

THE BROAD ROAD IN CHRISTIAN CLOTHING

*False Assurance, Counterfeit Conversion, Normalized Sin,
and the Biblical Marks of Saving Faith*

CHAPTER 1

THE BROAD ROAD THAT CALLS JESUS “LORD”

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter
the kingdom of heaven.”

[Matthew 7:21, CSB](#)

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Open Christian Press

A Publishing Imprint of Open Christian University and Center for Faith and Work
2026

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CHAPTER DOI: [10.65655/ocp.m22.c45](https://doi.org/10.65655/ocp.m22.c45)

BOOK DOI: [10.65655/ocp.m22](https://doi.org/10.65655/ocp.m22)

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PUBLICATION INFORMATION

COPYRIGHT	© 2026 Sixbert SANGWA
EDITION	First independent chapter edition, 2026
CHAPTER DOI	https://doi.org/10.65655/ocp.m22.c45
PARENT BOOK DOI	https://doi.org/10.65655/ocp.m22
PUBLISHER	Open Christian Press, a publishing imprint of Open Christian University and Center for Faith and Work.
PUBLISHER WEBSITE	press.openchristian.education
PUBLISHER CORRESPONDENCE	editor@openchristian.education
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SUGGESTED APA 7 CITATION

Sangwa, S. (2026). The broad road that calls Jesus “Lord”. In *The broad road in Christian clothing: False assurance, counterfeit conversion, normalized sin, and the biblical marks of saving faith*. Open Christian Press. <https://doi.org/10.65655/ocp.m22.c45>

RESEARCH AND THEOLOGICAL NOTE

Scripture governs the theological claims in this chapter, with Matthew 7:13-23 as the controlling passage. Secondary evangelical scholarship is used to clarify exegetical context, while peer-reviewed psychological literature is used only to illuminate descriptive mechanisms of self-deception and moral normalization. The chapter distinguishes justification by grace through faith from the fruits of regeneration and rejects both antinomian presumption and legalistic false assurance. No denomination, ministry tradition, or cultural group is condemned merely by association; claims are assessed through Scripture, context, and evidence.

Abstract

This chapter establishes the governing warning of *The Broad Road in Christian Clothing* through a close theological and pastoral reading of [Matthew 7:13-23](#). Jesus' warning is directed not merely toward open unbelief but toward religious self-deception: people can use Christian language, confess Jesus as "Lord," participate in visible ministry, claim supernatural activity, possess moral seriousness, or stand within respected religious institutions while remaining strangers to Christ. The chapter argues that neither popularity, sincerity, religious zeal, doctrinal vocabulary, ministry success, nor extraordinary experiences can function as independent grounds of assurance. The decisive question is whether a person is known by Christ and whether professed faith bears the kind of obedient fruit that Scripture associates with regeneration. This does not turn obedience into the basis of justification. Salvation remains God's gift in Christ, received by grace through faith, while genuine grace never leaves the sinner reconciled to rebellion. The chapter also examines the psychology and social dynamics of self-deception and moral normalization, showing how euphemism, repetition, group approval, selective comparison, and desired conclusions can gradually make disobedience feel safe. At the same time, it rejects legalistic counterfeits that mistake external conservatism for saving faith. The chapter concludes that biblical warning is an expression of love because it disrupts false peace in order to lead the sinner to repentance, restoration, holiness, assurance in Christ, and readiness for His return.

Keywords: false assurance; Matthew 7:13-23; counterfeit conversion; religious self-deception; lordship of Christ; false prophets; spiritual gifts; normalized sin; biblical holiness; saving faith

Introduction: The Most Dangerous Place May Be Near the Gate

Some warnings are frightening because the danger is obvious. A collapsing bridge, an advancing fire, or a medical emergency does not need to disguise itself. The warning of [Matthew 7:13-23](#) is more unsettling because the danger appears religious. Jesus does not finish the Sermon on the Mount by contrasting Christians with atheists, worshipers with criminals, or churchgoers with people who openly despise God. He contrasts two gates, two roads, two kinds of trees, two kinds of fruit, two professions, and, immediately afterward, two builders ([Matthew 7:13-27](#)). The entire closing movement presses the hearer toward a decision. Hearing is not enough. Religious proximity is not enough. Speech is not enough. Visible results are not enough. The question is whether the hearer

actually enters, bears good fruit, does the Father's will, and builds on the words of Christ.

That is why this book begins here. The most dangerous false assurance is rarely naked unbelief. It is unbelief wearing Christian clothing. It speaks the vocabulary of faith while resisting the authority of Christ. It may sing loudly, preach persuasively, serve sacrificially, vote conservatively, defend doctrine, belong to a historic denomination, testify to dramatic experiences, or point to a long record of ministry. It may also speak the language of inclusion, compassion, authenticity, justice, healing, or grace. Yet both traditional and progressive forms of religion can become evasions of the same Lord if they permit the self to remain sovereign.

The author's prior work has repeatedly developed this distinction. Earlier writing contrasted religion with regeneration and warned that morality cannot purchase salvation (Sangwa, 2023b, 2024). Later doctrinal work sharpened the positive center: salvation is by grace alone through faith in Christ alone, the Holy Spirit regenerates and sanctifies, and good works are fruit rather than payment (Sangwa, 2026c, 2026d). Recent monographs have pressed the same burden through the language of an unavoidable personal response to Christ and through critique of counterfeit Christianity shaped by the spirit of the age (Sangwa, 2026a, 2026b). This chapter therefore does not begin from the assumption that external discipline saves, nor from the opposite assumption that grace renders obedience irrelevant. It advances a single controlling thesis: **false assurance becomes especially dangerous when Christian words, activities, and identities are allowed to stand in the place of knowing and being known by Jesus Christ.**

This is not a small distinction. It separates the gospel from moralism and from antinomianism. Moralism tells the respectable person to trust his decency. Antinomianism tells the professing believer that persistent rebellion need not disturb his confidence. Jesus allows neither refuge. The Pharisee cannot boast, and the lawless professor cannot presume. The gospel strips both of self-salvation and brings both to the same Christ.

The warning must also be handled pastorally. Some readers are hardened and need to be awakened. Others are already tender, ashamed, wounded, or scrupulous. A person fighting sin, confessing it, grieving it, and clinging to Christ is not in the same spiritual posture as a person who renames rebellion, resists correction, and demands assurance without repentance. Temptation is not identical to consent. Failure is not identical to apostasy. A bruised believer who

comes to Christ for mercy should hear the promise that He will not cast out the one who comes to Him ([John 6:37](#)). The aim of warning is not to terrorize the repentant into despair. It is to prevent the presumptuous from sleeping through judgment and to drive every hearer away from false refuges toward the mercy of Christ.

Matthew's closing sequence has long been recognized as a climactic call to decision in the Sermon on the Mount. France (2007), Keener (2009), Turner (2008), and Davies and Allison (1988) differ in exegetical emphases, yet each treats the final section as a serious demand for a response to Jesus' teaching. The contrasts are not decorative illustrations. They expose incompatible destinations and incompatible kinds of discipleship. The narrow way leads to life; the broad way leads to destruction. Good trees bear good fruit; corrupt trees do not. Those who merely say "Lord" are distinguished from those who do the Father's will. The wise builder not only hears Jesus' words but acts on them ([Matthew 7:24](#)).

The chapter will therefore proceed as Jesus' warning proceeds: from the road to the religious crowd, from profession to spiritual activity, from fruit to sincerity, from false peace to normalized sin, and finally from warning to invitation. The purpose is not to create a catalogue of people to condemn. The purpose is to place the reader, the author, the preacher, the scholar, the church member, and the ministry leader under the same searching Word.

1.1 The Narrow Gate and the Broad Road

Jesus' command is direct: enter through the narrow gate ([Matthew 7:13](#)). The image is not presented as one lifestyle option among many equally valid spiritual preferences. It is a summons to choose life rather than destruction. The contrast is severe precisely because Jesus refuses the modern instinct to make ultimate truth dependent on popularity, social acceptability, or the comfort of the majority.

