

Harris Creek Baptist Church
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Series: Stories from Acts
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Perception Management and The Pause

Acts 5

Morning, Church! How we doing? It's going to be like that this morning? Okay, all right, all right. Have you guys seen the movie *Catch Me If You Can*? (Whoop!) Leonardo DiCaprio plays Frank Abagnale Jr., Tom Hanks – the Great Tom Hanks – is in the movie, too. He plays the detective chasing him. Monica and I recently watched it, and it's a really incredible plot based on a true story where Frank Abagnale Jr., he's a con, and he learns to con from his father. And what makes it really interesting is he is a doctor, a lawyer, and a pilot, all before the age of 18. And in reality, he's not any of those things. He's a con artist; he tricks people into allowing him to work in the hospital, to work in a courtroom, and to fly planes all through cons.

(Video plays various clips of *Catch Me if You Can*).

And so, he gets to do these amazing things, go to incredible places. He's on all of these adventures, but not one of them by legitimate means. As he does those things you just see him, he's running, he's on the run. Every person that knows him doesn't know, actually *know*, him. They know some façade of him, some false version of him, and he's doing all of this while trying not to get caught. And the producers and directors do an incredible job of just showing how utterly exhausting it is. What you see in the movie, as it progresses, as he does all of these amazing adventures, is he's just running and he's tired. He's tired of being afraid that he's going to get found out.

As I think about that movie, I think about people that come into the church, and they pretend to be Christians, and they learn the lingo, but it doesn't last. They learn the lingo, but it doesn't last. They learn to play the game, but it's just utterly exhausting. They're trying to give the perception of holiness, like they know God, but they really have this pretend relationship with God; all for the purpose of perception management. Making you think that they're somewhere, someone that they're not, and you're going to see from the story today in Acts how much God cares about that.

And now you're here and you think, "Well, that's not going to pertain to me because I'm a legit follower of Jesus. I know God when I am all alone, when no one see me. When I'm by myself, I am doing things to feed my faith, to feed and foster this relationship. And I know that it's legitimate." But I think all of us do things to manage perception. And this is really the topic at hand, this idea of perception management.

This is why people go into debt. I should say, why you might dress the way you do. Why you talk the way you talk. Live the way you live. It's why we share what we share. It's why we don't share what we don't share. Sometimes we confess just enough to make people think that we're repentant, but we hold something back. Because if they knew what we know, then they'd know who we really are, we don't want them to know who we really are.

And so, we manage perception. Think about when we pray in front of others, and we're not really talking to God. We're thinking about, "What do they think about my prayer? Do they think I'm a good prayer?" And our mind is somewhere else, and we're managing perception. It's like when you ask somebody, "Hey, how you doing?" "Fine, I'm good. Living the dream." Right?

I have a friend that I ask him that whenever I see him. I say, "How are you doing?" I love it. He always pauses, and he stares at the ground for a minute. And he thinks of a thoughtful, honest response to that. It's never, "Fine," with him. It's never, "Good," because he wants to tell me the truth. He trusts that I'm not just asking in vain and he says, "Hey, this is how I'm doing." And I think about him because that's really rare. Because so many of us are, "Good! It's all good. Fine. I'm doing well."

So, today you're going to see how serious God takes this idea of perception management in His church. You're going to see a couple sneak in and begin to play the game of Christianity, and it's going to cost them dearly. I call this message: Perception Management and a Pause in Momentum. Because up until now, it is all gas, all acceleration in the first Church. They are growing. God is adding to their number. There are miracles, and we've seen it. It's go...go...go...grow... grow...grow...pause...subtraction.

And that's today. And that's what we're going to see. So, we're in a series of stories from Acts in the Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. It's the story of Jesus, all culminating in Jesus, the Son of God, dying on a cross, being placed in a tomb, raising from the grave. The story is told four times right there in the Gospel, so that you would see it from different perspectives and understand that this is central to what we believe as Christians. Jesus comes back from the dead, and His followers see Him, communicate with Him, have conversation with Him, and eat with Him.

