

The background is a vibrant red with a fine, pebbled texture. Scattered across this background are numerous books of varying sizes and orientations. Some books have black covers with a red cross, while others have light-colored, textured covers with a red cross. The books are positioned in a way that they appear to be falling or scattered randomly.

CHRISTIANITY'S

BIGGEST

QUESTIONS

HOW TO USE OUR MINISTRY PASS SERMON SERIES GUIDES

WHAT THIS GUIDE IS NOT

- > This guide isn't a set of sermon manuscripts. While sermon manuscripts can be both useful and a powerful training tool, our sermon series guides are different. Rather than tell you what to say, our aim is for this material to spark your imagination, assist you in planning your sermon, and offer a boost to your study time.
- > This guide isn't ironclad. While we hope you use our material, the pieces of this document are designed to be moved, tweaked, and altered. As you study the suggested passages, and pray through your message, this guide will hopefully be a launching pad, rather than a landing net.

WHAT THIS GUIDE IS

Included in each guide is:

- > A sermon series outline that breaks up the teaching set into a specific number of weeks.
- > A "big idea" of the series.
- > A passage, "big idea" of the sermon, topic list, and a number of illustrations and talking point ideas are included in each weekly section. The "Sermon Ideas and Talking Points" area is filled with observations about the text, relevant applications, creative ideas, and illustrations.
- > A small group discussion sheet (located in a separate document in this bundle).

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

- > Plan ahead. Our guides are best utilized in advance versus the day or night before. Read over the ideas and illustrations provided, thinking through how you can possibly utilize them in your message. We've purposely kept our guides simple so as to give you the best opportunity to create your own, unique message.
- > While we give you a passage and "big idea" of the message, take time to study the text.
- > Utilize the media contained in this bundle to promote and communicate your series message.

Note: Although we've worked hard to verify the accuracy of the material in this guide, we encourage all pastors to carefully review the information before sharing it with their congregation.



MINISTRY PASS



Christianity's Biggest Questions

Big Idea of the Series: This youth and adult series examines four tough topics that are often thought about (if not asked) by those inside and outside of the church. If Christians really love Jesus, why is there so much hurt in the church? How can we trust the Bible? What's the relationship between faith and science? Is abortion wrong? There are no easy answers, but Scripture helps us navigate these questions with wisdom, grace, and intelligence.

Week 1

Text: Matthew 23:1–36

Topic(s): Church, Hypocrisy, Influence

Big Idea of the Message: If Christians really love Jesus, why is there so much hurt in the church? Jesus confronted the hypocrisy of religious people and desires his disciples to walk in love.

Application Point: Only when we stop pretending the church is perfect can we invite Jesus to conform us more and more to his image.

Sermon Ideas and Talking Points:

1. You don't have to look far to meet someone who has been hurt by the church. "In fact, one Barna study among unchurched adults shows that nearly four out of every ten non-churchgoing Americans (37%) said they avoid churches because of negative past experiences in churches or with church people" ("Millions of Unchurched Adults Are Christians Hurt by Churches but Can Be Healed of the Pain," *The Barna Group*, April 12, 2010, <https://www.barna.com/research/millions-of-unchurched-adults-are-christians-hurt-by-churches-but-can-be-healed-of-the-pain/>). From sexual abuse cover-ups to embezzled funds, the church is not without its own brokenness and sin. This makes sense because the church is full of imperfect people with the capacity to sin. As we exert our free will, we also exert our own ability to inflict harm. Jesus reserved some of his harshest critiques for the religious leaders. His words still ring with truth for the modern Christian.