The broad road has one immediate advantage: it is broad. It does not require the traveler to surrender much. A wide road can accommodate incompatible desires, rival loyalties, religious labels, private idols, and public respectability. Its apparent generosity is part of its attraction. It can feel humane because it makes room for the self. It can feel tolerant because it rarely demands the death of pride. It can feel spiritual because it does not necessarily forbid religious practices. What it cannot do is lead to life.

This is why popularity cannot establish truth. Scripture never permits a vote count to determine revelation. Noah did not become wrong because the ark was unpopular ([Genesis 6:5-22](#)). Israel's repeated drift into idolatry did not become holy because it became national practice ([Judges 2:10-13](#)). Elijah did not discover truth by standing with the majority of prophets at Carmel ([1 Kings 18:20-40](#)). Paul warned that people can accumulate teachers who tell them what they want to hear ([2 Timothy 4:3-4](#)). The existence of a crowd proves the existence of a crowd. It does not prove the approval of God.

Yet the narrowness of the gate must not be misused. Jesus is not teaching salvation by social obscurity, hardship for hardship's sake, or membership in a tiny group that congratulates itself for being persecuted. A fringe movement can be false. An unpopular doctrine can be wrong. A severe lifestyle can be self-righteous. The narrow gate is not validated by how few people claim it; it is defined by the truth and authority of Christ. Christian history contains enough examples of sectarian pride to warn against the romantic idea that being rejected is itself evidence of faithfulness.

Nor should "narrow" be reduced to a humanly invented list of restrictions. Later chapters will distinguish explicit biblical commands from principles, wisdom, conscience, and Christian liberty. Here the point is foundational: the way of Christ is narrow because Jesus is Lord, not because Christians are authorized to create extra laws. The same Lord who condemns lawlessness also condemned religious leaders who loaded people with burdens while neglecting the weightier matters of God's law ([Matthew 23:4, 23](#)). Legalism and permissiveness are different roads, but both can avoid grace. One broadens God's commands until sin becomes safe; the other adds human commands until self-righteousness feels holy.

Within Matthew, the narrow-road image belongs to a larger theology of discipleship. Jesus has already blessed the poor in spirit, the mourners, the meek, the merciful, the pure in heart, and those persecuted for righteousness ([Matthew 5:3-12](#)). He has exposed murder in anger, adultery in lust, piety performed for human admiration, anxiety rooted in divided trust, and judgmentalism that ignores one's own hypocrisy ([Matthew 5:21-6:34](#); [Matthew 7:1-5](#)). The narrow way is therefore not merely external morality. It reaches the heart. It refuses to let public religion conceal private rebellion.

This helps explain why the language of discipleship can coexist with self-deception. A person can learn the vocabulary of the narrow road while remaining

on the broad one. He can call sacrifice “discipleship” while protecting the idol he will not surrender. She can speak of grace while treating Christ’s commands as optional. A church can confess biblical authority in its statement of faith while organizing its life around money, status, ethnicity, entertainment, political access, or celebrity. The broad road becomes especially deceptive when it acquires Christian signage.

The first self-examination is therefore not, “Am I part of a minority?” It is, “Who actually governs me?” Do I come to Scripture asking what Christ requires, or only searching for arguments that permit what I already want? Do I treat His commands as the voice of my Lord, or as suggestions to be negotiated with the age? Do I secretly define grace as God’s willingness to leave my cherished rebellion untouched? These questions do not save. They expose where confidence has been placed.

The narrow gate is demanding, but it is not cruel. The One who commands entry is the same Jesus who receives sinners, bears the burden of the weary, and gives rest ([Matthew 11:28-30](#)). Its narrowness does not mean there is insufficient mercy. It means mercy cannot be detached from the Lord who gives it.

1.2 Religious People Can Be Lost

The most uncomfortable feature of Scripture’s warnings is that many are addressed to religious people. The Bible does not allow covenant privilege, institutional belonging, theological education, ceremonial participation, or religious zeal to become substitutes for faith.

John the Baptist confronted people who took comfort in descent from Abraham and warned them not to presume that ancestry could shield them from the demand for repentance ([Matthew 3:7-10](#)). Jesus later confronted religious leaders who were meticulous in public observance yet neglected justice, mercy, and faithfulness and were inwardly corrupt ([Matthew 23:23-28](#)). Paul, reflecting on Israel’s privileges, could list covenantal advantages while insisting that external possession of those privileges did not automatically equal saving obedience ([Romans 2:17-29](#); [Romans 9:1-8](#)).

The point is not anti-Jewish polemic. Jesus, the apostles, and the earliest disciples were Jews, and the New Testament’s critique of religious presumption is turned inward upon every community that possesses revelation. The church can repeat the same error in Christian form. “We have Abraham” can become “I was

baptized,” “my family is Christian,” “I belong to the right denomination,” “I went to Bible college,” “I serve on the worship team,” “I preach,” “I have always believed,” or “our church is biblical.” Some of these things may be gifts. None can carry the weight of salvation.

The Pharisee and the tax collector in Jesus’ parable illustrate the difference between religious confidence and justified dependence ([Luke 18:9-14](#)). The Pharisee is not condemned because prayer, fasting, and giving are evil. He is condemned in the story’s logic because his religious achievements become material for self-exaltation and comparison. He trusts the moral distance between himself and other sinners. The tax collector brings no religious résumé. He asks for mercy. The shock of the parable is not that wickedness is preferable to discipline. It is that discipline cannot become a ladder by which a sinner climbs above the need for grace.

This is where conservative readers must allow the warning to turn toward them. It is possible to oppose sexual immorality while practicing greed. It is possible to defend biblical marriage while humiliating one’s spouse. It is possible to condemn cultural relativism while lying in business, spreading gossip, exploiting workers, falsifying credentials, or nursing ethnic hatred. It is possible to dress modestly and worship the approval of the modest. It is possible to abstain from alcohol and be drunk on pride. The broad road can wear a conservative suit.

Progressive readers must face the same Lord. Compassion does not authorize the redefinition of sin. The desire to welcome people cannot become permission to assure what Scripture warns against. Justice for the wounded cannot require the silencing of God’s moral claims. If a theology protects a person from every call to repentance, it may feel therapeutic while functioning as spiritual anesthesia.

Religious zeal is equally insufficient. Paul could testify that his pre-conversion life was marked by extraordinary zeal for ancestral tradition and fierce opposition to the church ([Galatians 1:13-14](#)). He later described some of his fellow Israelites as having zeal for God but not according to knowledge ([Romans 10:2-4](#)). Sincerity intensified by zeal can still travel in the wrong direction.

The author’s earlier distinction between being “religious” and being Christian remains useful, but the present argument requires a further refinement. Christianity certainly includes beliefs, practices, sacraments or ordinances, worship, community, moral formation, and inherited traditions. The problem is not “religion” as such, as if structured worship were inherently opposed to faith. The problem is **religious form without saving reality**, an outward relation to

Christian things without reconciliation to God through Christ. James can speak positively of “pure and undefiled religion” while also condemning empty religious profession ([James 1:26-27](#)). The contrast, then, is not spirituality versus institution. It is living faith versus confidence in forms that cannot regenerate.

That distinction protects the church from two opposite errors. One error treats the church as unnecessary because “I have a personal relationship with Jesus.” Scripture does not support isolated Christianity. Believers are joined to Christ’s body, baptized, taught, corrected, nourished, and sent in community ([Acts 2:41-47](#); [Hebrews 10:24-25](#)). The other error treats participation in that community as automatic proof of conversion. Scripture does not support that either.