And He says, "I have to go away, because as I go away, the Holy Spirit is going to come and live with you," as He ascends to be with the Father. The Spirit comes down in fire. These men begin to preach boldly and declare that Jesus died and came back to life. That's central to their message. They do miracles, and the church has, BOOM! three thousand people follow Jesus. And Nate talked about this, called Pentecost, week one. Then Dale, week two, said, "Hey, let's pull up to the window of the first church gathering." And we see that they are devoted to the apostles' teaching, to the breaking of the bread, having all things in common. That there's devotion, there's generosity, there's evangelism, Dale told us, week two. Then last week, we looked at this miracle as Peter and John go to the temple to worship. There's this man who can't walk, and he's begging for money, and they say, "Hey, we don't have money, but get up!" And there's this miracle. And as this man, who everybody knew couldn't walk, starts walking around, jumping, praising God, people gather.

Peter preaches again: Jesus died and raised from the dead. They arrest him, and he appears before the Sanhedrin. He preaches again: Jesus died and raised from the dead. Okay, they let him go. The church gathers and prays. It's a beautiful prayer for revival right there in the Scripture.

In Acts Chapter 4, it says, **“When they were done the whole place shook.”** The Spirit of God was there and literally shook the ground like an earthquake. And then, here you're going to see more. I'm going to be in Acts Chapter 4:32. As we move through this Scripture, we're going to look at how surrender marks a true believer. We're going to look at the scheming of an imposter or imposters. And before you leave here, in a few minutes, the serious sin of perception management.

The church has quickly grown from 11 people to 15,000 in number. In just a few chapters that we've seen, three sermons center around the gospel. Christ crucified and resurrected. And here is verse 32; we're looking at the church more. It says, **“³²All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. ³³With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all ³⁴that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales ³⁵and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need. ³⁶Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas, (which means “son of encouragement”), ³⁷sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet.”**

So, we see this idea repeated and we're given a specific example of this idea that generosity, Dale told us, this generosity marked the first church. And you're seeing, it's like this radical form of generosity, mark these Jesus followers. It's more than generosity, though, it's a picture of surrender. My first point would be, surrender marks a true believer.

1. Surrender Marks a True Believer

Think about that. Surrender marks a true believer. There's something happening right now in our culture. I'm seeing it everywhere. You can't be a Christian if ... You can't be a Christian and ... You're not a follower of Jesus if you ...

I see memes: If you vote this way ... If you believe this ... If you go here ... If you do this ... you're not a true Christian. Listen, I've been accused of a lot of things. Not boldly declaring the truth is NOT one of those things. I tend to be more like stand on my toes and yell! You know, I take issue with this! You can't be a Christian if ... If you can't be a Christian, you're not a true follower of Jesus ... You can be a Christian and believe all kinds of dumb things.

You can believe that Jesus Christ has died for your sins, and God raised Him from the dead, and the Holy Spirit lives in your life, and you can STILL be deceived. You can STILL grow up in a home that has taught you something that's not true, and you can believe that. So, it belittles the nature of the gospel when we say these things. You can't be a Christian if ... If *anything* that follows that is, “and you reject Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior,” just about anything else

you can put there is possible. We are capable of doing all kinds of things. It's easier to describe a Christian by what they *do*, by what they *do believe*.

What you see in this text is followers of Jesus subscribe to radical generosity. So, I want you to think of someone who's generous, and I want to show you that it's more than generosity. That word falls short because I'm not talking about someone who buys the best Christmas gifts. I'm not talking about someone who gives the best birthday gifts or they put the most money in the card, or that person that when the bill comes, somehow, they had already sneaked their card to the server. "It's already taken care of. I got it." They're always picking up the bill, you know. That's what we call generosity. That's really not what we're talking about here.

We're talking about an individual who sees everything that they have as the Lord's. So, we're not just talking about someone who pays the bill. We're talking about someone who lives with the mindset that everything, every cent that they have and every possession that they own, is actually God's. And they should consult with the Owner of how they should steward that. That's what you're seeing in the first church; that it's all His.