2. Matthew 23 begins with Jesus speaking to the masses: his disciples and those in the crowd (v. 1). He encourages them to do as the religious leaders say, not as they do (v. 3). The scribes were the religious teachers of the day and the Pharisees were a specific sect, what we might call a denomination, of Judaism. They were not mutually exclusive, so for the purpose of this study we will lump them together as religious leaders. Jesus explains that these leaders were hypocrites. They were more interested in looking holy and important than living a life of service (vv. 5–7). Jesus tells his listeners that we are all equal and that the only true teacher is Christ (vv. 8–10). Those living a life of humility and service are the ones who deserve to be exalted (vv. 10–12). Then Jesus turns the conversation towards the scribes and Pharisees and delivers seven “woes.” In this passage, Jesus acts as a righteous judge and delivers the just indictment of the leaders and their hypocrisy. First, he accuses them of preventing others from entering the kingdom. This is primarily because they reject Jesus as the Christ (v. 13). Second, they would work hard to convert someone and then subject them to a corrupt theology that placed the authority of the rabbis over the Scriptures (v. 15). In the third woe (vv. 16–22), “the Pharisees and teachers of the law were encouraging evasive oaths that amounted to lying. Jesus’ point was that people should tell the truth. Jesus condemned His critics for mishandling the Scriptures that they claimed to defend and expound” (Thomas L. Constable, *Notes on Matthew* [2020], 539, <https://planobiblechapel.org/tcon/notes/pdf/matthew.pdf>). The fourth and fifth woes dealt with the legalistic hypocrisy of the leaders. They tithed faithfully but did not practice justice, mercy, and faithfulness of heart (vv. 23–24). They were diligent in following the laws to be ritually and externally clean but neglected the filth of their “greed and self-indulgence” (vv. 25–26). In an effort to help visitors who had made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the Passover, the local Jews would whitewash the gravestones, making them visible, so they would not be touched, for doing so would make one unclean. Jesus used this illustration in the sixth woe (vv. 27–28) because the “Pharisees prided themselves on punctilious observance of the Law (Gr. *nomos*). Ironically, their failure to understand and apply the Law correctly made them lawless (Gr. *anomia*) in Jesus’ view. *Anomia* is a general word for wickedness in the New Testament. Jesus implied that the Pharisees’ whole approach to the Law was in fact *wicked*” (Constable, *Matthew*, 541). Jesus ends the series of woes by calling the leaders out for pretending to honor the prophets and martyrs of the faith, when they are rejecting their teachings by rejecting Jesus (vv. 29–36).
3. As evidenced by this passage, the letters to the churches in the book of Revelation (Revelation 2–3), the teachings of Galatians (legalism), Colossians (heresy), 2 Timothy (leadership transition tensions), Philippians (conflict and selfish ambition), and 1 and 2 Corinthians (pride and arrogance), we know that God has high expectations for the church. It is also obvious that church disfunction is not a new issue. It seems like it’s always been kind of messed up. The only way to overcome sin in our own lives and in the church as a whole is through confession, repentance, forgiveness, and restoration found through Jesus. Pretending we don’t need help keeps us from healing and wholeness in Jesus. Pretending the church doesn’t need help prevents it from inviting Jesus to

conform it more to his image. We must face its inadequacies with the hope that Jesus is truly the way towards holiness. We do this individually and corporately.

4. It is good to be reminded that the church isn't all bad. Greg Boyd writes, "Christianity isn't a religion or an institution of any sort; it's a relationship. Within the religion of Christianity there are, and have always been, genuine Christians—people who have a saving and transforming relationship with Jesus Christ. And this fact accounts for the tremendous good Christianity has brought to the world (in spite of the evils)" (Greg Boyd, *Letters from a Skeptic* [Colorado Springs, CO: Chariot Victor Publishing, 1994], 20).
5. The church is the people, not a building or a denomination, and through his people God has moved mightily in the modern world. Consult an online list of Christian contributions to society, like [this one](#) (note that the list is pretty dependent on Wikipedia, which is not the best source, but Wikipedia can lead you to additional substantive sources). Consider Christians like lawyer Bryan Stevenson (and author of *Just Mercy*) whose work with the inequalities directed toward those on death row and in the criminal justice system might seem the definition of hopeless—and yet Stevenson continues to have faith and to go on as a Micah 6:8 Christian (see Dominique DuBois Gilliard, "Bryan Stevenson Wants to Liberate People from the Lie That Their Life Doesn't Matter," *Christianity Today*, January 10, 2020, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2020/january-web-only/just-mercy-film-bryan-stevenson.html>). Think too of famous Christians like Fred Rogers, who helped an entire generation of children learn to deal with their emotions through *Mr. Roger's Neighborhood*. And consider that organizations like the YMCA, Salvation Army, World Vision, Habitat for Humanity, the Red Cross, Save the Children, Amnesty International, Alcoholics Anonymous, and many more have Christian roots. Consider also [the Christian impact on modern science](#). And explore [the biographies](#) of these famous Christians, many of whom made enduring contributions to modern thought, mercy work for those in need, science, and the arts.
6. The church and its people are imperfect. One of the first things the Holy Spirit impresses upon us as we move toward salvation is that we are unrighteous. We are unholy, but we find hope in the holiness of Christ. His grace gives us the motivation to do the things that will honor him instead of dishonoring him. In the movie *A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood*, Joanne Rogers tells a writer who is working on a magazine profile that Fred is not perfect but he chooses his responses wisely and practices things like prayer, Bible reading, writing letters, and exercise that help him to stay grounded in a challenging world (<https://www.wingclips.com/movie-clips/a-beautiful-day-in-the-neighborhood/married-to-a-saint>). Simple disciplines keep us rooted in faith so that we can follow Jesus instead of living as a hypocrite.