The diagnostic question is painfully simple: if every Christian label were removed, what evidence would remain that I am resting in Christ rather than in the label? If baptismal records disappeared, titles were forgotten, church membership ceased to impress anyone, and ministry achievements were stripped away, would I still have Christ? More deeply, would Christ have me?

Religious people can be lost. That sentence should not make the church cynical. It should make the church evangelical. It should make pastors preach the gospel to the congregation rather than assuming the congregation has already believed it. It should make parents teach children that a Christian home is a privilege, not a substitute for new birth. It should make theologians remember that knowing vocabulary about grace is not the same thing as living by grace. Above all, it should drive the religious person away from inherited confidence toward the Savior Himself.

1.3 “Lord, Lord” and the Terror of False Profession

The words “Lord, Lord” in [Matthew 7:21-23](#) are among the most sobering words in the New Testament because the speakers are not denying Jesus. They are addressing Him with a title of honor. They appear surprised by rejection. They expect recognition. Their confidence is not tentative. It is vocal, religious, and apparently sincere.

The repeated address should not be trivialized as though the problem were merely careless speech. In biblical usage, repetition can intensify earnestness or emotion. “Lord, Lord” can sound fervent. That is precisely the point. Emotional

intensity does not convert a false profession into saving faith. A person may say the right word twice and still not belong to the One named.

Jesus also places Himself at the center of the final judgment. “On that day,” many appeal to Him, and He gives the verdict ([Matthew 7:22-23](#)). Within Matthew’s Gospel, “that day” naturally carries eschatological weight, and the later judgment scenes reinforce the same authority ([Matthew 24:36-51](#); [Matthew 25:31-46](#)). The one whom these people called “Lord” is not a passive symbol. He is Judge.

The terror of the passage lies in the asymmetry between profession and relationship. They know the name. They invoke the name. They appeal to works done in the name. Yet Jesus says, “I never knew you” ([Matthew 7:23](#)). The statement does not imply that Christ lacked information about them. Biblical “knowing” can carry relational and covenantal force. The contrast is between public association with Jesus and the absence of belonging to Him. Their rejection is not described as the loss of a once-saving relationship. The wording is stronger: never.

This should immediately correct a common way of reading the text. Jesus is not teaching that one must accumulate enough works so that He will finally accept the résumé. Their entire appeal is already a résumé: prophecy, exorcism, miracles, all “in your name.” Their defense is performance. His answer is relationship and lawlessness. They point to what they did around His name; He points to the fact that He never knew them and that their lives were characterized by lawlessness.

The phrase “the one who does the will of my Father in heaven” ([Matthew 7:21](#)) must therefore be read without falling into legalism. Matthew does not teach that obedience earns entrance into the kingdom. The same Gospel presents God’s mercy toward sinners, the Son giving His life as a ransom, forgiveness, and childlike dependence ([Matthew 9:12-13](#); [Matthew 18:3-4](#); [Matthew 20:28](#); [Matthew 26:28](#)). Across the New Testament, justification is God’s gift, not the wage of moral achievement ([Romans 3:21-28](#); [Ephesians 2:8-10](#)).

Yet the opposite error is equally serious. If grace is used to make obedience irrelevant, grace has been detached from the God who gives it. The New Testament consistently joins salvation to a new direction of life. Good works are prepared for those saved by grace ([Ephesians 2:10](#)). Grace trains believers to renounce ungodliness ([Titus 2:11-14](#)). Faith without works is dead ([James 2:14-](#)

[26](#)). The apostle John repeatedly ties assurance to faith in Christ, obedience, love, and a changed relation to sin ([1 John 2:3-6](#); [1 John 3:6-10](#)).

The distinction is crucial: obedience is not the root of justification, but it is expected fruit of regeneration. The believer does not obey in order to persuade Christ to save him. He obeys because the saving Christ has claimed him. This is why “doing the Father’s will” functions as a test of profession, not as a competing gospel of works.

The passage also confronts verbal orthodoxy. Correct words about Jesus matter. The New Testament does not treat doctrine as optional. A false Christ cannot save, and denial of the Son is spiritually deadly ([1 John 2:22-23](#)). But words can be orthodox at the mouth while rebellion remains enthroned in the will. Demons can recognize truths about God and tremble ([James 2:19](#)). Caiaphas could speak a true prophetic sentence about Jesus’ death while participating in the plot against Him ([John 11:49-53](#)). Accurate theological statements are necessary for Christian faith, but they are not identical to saving trust.

For pastors, theologians, and apologists, this is a special danger. The ability to defend Christianity can create a subtle second-order confidence: “I must belong to Christ because I can explain Him.” One can master arguments about the resurrection while remaining proud, sexually impure, greedy, cruel, prayerless, unforgiving, or dishonest. One can teach justification by faith while functionally trusting intellectual competence. Theological knowledge is a gift, but like every gift it becomes dangerous when converted into evidence of personal righteousness.

For the nominal Christian, the danger may be simpler: “I have always called Him Lord.” But how has that lordship functioned? When Christ’s word collides with desire, who wins? When Scripture exposes a cherished sin, is the instinct repentance or reinterpretation? When obedience costs status, comfort, money, a relationship, a habit, or an identity, is Jesus still Lord in practice?

These questions must not be turned into a doctrine of sinless perfection. Peter called Jesus “Lord” and later denied Him under pressure ([Matthew 26:69-75](#)). David sinned grievously and needed severe correction ([2 Samuel 11-12](#)). The difference between a believer and a false professor is not that one never falls. Scripture’s concern is deeper: what happens when the Word exposes the fall? Is sin defended, renamed, and enthroned, or confessed, hated, and brought into the light?

This is why sensitive consciences should read Matthew 7 with both sobriety and hope. The one who fears hypocrisy because he wants Christ, confesses sin, and seeks mercy should not conclude that his fear itself proves he is rejected. Jesus' warning is aimed at presumptuous confidence, not at crushing the bruised reed ([Matthew 12:20](#)). The appropriate response is not frantic self-salvation. It is to stop appealing to spiritual credentials and come to Christ as a sinner who needs grace.

The final question is not merely, "Do I call Jesus Lord?" It is, "Is the Jesus I call Lord actually my Lord, or have I kept the title while withholding the throne?"

1.4 Miracles, Ministry, and Spiritual Activity Without Regeneration

The people rejected in [Matthew 7:22](#) present what many modern Christians would consider compelling evidence of divine favor. They claim prophecy, exorcism, and "many miracles" in Jesus' name. These are not minor religious activities. They are the kinds of experiences that can build platforms, fill auditoriums, generate testimonies, attract media attention, and persuade followers that a leader must be specially approved by God.

Jesus refuses that inference.

It is important to observe exactly what the text does and does not say. Jesus does not pause to verify every claim. He neither builds His verdict on the authenticity of the wonders nor needs to deny them individually. Their supernatural résumé is simply not decisive. Even if every claimed event were granted for the sake of argument, it would not answer the question that matters: does Christ know them, and is their life characterized by the Father's will rather than lawlessness?

This principle appears across Scripture. [Deuteronomy 13:1-5](#) warns Israel that even a sign or wonder that occurs does not authenticate a message that leads people away from the true God. The test is covenant faithfulness, not spectacle. The Egyptian magicians imitated some signs in Moses' confrontation with Pharaoh ([Exodus 7:10-12, 22](#)). Balaam uttered genuine oracles under divine constraint while later Scripture remembered him as a corrupt figure associated with greed and seduction ([Numbers 22-24](#); [2 Peter 2:15](#); [Revelation 2:14](#)). Caiaphas spoke prophetically about Jesus' death without thereby becoming a faithful disciple ([John 11:49-53](#)).

Judas Iscariot is perhaps the most sobering New Testament example. He was numbered among the Twelve when Jesus gave them authority to preach, heal, and drive out unclean spirits ([Matthew 10:1-8](#)). Matthew does not report an exception to that commission, though it also does not separately narrate Judas performing these works. The point should therefore be stated with care: his proximity to Jesus, participation in apostolic ministry, and office did not prove a transformed heart. Later he betrayed the Lord ([Matthew 26:14-16, 47-50](#)). Ministry usefulness and saving union are not the same category.