We just added a couple to our life group recently, and I was having a conversation about this with them, kind of engaging alignment. And I just said, "Listen, if I have ten dollars, and you have no dollars, we both have five dollars, or we both have ten dollars to share." This is the right mindset. This is what this is talking about. And even in processing, as Monica and I processed in our life group, building a house, whether to build or not, the person most outspoken about this decision and asking the most pointed questions, just said, "Look, if something happens to you, then I'm the one to pay for this, so I really care."

All that means is they get it. It's not a cult; it's biblical stewardship, a biblical view of the church and generosity. Even this passage was so convicting for me, and I've read this, and I've taught it before. But I can be so pragmatic in my thinking of stewardship. We sold the house in Dallas, and we took the money and bought a house in Waco. That house in Waco appreciated, (I don't know if you guys knew property values went up here), and we sold the house in Waco. We took that money and built the new house. So, I'm just thinking this is stewardship; you level up. And that can be my worldly way of thinking.

It's different than what Barnabas did. He sold something; he took it and said, "Here, this isn't mine. It's y'all's to steward." It's not a crazy way of thinking. The things we call radical are just Biblical. They're just normal in the Scriptures. And so, let me just say this to you: Any member of Harris Creek, as long as anyone has an empty bedroom, no one will be homeless. And I'll even go as far as to say as long as anyone has floor space, nobody in this body will ever go homeless. As long as anyone has a loaf of bread in the pantry, nobody here will go hungry. Right, that's what the church is when you're a member of this club. We're looking out for each other.

Let me show you from the Scripture, Galatians 6:10, "**Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.**" Right from the Scripture! And so, you have this guy, Joseph, who's called Barnabas. Bar means 'son

of' so bar abbas means 'son of the father'. Barabbas; bar Jonah 'son of Jonah'. Bar Jesus 'son of Jesus.' Here you have Bar-nabas, 'son of encouragement.'

What they're saying is, "This guy, Joseph, he's such an encourager. Everybody loves this guy. He sees you; he's complimenting your shoes and asking you really good questions." I think of Scott Kedersha. That's Barnabas: Scott Kedersha. The same guy, everybody loves Scott. He's just so kind to everyone that he comes in contact with. This guy, Barnabas, this is the guy they sent to Antioch when they were checking on the church. Send the 'son of encouragement'. This is the guy who vouched for Paul when they were like, "Whoa, that's Saul. He's led a revolt against the Way, against Christians." And Barnabas said, "No, the Holy Spirit changed him."

This is what Acts 11 says about Barnabas: he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith. And we see that being carried out here as he sells a field, and he gets a sum of money, and he brings it to the church. And says, "Hey, this is for anybody who has need." Now I don't know what anyone gives here. Okay, as practice, I don't want to steal your reward in heaven, and I don't want to be tempted to treat you different, as a practice.

The only people that I know what they give are Monica and I and our life group, as we hold each other accountable in those ways. But I do know that this happens here, that people have sold fields and brought the money here. People have sold homes and brought the money; people have sold stocks and brought the money, and people have sold businesses and said, "Here, this is for the church." What do we do with it? You might notice those chairs are comfortable that you're sitting in, that in here it's actually climate-controlled, that we have the AC, there's an AC bill every month that comes around. And so, it funds the church, it funds the ministry, it funds, in part, some partnership, and we'll continue to fund some of our international focus. That's the way this works.

So, it's still being practiced that we should ask God, "What do you want us to keep and give sacrificially?" Every membership class I have the opportunity to answer the question, "Hey, how come you don't pass the plate? How come Harris Creek doesn't pass the plate?" Let me answer that gladly for all of you. Some of you know the story. We did pass a plate for decades, for over a century, as I understand it. And we ran an experiment where we passed the plate one week, and then we didn't the next. And then we passed it one week, and we didn't the next, and we passed it one week, and we didn't the next. What we learned through that experiment is that on weeks that we would pass the plate, people would give an average of four thousand dollars more. And what that tells me is that people are giving out of either compulsion or convenience, which the Scripture warns us not to do so. So as somebody who's going to give an account for you, then I'm like, "Hey, we can't do that. We're shepherding our body in the wrong direction. They're giving out of compulsion and convenience." The Scripture tells us that we are to give what we decide between us and the Lord, in our own hearts, that we can give joyfully. We're to ask Him, "God it's all yours. What would you have me keep?"