Week 2

Text: 2 Timothy 3:14–17

Topic(s): Scripture, Inerrancy, Textual Criticism

Big Idea of the Message: How can we trust the Bible? We can trust the Bible as God's Word because of its enduring message. The Bible remains the primary way God teaches, encourages, and guides humanity.

Application Point: The believer can be confident that the message of the Scriptures is reliable and relevant to their lives.

Sermon Ideas and Talking Points:

1. This short video from The Bible Project (episode 1) illustrates what the Bible is and how it came to be: <https://thebibleproject.com/explore/how-to-read-the-bible/>.
2. Paul is writing to his young protégé Timothy. He has just finished telling Timothy that the times they live in are difficult and will likely get worse. People are going to become more selfish, more arrogant, greedier, more brutal, and less interested in God and his ways. They will pretend to be godly but instead do what they want, led by their own desires (2 Timothy 3:1–9). Paul tells Timothy that he is different. Timothy has watched how Paul has lived, his faith, his love, his struggles. Timothy recognizes that a life of faith will be difficult, but God is good (vv. 10–13). Paul wants Timothy to keep on keepin' on (v. 14). Timothy has been taught by the Scriptures since he was young. It has helped him become wise and led him to salvation through Jesus (v. 15). Paul tells the reader that Scripture is “breathed out by God,” and it is the path to understanding, instruction, discipline, correction, and growth (v. 16). Knowing Scripture equips the believer for living a life that aligns with God's will (v. 17).
3. When we read that Scripture is “breathed out,” we should be careful to remember that the Bible is sixty-six books written by approximately forty different people. The authoring of the Scripture through mortal hands “should not be viewed as one of which God breathed life into the words of an author after he had written them; if this were the case, they would be primarily man's words” (Paul D. Wegner, *The Journey from Texts to Translations* [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1999], 28). Neither did God use the authors as a pipeline for information to dictate. Instead, “God appears to have been so intimately involved in the lives of its writers that he knew what they would say and even how they would say it. Their individual personalities were thus combined with the indwelling, guiding work of the Holy Spirit to create Scripture” (Wegner, *Journey*, 29).
4. Logically speaking, we should address the idea of biblical transmission. We know that God's use of people to record and interpret his Word over thousands of years and hundreds of languages has some risk of misdocumentation. However, “we can confidently say that not one major doctrine of orthodox Christianity rests on any disputed or uncertain passage. We know what the Bible says and what it means” (Greg Gilbert, “Why Trust the Bible?,” *Crossway*, February 9, 2018, <https://www.crossway.org/articles/why-trust-the-bible/>).

5. The ideas of accuracy, reliability, and relevance of the Bible are answered in a succinct way in this video by the Canadian Bible Society:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bPaeo19sQXw>.

Week 3

Text: Psalms 104:1–35; 111:1–3

Topic: Science, Faith, Creation, Knowledge

Big Idea of the Message: What's the relationship between faith and science? Faith and science are not opposed. Christians have been the greatest proponents of scientific discovery, using their intellect to worship God.

Application Point: We should love God with all our minds.

