

NATIONAL COMMUNITY CHURCH

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Counterfeit gods

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I'm fascinated by the trailer that our team put together, because of the imagery that you see on it. It's us holding God in our hands and it can go two ways, right? It can go one way, which is us seeing a beautiful picture of us getting a vision or a revelation of God, but it can also be dangerous. It's a piece of mirror. It's a broken piece of glass in our hand. It can actually cut you. Blood can come down. It could be an incomplete picture of God. It could be at the wrong angle. It could kind of be a misconception of God, if you will, and if you put it in the hands of an angry person, that doesn't just hurt them, but it can actually hurt somebody else around them, right? It's God in the hands of angry people.

So gracious God, we come to you now asking that you would give us a clearer picture of who you are. And I pray today that you would help us to push aside those falsities, those misconceptions of you. In Jesus name. I pray these things. Amen.

I was a junior in high school and a young man showed up at our youth group and he was kind of reserved, laid back a little bit. He wasn't really engaging the first time I met him. He wasn't really engaging in our joking and worst of all he was from our rival high school. I did not like those guys. And it's because they were probably pretty good. And uh, and they talked a bigger game than they played. We know how that works out in the end, though don't we, like by the end of the game, right? And I think we took care of business and, you know, how it works, like the older you get, the better you were. Right? So I probably had about 52 points I'm guessing in that game. Last year was 42, but next year it will be my first 60 point game, but we took care of business. And this guy, he kept showing up and he kept coming, but I did something. I just decided, I don't think so, you know, I'm not gonna, I don't think I'd be friends with that guy. And so I just stayed clear because of my own judgements because of my own assumptions about him, because of his association with other people that I didn't necessarily want to be out or, that I liked. Fast forward a couple of years and we actually ended up at the same college and we ended up with the same group of crazy friends and I got to know this guy and I love this guy. He's a great guy. And he was fun. He was challenging. He was loyal. Just a good guy who became one of the most meaningful friendships in my life. All of that could have never happened, why? Because I made assumptions about him because of his associate. I decided, no, I'm going to make a judgement and I'm not going to enter into that relationship. Don't tell me you don't do this in your life. As soon as you hear somebody's political affiliation, don't tell me you don't make 150 assumptions about them. Right? What about deeper places? What about when you see somebody's race? Do you make certain stereotypes about them? Do you make certain assumptions? Do you have misconceptions about them and here's what happens when when we, when

we push through those things, it's that beginning picture. Where we see a beautiful picture and our minds are opened up to a new vision. We find a new relationship, but when we go the other direction and we live in our assumptions, what's the result? Anger, loss, a missed opportunity. So my goal today is not to push you to gain a deeper level of faith. My goal today isn't to convince you that there's a God. My goal today is to maybe help us weed through some of the misperceptions and the misconceptions, the untruths about who God truly is.

A well known. Atheist and author Richard Dawkins said something really interesting. He said, we are all atheists about most of the gods that societies have ever believed in. Some of us just go one god further. Andy Stanley talks about this, and he talks about how early Christians, how they were actually seen as atheists because they didn't believe in the god of Jupiter. They didn't believe in the god of Zeus. They didn't believe in a Caesar. They didn't bow down to Caesar even though he had this whole salad thing going for him. They did not go there. They didn't believe in the Pantheon of Gods. They didn't think that, OK. It's like whenever God gets a new whim, he just throws some people around or he throws this down and this wrath happens. No, they didn't believe in that and so they were coined as atheists, but they kind of stood up saying like, no, we're not atheist. We just think you have the wrong god. And maybe some of us that are here listening today saying, you know what? I kind of stepped back. I stepped away things or I'm on the outskirts because that's kind of how I feel like, I was pursuing. But you know what? To be honest, I was pursuing the wrong god. Now my experience in, in conversation with with friends about faith or a lack thereof, it's often illuminating to me because I appreciated diving into questions that challenged me because I always grow through those experiences, but here's what's interesting. Sometimes I'll actually agree with an agnostic or an atheist or a disillusioned believer and it's not that I agree with the end of their premise, it's that I agree with the fact that this God that you're describing, I don't believe in that God either. No, that's, that's a, that's a false god. That's a counterfeit god. That's, that's the wrong god.

In other words, many times the roadblocks that get in the way of faith or misconceptions about God or counterfeit gods. Now, can I just be honest today? I think some of us are here and we have faith in the wrong god. We have put faith in a counterfeit god in a misconception that we have learned, that we have heard, that we have brought up with us, and that just means that our foundation is not in a steady place, but it's a god of our own making. And Psalm 50:21 God says this, says 'these things that you have done and I have been silent. You thought that I was one like yourself'. Pastor Mark talked about this last week didn't he? And he talked about the idea that, God stepped in and he made us in his image and we have returned the favor ever since. And it's called something. It's called anthropomorphism, projecting human characteristics on God.