The Corinthian church reinforces the distinction between gifts and maturity. Paul can say that the congregation did not lack any spiritual gift ([1 Corinthians 1:7](#)), then rebuke jealousy, division, sexual disorder, litigation, disorder at the Lord's Supper, and immature behavior. His great chapter on love deliberately imagines extraordinary spiritual capacities without love and declares them spiritually empty ([1 Corinthians 13:1-3](#)). A gift can be real while character is grievously deficient. A platform can be large while the soul is small.

This distinction must be applied carefully. It would be wrong to respond by becoming cynical about every report of healing, prophecy, answered prayer, or spiritual gift. Scripture itself records God acting powerfully and commands believers not to despise what is genuinely from Him ([1 Thessalonians 5:19-21](#)). The proper response is not gullibility and not reflexive disbelief. It is testing.

Testing begins with doctrine. Does the ministry confess the biblical Christ, the true gospel, and the authority of Scripture? Paul feared that the Corinthians might tolerate “another Jesus,” “a different spirit,” and “a different gospel” ([2 Corinthians 11:3-4](#)). John commands believers to test the spirits and makes confession of the incarnate Christ central to that discernment ([1 John 4:1-3](#)). A ministry that produces excitement while altering the identity of Christ or the gospel has failed the most basic test.

Testing also includes character. Is there humility, truthfulness, sexual integrity, financial transparency, accountability, love, patience, and repentance when wrong? Are leaders correctable? Do they exploit fear, money, or dependence? Do they use titles, supposed revelations, or “anointing” to place themselves beyond examination? Spiritual gifts are given for the common good, not for the construction of an untouchable religious class ([1 Corinthians 12:4-7](#); [1 Peter 5:1-4](#)).

Testing further includes the message produced in hearers. Does the ministry lead people toward Christ, Scripture, repentance, holiness, love, and mature

participation in the church, or toward dependence on the personality at the center? Do people learn to pray to God, read Scripture, practice truth, and grow in wisdom, or do they become increasingly unable to make ordinary decisions without consulting a prophet, buying a product, receiving a special word, or paying for spiritual access? The New Testament picture of ministry is equipping the saints, not infantilizing them ([Ephesians 4:11-16](#)).

Earlier critiques of false teachers rightly emphasized that signs and religious excitement cannot substitute for truth (Sangwa, 2023a). The present chapter advances that concern by adding two safeguards. First, not every charismatic or Pentecostal claim should be treated as false merely because it is charismatic or Pentecostal. Traditions contain internal diversity, and Scripture requires specific evidence rather than denominational caricature. Second, not every false ministry needs a supernatural explanation. Fraud, suggestion, selective reporting, emotional contagion, ordinary providence, misdiagnosis, exaggeration, and sincere misinterpretation can all produce impressive narratives. Evidence discipline is part of Christian truthfulness.

The same warning applies outside spectacular ministries. A preacher can have conversions reported under his ministry and still be personally unregenerate. A theologian can write a book that helps believers and still be spiritually dead. A worship leader can move thousands to tears and be privately enslaved to sin. An evangelist can fill stadiums and neglect his family. A Christian executive can fund missions while cheating employees. A parent can lead family devotions while terrorizing the household. Visible usefulness is not self-authenticating.

This does not mean God is indifferent to faithful service. Scripture honors labor done in the Lord and promises that it is not in vain ([1 Corinthians 15:58](#)). The danger is turning service into the foundation of assurance. The workers in Matthew 7 effectively say, “Look what we did.” The safer question is, “What has Christ done, and what is His grace doing in me?”

A minister should therefore tremble more at secret lawlessness than rejoice at public success. A congregation should care more about truth and fruit than about spectacle. A believer should never conclude, “God used me, therefore I must be right with God.” God’s sovereignty over a useful act does not absolve the instrument from the need for repentance.

When ministry becomes the place where we hide from God, it has become spiritually dangerous. The altar, pulpit, microphone, classroom, mission field, and charitable project can all become camouflage. Christ sees behind the usefulness to

the person. He does not ask whether our platform knew His name. He asks whether we belonged to Him.

1.5 False Prophets and Deceptive Fruit

Immediately before the “Lord, Lord” warning, Jesus says, “Beware of false prophets” and gives the test: “You’ll recognize them by their fruit” ([Matthew 7:15-20](#)). The sequence matters. False profession is not merely an individual problem. Deception is taught, modeled, organized, monetized, and normalized by leaders who appear safe.

Jesus’ image of sheep’s clothing exposes the central problem of counterfeit spirituality: it does not arrive announcing itself as counterfeit. False prophets come in forms that make trust seem reasonable. They may use familiar vocabulary, quote Scripture, display compassion, speak about Jesus, denounce obvious sins, perform acts of generosity, tell compelling testimonies, or appear unusually spiritual. Deception succeeds because appearance and reality diverge.

The fruit test is therefore indispensable, but it is often misunderstood. “Fruit” cannot be reduced to visible success. Crowds are not fruit in the moral sense Jesus intends. Wealth is not fruit. Buildings are not fruit. social-media reach is not fruit. Emotional intensity is not fruit. Reports of miracles are not fruit. Political access is not fruit. Academic reputation is not fruit. A ministry can possess all of these and still be corrupt.

Within Matthew, fruit is closely tied to the moral and spiritual character that flows from the nature of the tree. John the Baptist demanded “fruit consistent with repentance” ([Matthew 3:8](#)). Jesus later used the tree-and-fruit image in relation to speech flowing from the heart ([Matthew 12:33-37](#)). At the conclusion of the Sermon, the fruit test sits beside doing the Father’s will and acting on Jesus’ words. It is therefore reductionistic to define fruit as either doctrine alone or behavior alone. Falsehood and character corruption often reinforce each other.

Doctrinal fruit asks what a teacher ultimately makes of God, Christ, Scripture, sin, grace, repentance, holiness, the church, judgment, and hope. A teacher may say many orthodox things while subtly relocating authority. The decisive question becomes not only, “Does he quote the Bible?” but “What function does the Bible actually have?” Is Scripture allowed to correct the teacher, or is every text bent to protect the system, leader, ideology, or desired outcome? Does the message magnify Christ or gradually make the teacher indispensable?

Moral fruit asks what kind of life is being formed. Jesus does not permit a teacher's charisma to excuse predatory behavior. The pastoral epistles place striking weight on character qualifications for overseers and deacons ([1 Timothy 3:1-13](#); [Titus 1:5-9](#)). Peter calls shepherds to lead without greed, domination, or self-exaltation ([1 Peter 5:1-4](#)). Paul's own ministry ethic includes transparency, gentleness, hard work, and refusal to manipulate hearers for gain ([1 Thessalonians 2:3-12](#)).

Relational fruit asks what happens to people under the ministry. Are the vulnerable protected or exploited? Are victims heard or silenced? Are members free to ask biblical questions, or is disagreement treated as rebellion? Are people becoming more mature and Christ-dependent, or more leader-dependent? Do families become healthier, truthfulness stronger, generosity freer, sexual integrity clearer, repentance deeper, and love more visible? No congregation will display perfection, but long-term patterns matter.

Institutional fruit matters too. A church can have a formally sound statement of faith while structures reward secrecy and celebrity. A ministry can preach holiness while finances remain opaque. An organization can speak of servant leadership while concentrating unreviewable power in one family or personality. Systems reveal what communities actually protect. Healthy doctrine should generate practices of accountability because leaders, too, are sinners under Scripture.

At the same time, fruit testing must not become gossip. Christians are not authorized to diagnose hearts from rumor, disliked personality, cultural difference, or isolated failure. Jesus condemns hypocritical judgment immediately before this section ([Matthew 7:1-5](#)). Paul requires accusations against elders to be handled with seriousness and evidence ([1 Timothy 5:19-21](#)). Discernment is not suspicion without proof.