Sermon Ideas and Talking Points:

1. Noted philosopher and scholar J. P. Moreland describes an interaction at a meeting he was speaking at. A man told Moreland, "I understand you are a philosopher and theologian. I used to be interested in those things when I was a teenager. But I have outgrown those interests. I know now that the only sort of knowledge of reality is that which can and has been quantified and tested in the laboratory. If you can measure it and test it scientifically, you can know it. If not, the topic is nothing but private opinion and idle speculation" (J. P. Moreland, *Kingdom Triangle* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007], 42).
2. Can you believe in science and also believe in the Christian faith? Are the two strictly opposed to each other; one an antiquated view of the world and the other the contemporary and educated view of how things are? For some Christians this can be difficult. Over the last one hundred years the fight over religion and science has brought about tremendous contention in our classrooms, pulpits, and workplaces. There are many smart and scientific Christians who believe in the compatibility of science and the Christian faith. *The Veritas Forum* has created a video of some of the leading scientists throughout the world who are committed believers: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W8XmXSMxXHQ>.
3. In the 2006 comedy *Nacho Libre*, struggling priest and main character Ignacio asks his sidekick Esqueleto, "How come you have not been baptized?" Esqueleto replies, "Because I never got around to it, okay. I don't know why you always have to be judging me. Because I only believe in science" (<https://www.wingclips.com/movie-clips/nacho-libre/baptism>).
4. Many of the earliest scientists were Christians, both laymen and laywomen and clergy. They wanted to understand more about God's universe and began to develop theories and a wealth of knowledge showing how God's universe worked. Men like Isaac Newton, Johannes Kepler, and Galileo were dedicated to their religious beliefs. Galileo is noted for saying that "God is known by nature in his works, and by doctrine in his revealed word" ("Galileo Galilei," *Christianity Today*, from *131 Christians Everyone Should Know* [Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2000], 355–57, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/people/scholarsandscientists/galileo-galilei.html?share=ipMWw8NQTtBPa9r8bB95vp9bq19BWwWP>).

5. Famous actress and scientist Mayim Bialik, describes her own personal belief in God, via her Jewish faith, and how she sees it relating to and not contradicting her scientific study: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qZh1MrDHL0Y>.
6. We were created to worship God with all of our being; this includes our intellect and ability to study and reason. Matthew 22:37 says, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” Psalm 111:2 tells us that “great are the works of the LORD, studied by all who delight in them.” Psalm 104 describes God’s interaction with his creation, “He set the earth on its foundations, so that it should never be moved” (Psalm 104:5). The psalmist describes how the moon marks the seasons and the sun knows when to set (v. 19). In all of these descriptions from Scripture, we see someone observing the power of God from nature. Not just the power of creation, but God’s continued interaction with sustaining it. God desires us to love him with our minds—thinking, exploring, and discovering his world through the natural sciences.

Week 4

Text: Genesis 1:26–31

Topic(s): Abortion, Pro-Life, Human Dignity, Creation

Big Idea of the Message: By God’s creation, all human life is valuable.

Application Point: Being pro-life is about more than abortion. The believer should live in a way that honors the dignity of all humans, regardless of political policy or societal norms.

Sermon Ideas and Talking Points:

1. The Scripture teaches us that human life is different from other types of life, because human beings are made in the very image of God (vv. 26–27). This is an important distinction. Matthew Henry notes: “That man was made in God's image and after his likeness, two words to express the same thing and making each other the more expressive; image and likeness denote the likeliest image, the nearest resemblance of any of the visible creatures. ... God’s image upon man consists in these three things: ... his nature and constitution ... his place and authority ... his purity and rectitude” (Matthew Henry, *Commentary on Genesis 1*, https://www.blueletterbible.org/Comm/mhc/Gen/Gen_001.cfm?a=1026). God also gave the man and woman “dominion” over everything on earth (v. 26), imparting to humanity the task to serve as God’s representative on earth, in governing and stewarding the land and its creatures (vv. 28–30). This was not a mistake, or an oversight, or a creative hiccup; it was intentional and “very good” (v. 31).
2. The concept that humanity is made in God’s image is reaffirmed in the New Testament (James 3:9–10) and helps the believer understand that sin and brokenness do not negate the fact that we all remain image bearers of God. Jesus lived in a way that acknowledged equal human dignity of every person, despite what popular opinion may say. This is especially important when we consider what it means to be pro-life. Jesus erased the distinctions that would separate, and isolate people based on age, ability, gender, or nationality and

race. He welcomed the children (Matthew 19:13–15). He rejected social norms by engaging with tax collectors and sinners (Mark 2:16). He went against the crowd to reach out to those with a disability (Matthew 20:29–34) or suffering from disease (Luke 17:11–19). He reached out to the foreigner of another religion (John 4:9–27). Christ paid special attention to those considered insignificant by the majority. He elevated all as worthy of dignity.