There was an interesting and controversial brain study done at the University of Chicago. And, uh, it was a study on the brain of these participants as they tried to help

them almost relate or understand God. And so they took these fMRI's and they studied their brain while they ask them God's specific questions. And what they found was that activity was found in the medial prefrontal cortex. And it's also an area that is linked to self referential thinking and so the brain, it remained active or a buzz as they asked questions about God, and then as they asked them questions about self, but when they started asking questions about other people, it actually became passive. And so there's all kinds of interesting theories that can come out of this and certainly controversial ones. But I think here's an interesting one just to look at the link between our understanding within our natural brain, the same specific area that when we think thoughts of God and when we think thoughts of self, they're very similar. And so what happens is this. If we just get a little bit off, if we just veer this way a little bit, all of a sudden, God's priorities, God's thoughts, God's ideas, God's ways can easily become my thoughts, my abilities, my ways, and we can begin to intertwine a projection of our self onto God. I wish I had time to go on another study because it talks about this idea of the height of the way that we think ourselves and we give ourselves so much grace and forgiveness in how we relate in certain things and so whether its motivations or thoughts or ideas, and so we release our character and we allow our circumstances to become the judgment upon which we look upon ourselves. And so we intertwine, we almost project ourselves to God

In a book called 'Windows into the Bible'. Marc Turnage talks about how Christians throughout history have framed their understanding and interpretations of the Bible and spiritual life through the context of the Cultural Lens. So take Nazareth where Jesus grew up, right? This is his hometown growing up, and there's this church right in the middle of Nazareth that's called the Church of the Ascension. And if you go inside, it's beautiful art. It's unbelievable. You'll see this art from all over the world of different depictions of Jesus and of Mary and so you walk around and you see these unique depictions, but here's what's interesting. You can see one with an Anglo-Saxon version. You can see one with kind of a middle, ancient Middle East version. If you go over to the one from China, you see a Mary and Jesus that are Chinese, and so you start to notice something, OK, there's all this uniqueness in the depiction, but there's this thread that each depiction is based upon the culture in which they come from. What does it mean? When we receive God through the lens of culture we end up with a god and made in our own image. Romans 1:25, they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator. Exodus 20 verse three, thou shalt have no other God before me. Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image. So what's the scripture saying? Don't accept a counterfeit god. There is a counterfeit version of me out there. Do not engage in it. It might have come from a good person, it might have come from an assumption growing up, but don't allow that to, but instead pursue the one in the one and the true God.

Now I want to take the next moments just to dive in and actually talk about six different counterfeit gods. I can't cover everything, but I hope that I can at least wet the appetite and maybe, maybe just something might be a conviction as we walk through these things. OK?

So number one, secret service god. Alright. I'm going to start right there. It's a conception of God that says if you serve God, then he will keep you from harm or pain or suffering. This goes deep for many of us because somebody along the lines, they came across our path and maybe it was a pastor or maybe it was a friend or maybe it was something that we just kind of gleaned growing up that this idea that bad things won't happen if we're seeking God. It's like we're driving around in a spiritually armed car, right? And nothing can get us. Nothing can hurt us. Maybe you know, maybe we'll hit a few bumps and get a few bruises, but we will be safe and then all the sudden we get hit and it hurts a little bit, doesn't it? Or even worse, somebody in our family gets hit and our faith blows up. We lose our faith because we're, we're disillusioned because we thought, God, like you'll keep us perfectly safe, and we stopped believing in secret service god. Did you know that our faith, Christianity was founded on suffering? The story that we always come back to is the story of this really good guy who stepped into a really horrible suffering, and then you know what follows all his disciples, all of our heroes, all of them step into horrible circumstances and pain and persecution and suffering, and this is the story when you read the scripture, you see it all over the place. Acts chapter fourteen, Paul told, his young churches, he says, through many tribulations, we must enter the kingdom. James says, counted all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds. Jesus said, if they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. Peter said, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you. All these different scriptures.