This balance is especially important in an age of clips, screenshots, edited videos, viral accusations, and factional media. A person's worst thirty seconds may not summarize a life, and a polished thirty-second testimony may not reveal one. Fruit is observed over time. It is tested against Scripture. It is examined with evidence. It includes the response to correction. A genuine servant may fail and repent. A deceptive servant often treats correction itself as persecution.

The strongest defense of impressive ministries is understandable: surely large numbers of changed lives, extraordinary testimonies, or evident influence indicate God's blessing. Scripture allows us to thank God for genuine good wherever it

occurs. Yet it never lets outcome replace truth. God can bring good despite flawed messengers. Paul could even rejoice that Christ was preached by some whose motives were selfish, without approving those motives ([Philippians 1:15-18](#)). Providence is not the same as endorsement.

Jesus' test therefore requires patience and moral seriousness. What does the tree consistently produce? Does its teaching lead toward the apostolic Christ or away from Him? Does its leadership become more accountable or more insulated? Does its use of money become more transparent or more manipulative? Does its handling of sexuality protect holiness and victims, or protect reputations and power? Does its treatment of opponents display truth and love, or contempt and deception?

The same fruit test must be turned inward. It is easier to inspect preachers than to inspect ourselves. What does my profession of Christ produce in my speech, money, sexuality, relationships, digital habits, work, politics, use of power, and response to correction? Am I becoming more truthful, more teachable, more merciful, more self-controlled, and more willing to repent? Or have I learned to use doctrinal correctness as a shield against moral examination?

Fruit does not save the tree. Fruit reveals the tree. That is why the test is both serious and hopeful. Bad fruit calls for repentance, not cosmetic polishing. The gospel does not tell a thornbush to staple grapes onto its branches. It announces new life in Christ and the transforming work of the Spirit. The answer to deceptive fruit is not better religious performance. It is a changed root.

1.6 Sincerity Is Not the Same as Truth

Modern moral language often gives sincerity an almost sacred status. "At least she is authentic." "He is following his truth." "They genuinely believe it." Such statements may describe something morally relevant. Hypocrisy is worse than honest acknowledgment of what one believes, and Scripture itself condemns double-minded performance. Yet sincerity cannot perform a task it was never designed to perform: it cannot make falsehood true.

Saul of Tarsus was sincere when he persecuted Christians. He later testified that he had acted in ignorance and unbelief, but he did not reinterpret his sincerity as righteousness ([1 Timothy 1:12-16](#)). He had been convinced that he should do many things in opposition to the name of Jesus ([Acts 26:9-11](#)). Sincerity made his error energetic. It did not make the error holy.

Paul's description of religious zeal "not according to knowledge" makes the same point ([Romans 10:2](#)). Scripture repeatedly warns that a way can seem right while ending in death ([Proverbs 14:12](#)). Human conscience matters, but conscience is not infallible. It can be weak, defiled, seared, misinformed, or trained ([1 Corinthians 8:7-12](#); [1 Timothy 4:1-2](#); [Titus 1:15](#)). The conscience needs formation under truth.

This is not only a biblical observation. Psychological research has long shown that reasoning can be influenced by desired conclusions. Kunda's (1990) classic review of motivated reasoning argued that people often recruit cognitive strategies that make preferred conclusions appear justified, while still experiencing themselves as reasoning. Research on self-deception likewise suggests that human beings can maintain distorted self-perceptions without simply engaging in conscious lying (von Hippel & Trivers, 2011). These theories do not prove Christian doctrines of sin, and they should not be used as secular substitutes for Scripture. They do, however, reinforce a modest empirical point that Scripture has always pressed more deeply: human certainty about oneself is not self-validating.

This matters because false assurance usually feels like assurance. If deception always felt deceptive, it would lose much of its power. The person Jesus describes in Matthew 7 does not approach judgment saying, "I knew I was a hypocrite." The speaker is astonished. The conscience had apparently been persuaded by a story: "I called Him Lord. I served. I had spiritual experiences. Therefore I am safe." The story had enough religious evidence to feel convincing.

Sincerity can attach itself to almost any spiritual path. A person may sincerely believe that all religions lead to God, that spiritual experiences validate doctrine, that inherited tradition cannot be wrong, that a particular leader uniquely speaks for God, that personal peace proves divine approval, or that God would never judge a behavior because the behavior feels central to identity. Another person may sincerely believe that his denomination alone is pure, that every cultural practice he dislikes is sinful, that his political loyalties are identical with Christ's kingdom, or that his strict lifestyle proves regeneration. Sincerity can live on both sides of a theological argument.

How, then, should sincerity be evaluated? First, it should be respected as sincerity. Christians should not accuse people of knowingly lying when there is no evidence of deceit. Charity requires us to distinguish error from dishonesty. Second, sincerity should be tested by Scripture. The Bereans were commended

because they examined even apostolic preaching claims against the Scriptures available to them ([Acts 17:11](#)). Third, sincerity should remain teachable. A sincere person who refuses every possibility of correction has turned sincerity into sovereignty.

Personal experience requires the same discipline. Experience is real as experience. A person may genuinely feel peace, warmth, power, release, fear, ecstasy, or a sense of presence. Christians should not mock such reports. Scripture is full of genuine encounters with God. But experience must not be made judge over revelation. Paul warns that even an angelic messenger is not authorized to replace the apostolic gospel ([Galatians 1:8-9](#)). John tells believers to test spirits rather than treating spiritual phenomena as self-authenticating ([1 John 4:1](#)).

This principle protects people from manipulation. A leader who says, “Do not question this because you felt the anointing,” is asking experience to silence discernment. A movement that says, “This practice brings healing, therefore doctrine does not matter,” makes therapeutic effect the new authority. A believer who says, “I know God approves because I have peace,” may simply be describing the current state of conscience. Peace can accompany truth, but emotional calm is not a canon.

The same principle protects the skeptical reader. A person can sincerely feel that Christianity is implausible or morally offensive. That feeling deserves careful engagement, not contempt. Yet the truth of Christ’s resurrection, lordship, and judgment does not rise or fall with subjective plausibility. Christianity makes public claims about God’s action in history. It invites investigation, but it does not reduce truth to preference.

The pastoral danger is greatest when authenticity becomes a moral absolute. Modern culture often assumes that the deepest self must be expressed rather than judged. Jesus presents a different anthropology. The heart matters, but the heart needs cleansing. Desire matters, but desire needs discipleship. Identity matters, but the self must be received under the Creator and remade in Christ. Jesus does not call disciples to discover an autonomous true self and protect it from every external claim. He calls them to deny themselves, take up the cross, and follow Him ([Matthew 16:24-25](#)).

The self-examination here is uncomfortable because sincerity is one of our last refuges. “But I mean well.” “But I feel close to God.” “But I am convinced.” Scripture asks a more searching question: am I willing for God’s Word to contradict me? Can Christ tell me that what feels natural is sinful, that what feels

impressive is empty, that what feels safe is dangerous, or that what feels humiliating is the beginning of repentance?

The humble believer does not despise sincerity. He brings sincerity under truth. He prays, in effect, for God to search the heart, expose hidden ways, and lead in the everlasting way ([Psalm 139:23-24](#)). That prayer is the opposite of performative religion because it asks God to reveal what the worshiper may not yet see.

1.7 Why False Assurance Can Be More Dangerous Than Open Unbelief

Open unbelief is spiritually grave, but it contains one possible mercy: the unbeliever may know that he is outside the faith he rejects. False assurance adds a second danger to the first. The person may be far from God and convinced that no rescue is needed.