So, we adjusted that strategy, and that's why now in Acts 5, next chapter says, "**Now a man named Ananias,**" yours might say, but a man named Ananias. This story is connected to the last story. You have Barnabas as an example, and now you have a new chapter. It's a couple Ananias and Sapphira and they're going to do something similar, but different. "**Now a man**

named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property. ²With his wife's full knowledge he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles' feet. ³Then Peter said, "Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? ⁴Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied just to human beings but to God." ⁵When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard what had happened. ⁶Then some young man came forward, wrapped up his body, and carried him out and buried him. ⁷About three hours later his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. ⁸Peter asked her, "Tell me, is this the price you and Ananias got for the land?" "Yes," she said, "that is the price." ⁹Peter said to her, "How could you conspire to test the Spirit of the Lord? Listen! The feet of the men who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out also." ¹⁰At that moment she fell down at his feet and died. Then the young men came in and, finding her dead, carried her out and buried her beside her husband."

Barnabas sells the field, gets the money, and lays it at the apostles' feet. Ananias and Sapphira, married couple, they sell a field, they take some of that money, they put it in their pocket, they bring the rest and lay it at the apostles' feet. He brings it and dies right there. Peter, inspired by the Spirit says, "Hey he's lying. You're lying." He dies, his wife comes three hours later, Peter says, "Is this the amount?" She says yes. BOOM! Dead.

If you feel like this is crazy, that just means to me that you understand what is happening. Because, and you're not alone, I read that, and I'm like, "What in the world is going on here?" You have this incredible momentum in the church, and then just somebody pulls the parking brake. And it's God making an example of someone. There's something that He wants to communicate to us through this text. That the Holy Spirit would. When it happened, it's historical. It made it in the Book, and then the Holy Spirit preserved it for thousands of years so that we would read it today and say, "What am I do with that, God? What does that teach me about you? What does that teach me about what you want from me? What does that teach me about what you want from your church?"

2. Imposters Scheme in Selfishness

And so, my second point is imposters scheme in selfishness. You have two people that have snuck in the church. Here it says they're scheming against the Holy Spirit. You're conspiring against. These imposters scheme in selfishness. What did they do wrong that would lead to their death? As the Scripture calls out their sin, it presents you with the word lying. It says that they lied not only to human beings, but also to God. **"You lied not just to human beings but also to God."** But lying is one of those sins where there's always a motive, a foundational sin behind it. So, we have to do some exploring. Why did they lie? Was it greed? Were they greedy?

He just wanted more. I don't think it's greed, because he would have kept it all. If he was primarily motivated by greed, Peter says, **"Didn't it belong to you before it was sold and after it was sold wasn't the money at your disposal?"** Was it fear? I think, foundationally speaking, a lot of times when we're not generous, it's motivated by fear. We think, is God going

to really take care of me? I know what He says; He cares for the birds. I know about the flowers of the field and King Solomon and all that, but is He *really* going to take care of me?

So, there's a fear or lack of faith. But I think the cleanest way I know to tell you what I perceive from the scripture as their primary motivation is they wanted to give the perception of holiness while maintaining control; something that we're calling this morning, perception management. They want others to think that they're like Barnabas. They presumably just saw what Barnabas did and everybody's reaction when he gave it all. And they're like, "Hey, we have a field. We could sell the field, and we could give, you know, some of that money, and they'll applaud us just like they did Barnabas." NO! YOU'RE GOING TO DIE!

They wanted what Barnabas got without paying what Barnabas paid. And we have to deal with that God killed them both right there, and that may not even sit well with you. Death penalty in the moment! You can't pull this from the Scriptures. It's what happened! And so, here's what I want you to know before we go any further. I've done worse than this, and God has treated me mercifully. Let me tell you plainly, what Ananias and Sapphira did, I have done worse. And I can say that confidently before you, because what I know about every pair of ears that hears me right now, you've done worse than this, and God has treated you with grace.