A friend of mine was, he's had a long journey with God and he grew up and going to mass, actually thought he was going to become a priest and a good kid. And he was given kind of these fixed and finite ideology of God and he took those in and receive those and, and the older he got, OK, you know, I have this idea that God is if, if I serve God, that he'll just take care of business. It was almost like a mob boss god mentality. Like, OK, just you do that and everything will be good. And that's what I said bought, but when it got personal, you know, I understand maybe I'll have a few bumps, but, but when it got personal and my sister was taken...whew! My sister, do you know who my sister is? My sister, do you know who my sister is, he said. My sister is this amazing woman and she has gifts that I've never seen in anybody else. And she was a wonderful person. She added value and, and how could she leave this earth? And, and it hit him hard, made him disillusioned. He found heard and here's what he said, it made me question, if I don't know that God is going to take care of her, I don't know if God is real. That story didn't fit my structure as I grew up in life. I didn't have the faith that matured and her death shattered that inflexible basic and childish perception. We walk away from God because of a false perception of God. He said, I didn't want to walk away from God. I envied people who had a dynamic faith, but I needed to be honest with myself.

I'm so thankful for his honesty. I'm thankful that he's chosen to come to NCC and he would say this. He would say, I'll be honest, I'm on a journey, but he also talks about how he has had to set a preconception and he has had to overcome that and deconstruct his faith, and now he's beginning to reconstruct it with all the misperceptions set aside and God is doing a new thing within him, within his heart. I hate to burst any bubbles here today, but God does not promise an easy life or a lack of pain. He does the opposite in fact, he promises us pain. He foretells pain in front of us, but he also promises presence that he will be with us even until the very end of the age and he promises us the hope of glory. And think sometimes we allow our western understanding to almost be goggles to our faith, don't we? That's what we have here and all the benefits that those become expectations within our heart or within our faith, but when you go over to Uganda, when you go over to Indonesia, when you go over to Syria and you, you meet these people of faith, yet they're in poverty or they're in pain or they're in suffering or they're in hurt and it has no effect whatsoever on their faith and no even thought within their mind. It helps you begin to understand, maybe I got some goggles on here. Maybe I have a misperception of who God is and of what he does. We think are our nationalistic rights or safeties are assumed in faith, but God promises us blessing. What is blessing? It's his presence.

Number two, Frankenstein god, the idea that God is pieced together by our best thoughts and our best associations and we make up our own rules and regulations for who God is. This God might be one thing to one person and this God might be another thing to another person over here and now an example might be a that I liked the person of Jesus, but I don't like the concept of sin and I just choose this because it's a conversation that I've had before. OK? So like Jesus don't like sin, but there's some difficulty in there. You know why? Because Jesus constantly talks about repentance. It's one of the things he calls on now, always healing. He's always helping. He's always caring. He's always hanging out. He's always going to parties, but, but you know what, his most common call is to repent of sin and so these two things like they go, they come together in a package deal. Now there's multiple issues in here because when you take out sin, grace, you know what? It doesn't really mean anything. To receive grace is built on the premise that there is sin. A guy named Dietrich Bonhoeffer, he's the pastor who tried to ignite the church to act against the Holocaust. He talks about this idea. He says this, he says, cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves. Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, it's baptism without discipline, communion without confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ living an incarnate. We try to build our own God, don't we? We take whatever we want and we're building a Mister Potato Head. And we're OK, I like these things and I liked some of this over here and we put it together and that's fine because you created what you want, but guess what? The thing that you created is dead. It's fake. There's nothing in it. We can't create God. We can't put together our own Frankenstein god.

Number three, slot machine god. This god exists just to meet our need. If I pray, I expect to get what I asked for. If I put a quarter in the slot machine, I should win something. Who told you that God responds in a way that you expect Him to respond? I have a whole book of test cases of stories, of narratives. It's called the Old Testament and the New testament. It's a whole book that shows completely opposite evidence of this idea. There's a misconception that God exists to bring us happiness, and when we have that misconception, then we're completely disappointed or disillusioned when God doesn't live up to our expectations. When motherhood is a lot harder than we thought it would be. When our marriage is on the rocks and it's rough, when we don't get that job that we wanted, when we don't get that favor that we asked for, when we don't find the person that we want to love and we deserve in our life and we get so disappointed and so what do we do? OK, I'm going to pray. OK, now I'm going to, I'm going to pray more. I'm going to keep, I'm going to fast. Then I'm going to, OK, I'm going to serve, I'm going to worship, I'm going to go and I'm going to go to this event, and we just keep cranking that. OK? And then finally, oh, why am I not winning what I expect to come out of this slot machine? Because that's not a real god. That's a figment, that's a creation of our own mind. God is not subservient to my expectations on him.