Jesus repeatedly confronted this paradox. In the account of the man born blind, He says that those who claim to see while resisting the light remain in guilt ([John 9:39-41](#)). The Laodicean church says, in effect, “I am rich; I need nothing,” while Christ diagnoses poverty, blindness, and nakedness ([Revelation 3:17](#)). Their felt condition and their actual condition are tragically different.

False assurance works like a spiritual anesthetic. Pain that should lead to diagnosis is suppressed. Conviction is reinterpreted as negativity. Warning is dismissed as judgmentalism. Correction is called legalism. Consequences are blamed on others. A person who would run to a physician if he knew he were ill may refuse treatment if a false test has told him he is healthy.

This helps explain why Jesus’ sharpest words often fall on religious complacency. Tax collectors and notorious sinners sometimes knew enough about their condition to receive mercy with amazement. Self-righteous religious leaders often experienced mercy as an insult because mercy presupposes need. In [Luke 18:9-14](#), the tax collector asks for mercy; the Pharisee presents a moral comparison. The spiritually dangerous sentence is not only “I do not believe in God.” It is also “I am fine with God because I am not like those people.”

False assurance can rest on many foundations. It may rest on a past decision, a baptismal certificate, church membership, family heritage, moral respectability, a conversion date, a charismatic experience, a theological system, a ministry title, a

period of service, a sense of peace, or a doctrine of eternal security severed from perseverance. Chapter 3 will examine these substitutes in detail. The present point is simpler: anything that persuades a person to stop examining whether he is actually in Christ can become dangerous when it displaces Christ.

The doctrine of assurance itself is not the enemy. Scripture wants believers to have confidence. John writes so that believers may know they have eternal life ([1 John 5:13](#)). Paul speaks of the Spirit bearing witness to adoption ([Romans 8:15-17](#)). Hebrews invites believers to draw near with full assurance of faith ([Hebrews 10:19-23](#)). A Christianity that keeps every believer permanently unsure of God's mercy has not understood the gospel.

The issue is the basis and character of assurance. Biblical assurance rests first in Christ's finished work, God's promise, and the Spirit's witness, and it is confirmed rather than contradicted by the fruit of new life. Presumption rests in a substitute and resists evidence that the substitute may be false. Assurance says, "Christ is sufficient, therefore I come to Him and continue in Him." Presumption says, "I performed the right religious act once, therefore no present rebellion can say anything meaningful about my condition."

A sensitive believer can confuse conviction with evidence of reprobation. That is why pastoral precision is essential. The Christian who hates a recurring sin, confesses it, seeks help, sets boundaries, suffers setbacks, and continues fighting should not be treated as though struggle itself proves false conversion. Paul describes conflict between flesh and Spirit ([Galatians 5:16-17](#)). John teaches believers to confess sins and rest in God's faithfulness and Christ's advocacy ([1 John 1:8-2:2](#)).

The presumptuous conscience is different. It asks not, "How can I be free?" but "How can I keep this and remain safe?" It seeks theological permission for what the Word exposes. It becomes irritated by calls to repentance because repentance threatens the arrangement. The central question shifts from "What pleases Christ?" to "How much can I retain without losing heaven?" That is not a healthy use of grace.

This is why false assurance can be harder to awaken than open unbelief. The openly lost person may still be confronted by the gospel as news. The falsely assured person may have learned enough Christian language to domesticate the news. "I know all that." Familiarity becomes insulation. The cross is no longer scandal or rescue; it is background information. Hell is for other people.

Repentance is for more obvious sinners. Scripture is a source of confirmation rather than confrontation.

The church can unintentionally strengthen this danger when it treats every childhood prayer, altar call, sacrament, membership roll, ministry involvement, or doctrinal affiliation as an irreversible spiritual certificate without asking whether there is present faith in Christ. Pastors fear creating anxiety, and that fear is understandable. But reassurance becomes malpractice when it contradicts Jesus' warnings.

The answer is not to make believers inspect themselves until they disappear into themselves. [2 Corinthians 13:5](#) calls for self-examination, but Christian examination must lead outward to Christ. The question "Is there fruit?" is not meant to replace "Is Christ enough?" The order matters. We do not find peace by discovering moral perfection. We find peace in the crucified and risen Savior, then ask whether our life bears the family resemblance of those whom He is sanctifying.

False assurance is dangerous because it says, "Peace," where repentance is needed. The gospel gives better peace. It does not say, "You are safe because your religion is impressive." It says, "There is forgiveness in Christ for the sinner who comes." That peace is costly to pride but free to the repentant.

1.8 The Normalization of Sin

Sin rarely becomes normal in a single dramatic step. More often, moral perception changes gradually. What was once named plainly is redescribed. What was once resisted is tolerated. What was tolerated is repeated. What is repeated becomes familiar. What is familiar attracts sympathy. What attracts sympathy acquires moral language. Eventually, the question is no longer whether the behavior is faithful to God but whether anyone has the right to question it.

Scripture describes this process in several forms. [Isaiah 5:20](#) condemns the inversion of moral categories. [Romans 1:18-32](#) moves from suppression of truth to disordered worship, disordered desire, and finally social approval of what dishonors God. [2 Timothy 4:3-4](#) depicts hearers gathering teachers in accordance with their own desires. In [1 Corinthians 5:1-13](#), the scandal is not only grave sexual sin but a congregation's boastful tolerance of it. The community had learned to feel sophisticated where Paul says it should have mourned.

Modern psychology offers useful descriptive language for some mechanisms involved. Bandura (1999) described moral disengagement processes such as moral justification, euphemistic labeling, advantageous comparison, diffusion of responsibility, and minimization of consequences. These categories were not developed as Christian theology, and they should not be overextended. Yet they illuminate ordinary ways in which people can make harmful conduct feel less morally urgent. Euphemism changes the emotional temperature of a behavior before the behavior itself changes. Comparison says, “At least I am not as bad as them.” Diffused responsibility says, “Everyone does it.” Moral justification says, “This is actually compassionate, necessary, liberating, or righteous.”

The church is not immune. Christians can normalize sins by changing vocabulary. Greed becomes “blessing.” Vanity becomes “excellence.” Manipulation becomes “spiritual authority.” Gossip becomes “a prayer concern.” Partisan hatred becomes “standing for truth.” Cowardice becomes “wisdom.” Cruelty becomes “discernment.” Sexual compromise becomes “authenticity.” Dishonesty becomes “survival.” Tribal favoritism becomes “protecting our people.” Workaholism becomes “calling.” Laziness becomes “rest.” Spiritual commercialization becomes “honoring the anointing.” The new label does not automatically change the moral reality.

This is why normalization must be examined across ideological lines. It is too easy for conservative Christians to discuss sexual normalization while ignoring normalized greed, racial or tribal contempt, corrupt business practices, harshness, domestic cruelty, academic dishonesty, and pride. It is equally easy for progressive Christians to expose greed or injustice while normalizing sexual conduct, doctrinal revision, or religious pluralism that Scripture does not permit. The Word of God does not belong to either faction. It judges both.

Normalization also occurs through repetition. What enters the imagination repeatedly becomes less shocking. Entertainment, social media, peer groups, professional environments, and church communities all teach moral intuitions by habituation. This does not mean every depiction equals endorsement, nor does it justify fear of culture. Christians are sent into the world, not instructed to become psychologically fragile. The point is more ordinary: attention forms familiarity, and familiarity can lower resistance if the mind is never renewed by truth ([Romans 12:1-2](#)).

Normalization can happen through selective compassion. A real human wound is presented, and the only compassionate response is said to be moral

affirmation. Christians should be suspicious of any framework that forces a choice between truth and love because Scripture refuses that opposition. Jesus is full of grace and truth ([John 1:14](#)). Paul speaks of truth in love ([Ephesians 4:15](#)). Biblical compassion enters suffering, protects dignity, rejects mockery, and refuses to turn a person's struggle into a weapon. It also refuses to call evil good.