So why would they die in a moment? I believe God is trying to get the attention of the very beginning of the church. He's purifying the church. He's saying no; no imposters. Here we're not going to play religious games. These two are driven by fear of man. Here, by the way, we have to focus on a verse like Galatians 1:10, **"Am I now trying to win the approval of human beings, or of God? If I were still trying to please people, I would not be a servant of Christ."**

This dichotomy, you're a servant of Christ, or you're a slave to the approval of people. And you do not want to live as a slave, to manage people's perception of you. But it's hard for us not to do that because it's so much the air we breathe. It's so normal for us to do that here. But what you do when you're by yourself, when no one can reward you for it, and no one but God will know about it, will define your faith in God through His Son Jesus Christ. Because imagine the lack of faith of what they're doing. They say, but all these people are going to know. But God knows that they're operating in a way as though there's not a God. Like He doesn't know the truth, and so they think they can get away with lying when God, the Creator of the heavens and the earth, He knows the truth.

I assume that you give generously to this mission. I just assume you do. You always have the benefit of the doubt with me. But I also assume if you don't, it's a motivation of greed, of fear God may not take care of me. I need to control these resources as though they're mine, so people will think more of me. So, God, you can have this, but not this. And perception management is such the Satanic spirit that I see in Waco, Texas.

We learn to play the church game. We go to church on Sunday, we dress up, we sing the songs and then in our time you say, God you can have this, but not this. I'm going to do what I want, drink what I want, go where I want, hang out with who I want, say what I want, spend how I want, parents – how I want to dress, how I want...you can have this, but I'm going to have this.

Have you ever heard, just raise your hand? Humor me for a minute, because I'm curious. You ever heard the story? I've said it up here before, too. Baylor students going to the cafeteria on Sunday morning, getting dressed up to make it look like they went to church. You ever heard that? (Hands raise) Baylor students would go to the cafeteria Sunday morning dressed like they went to church. The others would think they went to church. You ever heard that story here? Just raise your hand if you had, real high, just so we could say people have heard that. (Hands raise) It's a story, kind of a legend thing that's told here.

For me, it's a metaphor for what happens in our city; that we want the appearance of holiness, but we deny the power of God. We want Philippians 4:13 on our letter jacket or in our bio or tattooed on our ankle, or an Ichthus on the back of our van or tattooed somewhere on our body. We want people to look at us and think, "Oh, that's one of the Jesus followers." But we want to be able to do what we want to do.

But you don't understand how costly it is. I was telling that story about Baylor students getting dressed up to go to the cafeteria and somebody just said, "But not anymore. But not anymore. Not today. Today, probably, if they went to church, they probably changed before they go to the cafeteria so nobody knows they went to church. It's probably a badge of honor that you didn't go to church. Today, in the next generation, if you go to the cafeteria, you don't want anybody to know you went to church." And I said, "Of course. That's where one mentality leads, if people see hypocrisy day in and day out as they grow up in it, they depart from it."

And it's happening right in front of you everywhere. And it's not a mystery. It's not a mystery as to why this is happening. "Hey, let's go to church. Tuck your shirt in. Put on your belt. Let's go in here, act like we have it all together, like we don't sin. Nobody talk about your junk." "Yeah, how we doing?" "We're doing fine." "Good to see you." "Oh, yeah! "Hey, brother, great to see you." And the kids grow up and out.

Can I tell you something? Look around you. This thing, it is an awful hobby, a terrible hobby. "What do you do for fun?" "I get dressed up Sunday mornings, go to this place, and pretend like I have it all together. Super fun!" NO, NO, NO ... Go wakeboarding! That's way more fun than you playing this game Sunday morning.

Why would anyone do that? And everyone can speak the lingo. But it won't last! "Let's pretend like our marriage is awesome!" You know who knows it's not awesome? The people who are in the other room when you're fighting! "Let's pretend like we have it all together." You know who knows you don't have it all together? The people who are a part of not having it all together. And you just lose their trust. And so, when you're like, "Hey, and by the way, this guy died and came back to life. "Yeah, I don't know."