Number four, association god. This is the belief that God is the direct reflection of anyone who claims to have religion. When talking with one of our family members, this often comes up when we talk about God, they consistently talk about, one of God's followers or one of the issues with, with people who claim God, and so they constantly judge God based on the imperfections of people. Now this can go two ways. We can actually take it to the opposite side as well. It can work in a different way in this, we can build a false god by pinning our faith or basing our faith on somebody else's faith. I've done this before, number of years ago, one of my spiritual heroes or spiritual mentors, they fell. They had a moral failure, and so we sat down, they sat me down over a cup of coffee. I'll never forget that moment, drinking a cup of coffee and hearing a tearful explanation of their failures, and you know what? It shook my faith. It pushed me out and it shook what was underneath my feet. Now, not long after that, my dad passed away. Some other things kind of came in all at the same time and now I've found myself in a rough place, but here's what I realized in that season, I had faith in somebody else's faith. Anybody ever been there? All of a sudden you realize, OK, I have this consistent faith in my lifetime, but it's in that person over there and good or bad that's a false faith. That's a false god. That is the association god and listen, as great as heroes can be, as great as mentors can be, as great as disciplers can be, God has no grandchildren.

Number five, thoughtless god.. This is a god that says don't question anything, right? I think I jumped the gun earlier. I think this is actually mob boss god right here. Don't you dare question anything. You just, here's your instruction. You take it, you go do it, right? I know a guy up there and he knows a guy and he's going to get you to the guy. Just do it. Don't question, just do it. Do it. Do it right? And it's this idea that we can't quit and so we we throw a whole branches of study out the window, don't we? We don't even go there, whether it's science or psychology or different ideas and you feel this tension at

certain point. Maybe you're in high school and you're here and you're listening and you feel some of that tension, don't you? Or you're hearing this thing taught, but then you don't know if that matches up and you're not sure what or maybe you're in college or at different points in your life where you feel this tension coming together and your Sunday school god just isn't quite getting there. Isn't quite living up to the building, but we pick and choose, don't we? And let's be honest, maybe we get a little hypocritical, right? Because. OK, I don't think. No, we're not going to go there, we're not going to subscribe to that. But then, oh, well, medicine. I mean, yeah, that's probably. Yeah, that's a good idea. Right? And so like if we were to have a medical issue here today with somebody's heart, what would we do? We would immediately call the ambulance and the ambulance would come and we would trust the EMT. We would trust the nurse, we would put full faith in the doctor and, you know, we wouldn't stop the doctor to say now I'm not sure if your studies match up with my faith. I'm just, so let's hold off. We're going to. No, let's keep them here. No, we wouldn't do that. And what would we do, we would pray for them. We would pray for the doctor and then we would thank God that he's given us knowledge of his designed creation to be able to more effectively heal and help those in need. And so we, we, we kind of, we take certain things and we pick and we choose and we almost become hypocritical in this idea of the thoughtless God.

I know many of us have felt that tension, but I just want to give a couple of thoughts if you've ever felt that tension that, that I have to either choose science or God, I just, that's a false alternative. It's not just one or the other. I love what Pastor Mark says. He says, every 'ology' is a branch of theology, right? That we're learning about God. The more we learn about creation, the more we are learning the things that we discover about our bodies, about our world, about the universe that's discovering how God did it. Isn't that awesome? We're growing so when we think of, OK, I believe that God created time and space and he created matter. And when I began to pursue and become edgy and learn about those things, I'm learning more about him. Isn't that an awesome thing to be educated about the things of God and the things that he has done and the beauty of his creation? It actually teaches us more about God when we understand that the earth is the perfect distance away from the sun so that we can have the right environment and the right temperature that we can live. When we understand that the atmospheric pressure in our world is exactly right, to be able to hold water at surface level and when we understand that there's the perfect amount of heavy mass and then different materials to kind of work together in an environment to create life and to allow life to arise out of the earth. Every one of those things leads me to what to say. Hallelujah. Glory to God. You have so uniquely created our bodies and our minds and this world and the more I learn about it, the more I can worship you and the more I believe in God and his power and his ultimate design and creation all around us, they all make us in awe that there is a great designer. In fact, Christians launched the modern science movement. That's where it all started with believers, with Christians. Your understanding of his world doesn't take away your appreciation of God. It enhances it. There is no thoughtless god

