way that we can be fooled by counterfeit products or money, we are also in danger of counterfeit religion as well. To be more specific, we are in

danger of having a counterfeit faith, of believing in a fake Christianity. We are in danger of worshipping a plastic Jesus.

So what do we mean by "plastic Jesus?" What exactly is a counterfeit faith? Where does this fake Christianity come from and how do we recognize it? More importantly, how do we make sure we don't fall for it?

The first thing we need to know is that, unlike counterfeit products or money that are produced by someone else, each one of us is responsible for creating these knockoffs. A plastic Jesus is some kind of caricature of Jesus that is not the real Jesus. It's the image we create in our minds of Jesus - the Jesus we think we want to believe in. John Calvin wrote, "every one of us is, even from his mother's womb, a master craftsman of idols." What he's saying is that you and I are like a plastic Jesus factory.

What are some of these fake Jesuses that we create? Let's look at some of the ways we misunderstand Jesus. Many people today see Jesus in the same category as Mister Rogers - a kind, gentle moral teacher telling stories that have a good life lesson but not really requiring much on my part. Back in 2005, psychologist Christian Smith studied Christian youth and discovered that many of them held similar views about God and about morals but that these views weren't really biblical. After further research he discovered that these beliefs had become widespread in American religion. Here they are. See if this describes your own beliefs.

1. A god exists who created and ordered the world and watches over human life on earth.
2. God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each

other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.

3. The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about yourself.
4. God does not need to be particularly involved in your life except when He is needed to resolve a problem.
5. Good people go to heaven when they die.

Smith called this kind of faith Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, which is a complicated way of saying that God's goal is to make me happy and to help out when I can't take care of things myself. Friends, that is NOT the God of the Bible. That's a made-up faith with *ME* as the center. That's a plastic Jesus.

Instead, in our Scripture reading today Jesus says, "being my disciple is a total commitment. This is not a part-time thing. To follow me you have to be willing to give up everything else that you love more than me. You have to love me more than your money or your pride or your family or even your own life. Any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple."

What Jesus is saying is that being His disciple has to be the most important thing in your life. This is a radical concept for most of us, particularly in modern American culture. Our society says, "take care of number one." Jesus says, "you're not number one."

One of the things that I find interesting about this passage is the two short parables Jesus uses as illustrations. In the first one, in verses 28 and 29, he says "If you want to build a building, don't you first sit down and figure out how much it's going to cost and whether or not you can afford to complete it?" In the second parable he compares

the decision to follow him to the decision of a king to go into battle against another. In both illustrations, what Jesus is saying is that being His follower takes a complete commitment and that commitment should come from careful, thoughtful consideration of what's involved. We saw that level of commitment from Abraham in our Old Testament reading. Abraham trusted God so fully that he was willing to give up the thing that was more important to him than anything in the whole world - his son Isaac.

I think it's important to point out here that God is not asking you to take a vow of poverty, or to live like the Amish. When Jesus says that we are to "hate" our parents or spouse or siblings or children he's using hyperbole. Clearly He's not giving us a command to hate our parents since that would violate the command to "honor your father and mother." What He's saying is that we need to have our priorities straight. In Matthew 6 He tells us, "seek first the Kingdom of God and then all these things shall be added to you."

So what are some ways that following the *real* Jesus is different from a *plastic* Jesus? First of all, a plastic Jesus is easy to live with. There's no real requirement for you to change as long as you're being more good than bad. But following the real Jesus is hard. We owe Him everything. Many people through the years have died for their faith.

Second, with the plastic Jesus faith and the church become something that I add to my already busy life. If I'm lucky I can make some time in my schedule to be at church or to help out with a service project. But the real Jesus isn't *added* to your life, He creates and sustains your life.

Finally, the plastic Jesus exists to meet *my* desires. This is the heart of the "prosperity gospel." At the root of this is the idea that more than anything God wants me to be happy and that means he must want me to have the things that make me happy, like a nice home and a fancy car. But Jesus did not come to earth, die on a cross and then rise again from death to make you happy. He came to make you whole, to redeem you from the consequences of sin,

and to bring you joy. Your happiness depends on your circumstances and so we are not always happy. Things in life can make us sad or angry. But joy comes from understanding what God has done for us in Jesus. The Apostle Paul says, "rejoice in the Lord always." Joy comes from the wholeness that Jesus provides. He is the one who heals marriages, breaks addictions, restores families and forgives sins.

So my challenge for you today is to get rid of your plastic Jesus. Get rid of the Jesus that you have created in your mind. Instead, trust in the Jesus who was one of us and yet fully God. Believe in the Jesus that you find in the pages of the New Testament. Make Him the most important thing in your life today and every day. Choose wholeness over happiness. Choose to give Christ the most important place in your life, even if it means having to change. Choose to get rid of your plastic Jesus and follow the *real* Jesus.

Amen