And so, you're watching a generation leave the church in droves, and people are scratching their heads and being angry at them. Why wouldn't they? It's a miserable hobby. They just have better hobbies than you do, that's all that's happening. And it's why I think God cares so much about this.

I might try to get my kids attention if they're doing something wrong. "Hey, don't do that! Don't watch that! Hey, turn that off!" But when they're about to run into the street and there's a car coming, it's, "**HEY!!!**" Sorry if you're sleeping. It's different. Like, I need their attention. You know it's ... that's what God's doing. He's like, "**HEY.... NO ... NO.... NO ... NO ... NO ... NO ... NO.**" To give explanation to a text that seems crazy, you can't keep up this game. You're playing *Catch Me if You Can* with God, the Creator of the heavens and the earth. And it doesn't go well. It doesn't go well.

Verse 5, "**And great fear seized all who heard what had happened.**" And repeated in verse 11, "**Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events.**" My third and final point is: perception management is a serious sin.

3. Perception Management is a Serious Sin.

I think that was why the Holy Spirit kept this in here. He wants you to see, "Hey, this is a serious grievance against the Holy Spirit." We have to deal with the fact that these two died; The reality that God is purifying the church. He tells us something about the church or His followers or imposter followers. In the last days, this is what He says in 2 Timothy 3. He says in the last days, "**¹There will be terrible times in the last days.**" Okay, what will it look like, God? Well, "**²People will be lovers of themselves, (yep), lovers of money, boastful, (seen it), proud, (yes), abusive, disobedient to their parents, (sure), ungrateful, (uh-huh), unholy, (yes), ³without love, (yeah), unforgiving, (oh, yes), slanderous, (sure), without self-control, brutal, not lovers of good, ⁴treacherous, rash, conceited, (yeah), lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, (oh, man, 2022), having a form of godliness but denying its power. ⁵Have nothing to do with such people.**"

The NIV doesn't translate that well. It's translated better in other versions having the "**appearance of godliness but denying its power. Giving off the perception that they are godly, but they deny its power. Have nothing to do with such people.**" The Scripture says, and so, in the last days there are these imposters here in Acts Chapter 5. The church is beginning, and God is protecting the church from this form of imposters. From this form of imposter. But, He's saying, "Hey, in the last days, they will be rampant within the church. You need to look out for them and disassociate yourself from them."

1 Corinthians 5 says, "**Do not even eat with such people.**" Those who claim to follow Jesus, but follow the Spirit of the Air, do what they want to do. And so, as you read this, there's probably a mix of emotions, condemnation, guilt, shame, fear. Let me tell you something, dear friends, in this moment, God's wrath, His anger at the choice of Ananias and Sapphira, came down on them and in a moment, they were crushed. The Gospel that you and I subscribed to, we've banked our life on, is that God, who is holy, the Creator of the heavens and the earth, is powerful. He's mighty, and He hates your sin, and He sees every one. He knows every single one of them, and He's paid for them. His wrath and your sin came down on His son, Jesus Christ, and it crushed Him. And that's the Gospel; the blood of Jesus Christ is protecting you and me from the wrath of God.

Which means, that God is free to love you in spite of your sin, in the midst of your sin. The Creator of heaven and earth looks at you and loves you dearly, because all of the other side of that love was satisfied on His Son. So, your relationship with God is not one of you running *from* Him, but *to* Him ... so important.

So, in summary, surrender marks a true believer; imposter's scheme in selfishness; and perception management is a serious sin.

Through the years, my wife, Monica, and I have had a number of people live with us for different reasons, for different periods of time. And in one particular season, when Presley was young and Finley was just born – newborn, we had some guys living with us in kind of a discipleship relationship.