Normalization can likewise happen through selective severity. Some communities create extra-biblical taboos around clothing, food, entertainment, grooming, calendars, or cultural customs and then treat those taboos as evidence of holiness. A young believer may be taught to fear earrings while nobody confronts the father's rage. A church may police hairstyles while financial corruption is tolerated. A family may condemn a harmless cultural practice while cultivating bitterness. That, too, is normalization: the normalization of hypocrisy under the appearance of strictness.

For this reason, the rest of this book will repeatedly distinguish moral categories. Some acts are explicitly commanded or forbidden by Scripture. Others require the application of biblical principles. Others belong to wisdom and prudence. Others are matters of conscience and Christian liberty. The failure to make these distinctions produces two opposite forms of deception. Permissiveness reclassifies sin as liberty. Legalism reclassifies liberty as sin.

The danger of normalization is intensified when theology is recruited after desire has already made the decision. Kunda's (1990) work on motivated reasoning is relevant here. Human beings can reason toward preferred conclusions while retaining a sense of rationality. In religious settings, this means exegesis can become a defense attorney for appetite. The question quietly shifts from "What does this text mean?" to "How can I make this text permit what I need it to permit?"

The antidote is not anti-intellectual certainty. Biblical interpretation requires humility, context, linguistic care, history, genre awareness, and willingness to learn. Christians can disagree in good faith about difficult passages. The antidote is a prior posture of submission: if Scripture, rightly understood, confronts me, am I willing to be confronted?

Normalization also has an ecclesial dimension. When a church stops disciplining serious unrepentant sin, members learn that the church's silence means safety. When a church abuses discipline over disputable matters, members learn that human control carries divine force. Both practices deform conscience. Biblical discipline aims at restoration, holiness, protection, and witness, and it

must be governed by due process, gentleness, and truth ([Matthew 18:15-20](#); [Galatians 6:1](#)).

The reader should therefore resist the temptation to ask only, “What sins has the culture normalized?” A more searching question is, “What has my church, family, profession, political tribe, online community, or own heart taught me to stop noticing?” What behavior do I excuse because respectable people around me practice it? What words do I use to make disobedience sound noble? Whose sins disgust me, and whose sins have I learned to rename?

The normalization of sin is not defeated by outrage. It is defeated by repentance, renewed minds, truthful churches, and grace that teaches us to say no to ungodliness. The Christian alternative to normalization is not obsession with sin. It is normalization of holiness, confession, forgiveness, truth, self-control, justice, mercy, and joy in God.

1.9 Warning as an Expression of Love

A book about false assurance risks becoming harsh if warning is separated from love. It risks becoming sentimental if love is separated from warning. Scripture refuses both distortions.

God’s watchman imagery is severe because consequences are severe. Ezekiel is told that warning belongs to his responsibility before God ([Ezekiel 3:17-21](#); [Ezekiel 33:1-9](#)). Paul can say that he warned believers “with tears” ([Acts 20:31](#)). That phrase is a needed corrective to both cold polemic and soft evasion. The apostolic model has tears and warnings in the same sentence.

Jesus’ own ministry joins compassion and rebuke. He weeps over Jerusalem while pronouncing judgment on its refusal ([Luke 19:41-44](#)). He looks with love on the rich young ruler and then exposes the ruler’s idol ([Mark 10:21-22](#)). He receives notorious sinners without pretending sin is harmless, declaring that He came to call sinners to repentance ([Luke 5:30-32](#)). Mercy does not require moral denial.

Warning becomes unloving when the warner enjoys superiority. Jesus condemns people who notice a speck while ignoring the log in their own eye ([Matthew 7:1-5](#)). Paul requires correction to be gentle and aimed at repentance ([2 Timothy 2:24-26](#)). Galatians commands spiritual believers to restore someone caught in wrongdoing with gentleness while watching themselves ([Galatians 6:1](#)). Biblical warning is never permission for cruelty.

Warning also becomes abusive when it exceeds Scripture. Leaders can use fear of hell, spiritual warfare, curses, apostasy, or divine displeasure to control decisions God has left within wisdom or conscience. They can label disagreement rebellion, claim access to hidden motives, or attach salvation to loyalty to an institution. This is not watchman faithfulness. It is spiritual domination.

A faithful warning has several characteristics. It is scriptural rather than merely traditional. It is specific rather than insinuating. It distinguishes evidence from suspicion. It is proportionate to the issue. It recognizes uncertainty where uncertainty exists. It refuses to assign motives without grounds. It protects the vulnerable. It invites repentance and restoration. It leaves final judgment to God even while making the moral judgments Scripture requires.

This framework matters because “do not judge” is often used to silence necessary discernment, while “speak the truth” is often used to excuse unnecessary harshness. Jesus forbids hypocritical judgment but commands discernment about prophets and fruit in the same chapter ([Matthew 7:1-20](#)). The Christian cannot obey one part by cancelling the other.

The church must recover the moral imagination to see warning as care. A physician who refuses to name a cancer because the word may distress the patient is not compassionate. Neither is a preacher who sees a congregation drifting into rebellion and decides that silence is love. Yet the physician analogy has limits. Pastors are not spiritual technicians standing above patients. They are sinners saved by grace, speaking as people who also need the medicine.

That shared need changes tone. The preacher does not say, “You people on the broad road.” He says, “We must hear Christ.” The author does not use the book to secure moral distance from the reader. The sword of [Hebrews 4:12-13](#) cuts the writer too. Scripture exposes the secret compromises of the watchman before it becomes a weapon in his hand.

Warning also requires patience with complexity. Addiction may involve physiological dependence, trauma, habit, environment, shame, and moral agency. Abuse victims may need safety before reconciliation can even be discussed responsibly. People with obsessive religious fear may hear every warning as proof that they are damned. A pastor who treats all complexity as excuse-making can harm the weak. A pastor who treats all responsibility as trauma can deny people moral agency. Love requires careful distinctions.

The same principle applies to cultural disputes. Not every difference in clothing, music, grooming, food, ceremony, or social custom is a holiness issue. The church loses credibility when it speaks with equal certainty about explicit sexual immorality and a local dress preference. It also loses credibility when it treats explicit biblical commands as negotiable cultural preferences. Warning must be calibrated to revelation.

Why warn, then? Because judgment is real. Because self-deception is possible. Because Christ loves people more than their current self-understanding. Because repentance is possible. Because the cross means sin is serious enough to require the death of the Son and grace is deep enough to forgive sinners who come.

The warning voice should therefore sound like a fire alarm, not like laughter at people in a burning house. It should be urgent, clear, and relentless about danger, but its entire purpose is rescue.

1.10 An Invitation to Christ, Not a Catalogue of Condemnation

If Matthew 7 is read only as a frightening diagnostic, the reader may leave with greater fear but no clearer gospel. Jesus' warning is meant to destroy false refuges so that sinners can take refuge in the true one.

The broad road is not escaped by becoming impressive enough for the narrow road. The religious person cannot rescue himself by adding more ministry, stricter rules, longer prayers, greater giving, louder worship, deeper mystical experience, stronger political convictions, or more theological reading. Those may be good in their proper place. None can atone for sin.

The gospel begins with God, not with self-improvement. The holy God created human beings for His glory, and all have sinned ([Romans 3:23](#)). Sin is not merely a wound to self-esteem or a collection of bad habits. It is guilt and rebellion before God. The wages of sin are death ([Romans 6:23](#)). No amount of religious activity can reverse that verdict.

God's answer is Jesus Christ. The eternal Son became truly human without ceasing to be truly God, lived without sin, died for sinners, and rose bodily from the dead ([John 1:1-14](#); [1 Corinthians 15:1-4](#); [Hebrews 4:15](#)). His death is not a religious example added to our works. He bears sin and reconciles sinners to God ([1 Peter 2:24](#); [2 Corinthians 5:18-21](#)).

