

CoreGroup Guide | Christian In Name Only - Part 1

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From Pastor Charity

This week we begin our new sermon series, *Christian in Name Only*. Our shared practice for this series is **Invite**. Take a minute to look at the *Start / Grow / Stretch* on the [Shared Practices](#) page and reflect on where you are and where you hope to go during this series. It's time for us to reclaim the narrative and get back to the heart of what it means to be Christian!

The memory verse for this series is 1 Peter 2:9 from the Common English Bible (CEB):

"But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people who are God's own possession. You have become this people so that you may speak of the wonderful acts of the one who called you out of the darkness into his amazing light."

Here are three simple ways to practice memorizing a verse:

1. **Write it** (one time a day on a notecard, in your notes app, or on your mirror).
2. **Say it out loud** (at the same time daily - driving, brushing teeth, before bed).
3. **Pray it** (turn the verse into a one sentence prayer for yourself or someone you love).

Finally, please take a moment to invite your group to our **One CoreGroup One Day** event happening on Tuesday, May 5, 2026, from 6:30-8:30pm at the McCausland Site. Experience the energy of being in one place, celebrate the highlights of CoreGroups, and look ahead to the fall. Attendees can expect food (Mexican!), worship, prizes, pictures, and so much more. Please encourage group participants to sign-up [HERE](#) before leaving your group today.

Welcome

Hello friends and welcome to the first week of *Christian in Name Only*. Over the next four weeks, we will take a deep dive into what it means to be Christian. It's weird to live in a time when so much harmful behavior is attributed to Christianity and The Church. So many unkind words and actions get thrown around in the faith we share, and this can be really confusing and disheartening. But this is not a new concept. Power, ambition, greed, tyranny, and hypocrisy are hardly Christ-like traits, and yet all of these things can be found in Christianity throughout history. In fact, our Bible reading this week focuses on several of these unholy attributes from ungodly people, and how Jesus responds to it all.

Let's first start our discussion with a prayer.

Opening Prayer

Hey God, please bless us with the feeling of your presence this week as we discuss what it means to follow you. Please guard our hearts as we discuss angry things done in your name. Guide us to clear understanding of our roles as your people and soften our words so that we are kind to one another. It is in your name we pray Lord, amen.

Ice Breaker

Can you remember your first experience with something being unfair? Was it an argument with friends, despair over a board game, or maybe even sibling rivalry? What was your experience and what did you learn?

The Head

Our Bible verses this week come from the New Testament book of Matthew. Now Matthew was one of the twelve disciples closest to Jesus and in chapter 23 we drop right into a fiery lesson Jesus is giving within the massive Temple complex in Jerusalem. His audience at this time would have included his disciples, many commoners (people drawn to Jesus) and religious leaders called Scribes (experts in the religious Law of Moses), Sadducees (wealthy religious aristocrats), and Pharisees (religious purists focused on legal religious interpretation).

Matthew 23:1-7

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them. They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. They love to have the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues, and to be greeted with respect in the market-places, and to have people call them rabbi."

- Phylacteries were typically small leather boxes worn by religious leaders on their belts that contained copies of the religious law copied on small scrolls. "Long fringes" was a reference to the outward appearance of someone trying to convey piety or holiness. Taking those items into consideration, what is Jesus actually saying here?

Matthew 23:13

'But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you lock people out of the kingdom of heaven. For you do not go in yourselves, and when others are going in, you stop them.'

- How do you think these leaders "locked" others out of the kingdom of heaven?
- Why would they stop others from getting closer to God?

Matthew 23:16-17

'Woe to you, blind guides, who say, "Whoever swears by the sanctuary is bound by nothing, but whoever swears by the gold of the sanctuary is bound by the oath." You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the sanctuary that has made the gold sacred?'

- The gold of the sanctuary written about here is a reference to the gold that adorned "sacred" objects used in religious practices. What is Jesus saying about the glitz in the church?

Matthew 23:23

'Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others.'

- Jesus describes expensive offerings here that were given without meaning. How is Jesus clarifying his thoughts about giving without spirit?

Matthew 23:27-28

'Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of filth.'" So you also on the outside look righteous to others, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

- Mic drop. This is clear. Jesus called out the religious-in-name-only. Approximately one week after he gave this fiery lesson, he was crucified, which adds some context about how uncomfortable Jesus made religious leaders feel. Why were his words here so threatening?

The Heart

We can see from the verses above that Jesus was really angry with how the church had taken the meaning out of worship and turned tradition into power, prestige, and profit. Of course, Jesus was in the process of changing the law and tradition to help people understand that God's will for us as believers was and is about spirit and truth and not about power, influence, and greed. Yet, those evil forces were constantly invading the way Jesus taught and those forces continue to infiltrate Christianity today.

- Why is power so addictive to some people?
- What might a "Christian in name only" look like today? What behaviors or outward appearances might they have? In what ways have you fit this description at times?
- Jesus was upset when leaders gave offerings without giving justice or mercy to others. Why does this matter to God?
- What habits or patterns have you caught yourself in that seem more like outward displays of faith rather than authentic belief?

The Hands

We have spent some time examining behaviors that use Christianity like a wolf in sheep's clothing. These behaviors clearly angered Jesus! As a comparison, this section will examine behaviors that Jesus supported as a path that Christians should walk.

In Matthew 22, from the same lesson Jesus gave in the Temple complex, Jesus was tested about his understanding of the Ten Commandments which were given to Moses and then to all Israelites in the book of Exodus more than 1,400 years before. His answer became known as the new covenant; a way to honor God in two statements.

Matthew 22:34-40

When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" He said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

- As Christians, what are some ways we can love the Lord?
- How might we express fullness of heart, soul, and mind?
- What does loving your neighbor as yourself look like?
- What are practical things we can do as Christians to love our neighbors?
- What are some practices we can put in place to make sure we are living and acting in line with our faith?

Closing Prayer

Oh Lord, There are influences in our lives that distract our thoughts and actions away from what we truly believe. Please forgive us for being distracted and help us to stay focused on your will for us. Guide us in ways that help others. Enlighten our minds to ways we need to act as believers. Show the path we need to take to fully honor you Lord. It is in your name we pray, amen.

Going Deeper

Maybe a "Christian in name only" could use an invitation to church. When we invite someone to come to church with us at The Gathering, is there an implied invitation to the Methodist denomination? The greater Church? The whole Christian faith? A relationship with Jesus?

- Can you invite a person to one of these without the others?
- When we extend an invitation to church, what are we really inviting people to?
- How might you nurture an invitational spirit throughout the rest of this series?