Last god number six, emotional god. This is the god who always needs to be felt. You sense him, right? You feel him and then one day you don't, and what do you do with that? OK, I'm not sure what to do. If you don't feel them, then he doesn't exist. If he doesn't feel near in a moment or a season, you start to question his very existence. I'm not sure where we got this idea, but I do know this it doesn't mean there's no emotion or feeling within a sense of spirituality or relationship with God because I think maybe it comes from associations that there are those moments where we're overcome by God's grace and there's an emotional responses isn't there, but to measure God based on our emotions or based on our feeling is completely inaccurate of who he is. You are the least aware of the things that are most constant. Isn't that true? Like the temperature in this room? You probably haven't been thinking about it this whole service. Maybe there's a few people I don't know I see some sweaters and some fans, I don't know. But when the temperature is perfect, you're unaware of it. The things that are most present you are most unaware of, its those constants, those things that are, there is no emotional god. These are all counterfeit gods, gods that some of us still believe in, gods that some of us have walked away from, but they come from different places, from childhood descriptions. They come from explanations from well meaning people or from even good people, or maybe they come from somebody who is trying to manipulate them to work you or to work some sort of situation, but they're counterfeit.

Matthew chapter 16, verse six, Jesus says to his disciples, he says, be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and the Sadducees. He's saying, beware, beware of those teachings, those misconceptions that are off, that are wrong, that are incongruent with who I truly am. Beware of the partial truths. And then in verse 13, he says, when Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, he said, who do people say the son of man is? They replied. Some say John The Baptist, others say Elijah, and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets. So he then talks through those misconceptions. He has them voiced them. He identifies like we've done today, identifies misconceptions about himself and that's not who I am. And then he asked the follow up question. Doesn't he? In verse 15, he takes them to the next point, but what about you? But what about you, he asks? Who do you say that I am?

Just coming out of this, out of these misconceptions. Could we just have a moment right here in the middle of this to just take a moment of reflection. I'm just going to ask a couple of questions. Think about this right now. You can take a few of these with you, but let me just ask a couple of questions. Who have others told you that God is? What are the misconceptions that you struggle with and where did they originate? What is the counterfeit god that you have decided is the only version of God? Did your god to ever grow up or did you never leave your childhood god. At some point I knew my kids were going to ask me that critical question. I knew it was coming. Dad, where do babies come from? I knew it was coming, right? Like all of us parents, we all know this question is coming, but we're always surprised when it hits us. Like, oh my God, like what do I do? And then we have no idea what to say at, OK, where's your mom? OK Nina, Nina, get over here. Got kids. You want some candy, Yahoo, ice cream. Who wants ice cream, you



know? And it totally catch us off guard but listen, when they asked that question, our answer depends on how old they are, how mature they are, where their understanding is. And so if a toddler asks that question, you give them a toddler appropriate answer. If an elementary school kid asks that question, you give them appropriate. If a teenager asked that question, you give them a unique answer. We don't lie to any of them, right? But we give them maturity appropriate answers. Where is their brain and their understanding, able to receive the information that I need to give them as an answer to their question? So here it is. Have some of us grown up physically, but in our faith we still have that elementary understanding and we just stopped. We just quit and that's where we're living and all of a sudden that that just doesn't fit our paradigm or the world's paradigm or experience anymore. So what do we do? We just take it and we throw it out or we set it aside. Listen, maybe there's a maturity to that, maybe that was a counterfeit god, I just. This is not any sort of proof of existence of God, but, but here's the idea that is posed to you today. Maybe you have thought about walking away from a god that is not true. That is a misconception and that is an assumption. So we've got to lay those things and set those things aside. Maybe God has a different idea for us to engage in, in this study and the scriptures and throughout this series as we continue to enter in. So let's keep growing together. Can we do that?

All right. The big question that we'll tackle next is this, how do I effectively read the scriptures, read the Bible, to weed out those counterfeit ideas that come against us and seek out the true and genuine God in his purest form? You want a five second answer on this? Come next week. All right, Pastor Heather's going to bring it next week, I'm looking forward to it. I hope you can be here. Let me just say thank you for allowing us to enter into this conversation. It's unique, isn't it? We're stepping into a different place and we're stepping in carefully, but you know what? We're family here and I love this that you know when, when Mother Teresa, years ago passed, then a couple years after, I think they published her diaries, remember this, and they were filled with faith and they were filled with doubt and a lot of people were disillusioned by the doubts. I never understood that because you know, I've learned that doubt is both a nemesis and a friend, right? That that at times it's held me back from truly finding my god-given destiny and image, but at other times, man, might, some of the deepest points of my faith has come out of doubt. So I just want to say we're family here and wherever you're at on your journey, God is not afraid of your doubt and neither are we. So we're going to keep stepping into the conversation. OK? So looking forward to continuing to do that, I want to invite our campus pastors that come at all locations and they're going to give our benediction. And we're going to close right there.