And there was one gentleman who was moving. He was a fireman in New York City, this was after 9/11, and he was moving up to where we were. He was joining the church that we were part of and we said, "Hey, you can move in with us." He wanted to be discipled, wanted to grow in the faith. And so, he moved in, and he had the most amazing stories about 9/11. Just being a fireman and what he saw. He would tell us about when the buildings came down, and where he was, and the debris and how he had to avoid breathing it in. He had this Pontiac Firebird, and he had the vanity plates, NYFD, New York Fire Department on that Firebird, front and back. It was just so much a part of who he was. He was from New Jersey, so if you've ever seen *Jersey Shore*, he had this big tattoo right here, (points to his arm) and it was just this NYFD, and it had flames coming out of it, and this fire hose wrapped around his arm, and it was just so much of who he was. He had the uniform.

So, Presley, when she was little, she would put on the coat and walk around the house, and it would just drag like a train, like a wedding dress, you know. The helmet, which was so big, you know she would dress up like the fireman. And our church was doing something like the Bible Reading Plan, where members of the body would write a devo, and he wrote a devo to go with the Scripture. And the devotional was all about 9/11, and what it was like to be there as a fireman and helping people fight for their life. And he put it out there on the World Wide Web and someone reached out to us from New York, a fireman from New York, and just said, "Hey, that guy was never a fireman." He said, "I've checked all the rosters and all the rolls. He was never a fireman." And I said, "No, he was fireman. You know he's got the vanity plates, he's got the tattoo, and he's got the uniform. He lives with us. We've heard the stories. He was a fireman." He said, "No, he was never a fireman."

And so, I sat down with him and said, "Hey, this accusation that has been brought against you. They're saying you were never a fireman, which I know is crazy, because you got the plates and the tattoo and the uniform and the stories." He said, "Yeah, this is crazy. I was." And I said, "Are you sure?" He said, "Yes I was a fireman." I said, "Are you sure?" He said, "Yes" I said, "Okay, well then we need to meet with this fireman in New York and bring reconciliation to this." And he said, "No. I was lying. I wasn't. I just came forward." He said, "Not a fireman." And I wasn't even mad.

I remember when that happened, and I felt sad, because where my mind went is all of the work that he had done to manufacture these stories. Could you imagine going to the DMV and saying, “Hey, I want a vanity plate.” “What do you want it to say, sir?” “Well, FDNY.” Going and buying the legit suit and the helmet, getting a tattoo? “Yeah, I’m a fireman.” You’re just so entangled in a lie at that point that you’re believing it. It made me really sad for him.

And maybe that’s you. You got a Bible, tattoo, and some church clothes. Maybe you lead a group. I’ve heard stories of pastors. I know a pastor who became a Christian preaching a sermon in his church. True story. But here’s the good news, the distance between you and being a real follower of Jesus ... is Jesus. All that happens is you turn to Him and you say, “God I’m a fraud. I haven’t been following You. I’ve been making others think I’m following You, and I’m tired.” You examine what you do, when you’re by yourself. It’s just you and God and no one can praise you for that. It’s going to be really telling and if that’s where you’re at, even in the movie *Catch Me if You Can*, he gets so tired of running that he turns himself in. He cuffs himself and willingly walks out.

I’m just so tired of running. That’s what you do. Right now, you just say, “God I surrender. Like Barnabas, I surrender my life to You. Right now, I believe that You sent your Son, Jesus, to die for my sins, and I believe you raised Him from the dead, and I’m placing my faith in that. And I want to follow You.” And in that moment, you went from being a fraudulent Christian to the real deal. And tell somebody! Let me pray.

Help us, God, in that. That’s probably rather terrifying us, knowing what’s true of us, and what we believe about You. I pray that we would take these things that You’ve entrusted to faithful people, or that You’ve taught in the presence of many witnesses, and that we would entrust them to faithful people. To be multiplied for those of us struggling with shame and guilt right now. Just like it’s something, it’s not of Your Spirit, maybe of the enemy. I pray that You would just center our mind around the cross and in place of a payment, where Your wrath was satisfied. Help us to hold fast to that. And for those of us that multiple times throughout this morning, we’ve just thought, “Man, I am going to be found out today!” would you mercifully expose us. Bring that to the light and help us to walk in the light. And help us not to manage perception, but just be true followers of You, through your Son, Jesus Christ. It’s in His name we pray, amen.