The response is repentance and faith, not payment. Jesus announces the kingdom with the call to repent and believe the good news ([Mark 1:14-15](#)). Paul summarizes his ministry as repentance toward God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ ([Acts 20:21](#)). Repentance is not moral self-repair before coming. Faith is not mere agreement that Christian statements are true. The sinner turns from self-rule and rests in Christ.

This means the openly rebellious reader is invited. Sexual sin is not beyond His cleansing. Addiction is not beyond His grace. Greed is not beyond His mercy. Violence, occult involvement, dishonesty, bitterness, and corruption do not place a repentant sinner outside the reach of the cross. Paul can name people whose former lives included serious sin and then say, “But you were washed” ([1 Corinthians 6:9-11](#)). The gospel does not call sin harmless. It calls Christ sufficient.

The nominal Christian is invited too. There is no shame in admitting that church familiarity has substituted for new birth. The greater tragedy would be preserving reputation until judgment. Nicodemus was religious, respected, knowledgeable, and still needed to hear, “You must be born again” ([John 3:1-8](#)).

The self-righteous conservative is invited. You do not need to become less moral before coming to Christ. You need to stop trusting morality as righteousness before God. The tax collector’s plea for mercy is not a celebration of vice. It is the death of boasting.

The culturally progressive reader is invited. You do not need to become cruel, politically aligned with a Christian subculture, or ashamed of every concern for justice in order to follow Christ. You do need to relinquish the right to make modern moral intuition the final judge of Scripture. Jesus does not ask for ideological relocation from one human tribe to another. He asks for allegiance to Himself.

The wounded and ashamed are invited. Some readers have been manipulated by churches, humiliated in the name of holiness, abused by leaders, or taught that God’s love must be earned through impossible performance. Matthew 7 does not vindicate those abuses. False prophets and lawless religious workers are part of the danger Jesus condemns. Christ is not identical with those who misused His name.

The struggling believer is invited to deeper confidence, not despair. If you are confessing sin, seeking help, desiring Christ, and grieving what dishonors Him, do not convert this chapter into a machine of accusation. Look to Christ. Confess

specifically. Make restitution where appropriate. Seek accountable discipleship. Use every wise means to resist sin. But do not imagine that your fluctuating emotional state is stronger than His promise. “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us” ([1 John 1:9](#)).

The pastor and ministry leader are invited. A public role can make repentance feel expensive because reputation, salary, institution, and influence may be at stake. Yet no platform is worth preserving at the cost of the soul. If there is hidden sin, financial dishonesty, sexual misconduct, spiritual abuse, fabricated testimony, or doctrinal compromise, the way forward is not better image management. It is truth, confession, appropriate consequences, safeguarding, restitution, and whatever loss is necessary to walk in the light.

Christ’s invitation is therefore not vague spirituality. It is personal and lordly. He says, “Come to me” ([Matthew 11:28](#)). He promises not to cast out the one who comes ([John 6:37](#)). He is the only way to the Father ([John 14:6](#)). The invitation is broad in proclamation and narrow in object: anyone may come, but salvation is in Christ.

That truth guards against both despair and presumption. Despair says, “My sin is too great.” The cross says Christ is a sufficient Savior. Presumption says, “My sin does not matter.” The cross says sin is serious enough that the Son of God died. Legalism says, “I will make myself worthy.” Grace says, “Come empty-handed.” Antinomianism says, “I can keep my rebellion.” Lordship says, “You were bought at a price” ([1 Corinthians 6:19-20](#)).

This chapter therefore ends where every Christian warning should end: not with the broad road, but with Christ standing before the sinner as Savior and Lord.

Conclusion: Before “That Day” Arrives

Matthew 7 does not permit easy confidence, but neither does it leave the repentant sinner without hope. Jesus exposes false assurance because there is still time to abandon it. The terror of “I never knew you” belongs to the finality of judgment; the mercy of the gospel belongs to the present call to come.

The chapter has established ten governing truths. The narrow road cannot be identified by popularity, cultural respectability, or sectarian smallness. Religious privilege cannot regenerate. Verbal confession can exist without submission. Ministry activity and spiritual gifts cannot carry the weight of assurance. False

prophets must be tested by doctrinal, moral, relational, and institutional fruit rather than charisma or visible success. Sincerity and experience are meaningful but not self-authenticating. False assurance is dangerous because it suppresses the recognition of need. Sin can be normalized through language, repetition, social reinforcement, selective comparison, and theological rationalization. Biblical warning can be loving only when it is truthful, humble, proportionate, evidence-based, and restorative. Finally, the purpose of exposing counterfeit faith is to lead sinners to the true Christ.

None of these truths teaches salvation by performance. The people in Matthew 7 already appeal to performance. Their tragedy is that religious claims and impressive works coexist with lawlessness and with Christ's decisive verdict: "I never knew you." The gospel does not answer that tragedy by offering a better résumé. It offers Christ.

This distinction must govern every chapter that follows. When the book later examines conversion, grace, sexuality, the body, pleasure, money, technology, church leadership, politics, conservative respectability, legalism, and Christian liberty, the question will never be merely, "Is this behavior socially acceptable?" Nor will it be, "Do strict Christians approve?" The deeper questions are: What has God actually said? What does this practice reveal about lordship, worship, motive, mastery, love, truth, and the heart? Is the issue an explicit command, a biblical principle, a matter of wisdom, or a question of conscience? And through it all, am I trusting Christ alone for salvation while refusing to use grace as permission for rebellion?

The reader should therefore resist two evasions. The first is to weaponize this chapter against others: false churches, liberal Christians, charismatic leaders, conservative hypocrites, nominal believers, or public sinners. Some of those categories will require serious critique. But if the Word never reaches the reader, the book has already failed. The second evasion is to collapse into morbid introspection. Christ does not call His people to stare endlessly at themselves. He calls them to abide in Him ([John 15:1-11](#)).

A useful final examination is therefore Christ-centered. When my sins are exposed, do I run toward Christ or away from Him? When Scripture contradicts me, do I submit or search for permission? When no one is watching, do I want the holiness I publicly praise? When I fail, do I confess and return, or rename and conceal? Is my confidence finally in baptism, morality, doctrine, ministry,

experience, denomination, politics, family, or a past decision, or is it in the crucified and risen Son of God?

The coming of Christ intensifies these questions without authorizing panic. The New Testament calls the believer's hope "blessed" and joins it to a life being trained by grace ([Titus 2:11-14](#)). Paul's promise that believers will be caught up to meet the Lord is given for comfort ([1 Thessalonians 4:13-18](#)), and the surrounding exhortation calls for wakefulness and sober faithfulness ([1 Thessalonians 5:1-11](#)). Readiness is not date-setting. It is life under the lordship of the One who may come.

For the believer, this hope purifies rather than terrifies ([1 John 3:2-3](#)). For the presumptuous, judgment interrupts false peace. For the unbeliever, the gospel announces that today is not yet the final verdict. For the ashamed, the wounds of Christ declare that forgiveness was purchased at infinite cost. For the self-righteous, the cross abolishes boasting. For the church, the hour calls for truthful preaching, holy living, patient restoration, and urgent evangelism.

The broad road is broad enough to carry religion, morality, charisma, activism, pleasure, wealth, prestige, and Christian vocabulary together. It is not broad enough to carry anyone through judgment.

Christ is enough.

Therefore, do not ask first whether you can persuade yourself that you are safe. Ask whether you have come to Jesus Christ. Do not ask how much of the world you may keep while retaining the Christian name. Ask what pleases the Lord who bought you. Do not build assurance on what you have done in His name. Build on what He has done for sinners, and let the life He gives bear fruit.

Before "that day" comes, the door of mercy stands open. Come to Christ. Turn from false peace. Receive grace. Walk in the light. Pursue holiness without trusting holiness as your savior. Rest in Christ without using rest as an excuse for rebellion. Watch, endure, serve, love, and be ready.

The narrow way ends in life because it ends with Him.

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