3. Abortion has become a political lightning rod. It is an issue that many have made *the* issue, on either side of the political divide. For the believer, our views are not to be based on the opinions of those trying to get elected; our beliefs must be based on what God has shown us. It is certain that God values and elevates human life and human dignity. He also commands us not to take a life. How this is lived out in the life of a believer must move beyond elections and legislation. Julia Herrington writes about what she learned through working at a pregnancy resource center and why we need to have real conversations about this touchy issue. She writes, “Let’s get proactively involved in all the issues of life. We cannot be advocates for life and absent from the foster care system. We cannot advocate an abortion-free society and condemn unwed mothers. Let’s mobilize our churches to support young mothers and families. We must be bringers of life to the unborn and to the born. This is a critical conversation because we have misguidedly adopted a polemical framework for how we discuss abortion. Maybe it’s time to begin questioning all of the assumptions surrounding this issue that have been made since its conception: that it’s a women’s issue, that it’s necessarily political, or that apathy is an acceptable response. This matters because it’s all life. The man whose sexual formation is incomplete and ridden with cultural values which ultimately dishonor his sexual wholeness directly impacts the woman with the similar disadvantages. And they both directly impact the children born into tragedy as well as the children who do not ever get a chance. We cannot disregard this issue. We can no longer allow for the continued unquestioned oppression of women to persist. We need to reclaim healthy sexuality for ourselves, our children, our communities and our culture. And we must defend the weak, the defenseless; the children who might not be born” (Julia Herrington, “How I Changed My Mind about Abortion,” *Christ and Pop Culture*, June 1, 2013, <https://christandpopculture.com/changed-mind-abortion/>).
4. Being pro-life is not just a religious point of view, as evidenced at the annual March for Life gatherings. *The Atlantic* profiled the event in 2019 and the experience of nonreligious attendees: <https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2019/01/march-life-secular-liberal-pro-lifers-feel-welcome/580837/>.
5. Scripture teaches us that all life is valuable. That means that believers must evaluate what it means to value the lives of all people. This can be especially difficult when we realize that Jesus erased distinctions over who we are to value and love, but we still tend to create “us and them” scenarios. What does it look like to value the ones who are different from you? Do I see value of the human being who is incarcerated, a sex worker, a refugee, poor, rich, an atheist, part of the LGBTQ community, a person of color, a Muslim, a member of another

political party, or whatever “them” we have created? This concept must infiltrate even the deepest recesses of our hearts and apply even to our greatest enemies and adversaries. Kyle Rohane wrote a sobering response to our tendency to celebrate death when it stems from our hatred. Using the example of known terrorist Osama Bin Laden, he wrote, “Many would agree with me that the world is a better, safer place without someone like Osama bin Laden. But even that thought is reason to grieve, not to celebrate. How evil are the designs of Satan, how corrupting the nature of sin to take humans created in God's image and twist them so far from his purposes—to the point that creation is better off without them? The snuffing out of God's image, no matter how twisted it has become, is a solemn event” (Kyle Rohane, “Dancing on Graves,” *Christianity Today*, April 18, 2013, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/2013/april-online-only/dancing-on-graves.html>).

6. Thanks be to God that he values our lives enough to give forgiveness and grace to each of us when we lose sight of human dignity. In 2014, a study conducted by the Guttmacher Institute (a pro-choice think tank) determined that 54 percent of women who sought abortions considered themselves Protestant, evangelical, or Catholic believers (<https://www.guttmacher.org/report/characteristics-us-abortion-patients-2014>). We should be grieved by these numbers, but we must also recognize that God is a God of restoration—and we get to take part in that restoration. We can give and accept God’s grace in our lives and his redemption over our failures. It is almost certain someone in the room has had an abortion (or influenced another person to have an abortion), but that does not mean that they are unforgivable. There is healing through the work of Jesus. There is also likely someone who is considering getting an abortion because they do not have the support they need—emotionally or financially—to consider another option. Be prepared with information about local resources for your attendees to get the help they need.

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