Today, the “fake it” approach is found in many business ventures, especially Silicon Valley start-ups and cryptocurrency. It pops up in what economics columnist Helaine Olen calls “the scrappy, optimistic mind-set of American hustle culture.” Think of Elizabeth Holmes of Theranos. Sam Bankman-Fried of FTX. George Santos of the United States House of Representatives. They tried to fake it till they made it, but they failed. The remedy for this kind of con, Olen says, is to “prioritize and reward diligent, honest effort,” not fake success that leads to disaster.

Jesus denounces the scribes and Pharisees for not practicing what they teach. Like Glenn Turner, who sold distributorships in his Ponzi scheme for $5,000, they “tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others” (23:4). Like Elizabeth Holmes, who claimed that her company had revolutionized blood testing, they “do all their deeds to be seen by others” (v. 5). Like Sam Bankman-Fried, who claimed a worth of $26 billion and who contributed to both political parties, 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 marketplaces” (vv. 6-7). The Scribes and Pharisees say all the right things, but they do not do them. According to Jesus, they are hypocrites. Charlatans. Phonies. Frauds. Fakes.

Jesus advises us to be wary of anyone who claims to be a parent or instructor to us, whether in the world of business, research, finance, or politics. Call “no one your father on earth,” says Jesus, “for you have one Father — the one in heaven. Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah” (vv. 9-10). We are to keep our focus on God, our Father in heaven, and on Jesus, our true instructor, as the ones who can show us how to make it without faking it.

Unfortunately, we are always looking for other, earthly saviors. We get excited when outsiders enter the political fray, from the left or the right, because we hope they will save us. We are suckers for business leaders who promise to make us successful, whether through mink oil makeup, biotechnology, or cryptocurrency. We find it hard to resist a charismatic leader who promises that we can get rich quick, without putting in honest, diligent effort over a long period of time.

Jesus understands the attraction of false messiahs. He knows we are more than willing to “fake it till we make it” as we try to get ahead in the world. Which is why Jesus turns our expectations completely upside down by saying that the “greatest among you will be your servant. And all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted” (vv. 11-12). We move up, by moving down.

All who exalt themselves will be humbled: which is certainly the fate of Glenn Turner, Elizabeth Holmes, and Sam Bankman-Fried. And all who humble themselves will be exalted: which is what we see any time a person has the courage to be a servant leader, putting the needs of others ahead of their own desires. In the upside-down world of the kingdom of God, the greatest of us will move up by moving down. We will not succeed by serving ourselves. We will succeed by serving others. A life of service requires persistent, genuine effort. There is no faking it with God.

The scribes and Pharisees were not evil people; nor are most leaders in business, technology, and finance today. Jesus did not hate the scribes and the Pharisees, but he held them accountable. He criticized their hypocrisy, saying, “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” (vv. 27-28). Jesus challenged them to be righteous both inside and outside, instead of clean on the outside and rotten on the inside. He wants us all to be people of integrity, not fakes.

If we want to be truly great in the eyes of Jesus, we need to find success through service; to put the needs of others ahead of our own; to see humility as the key to accomplishment. Instead of faking it until we make it, we should focus on honesty and justice.

Throughout the Bible, honesty is seen as a virtue in the community of faith and the wider world. The ninth commandment says that you “shall not bear false witness against your neighbor” (Exodus 20:16). “Lying lips are an abomination to the LORD,” says the book of Proverbs (12:22). Let “all of us speak the truth to our neighbors,” says Paul to the Ephesians, “for we are members of one another” (4:25). Honest speech is one of the building blocks of church and society, because it shows respect and a desire to treat others as we would like to be treated. We serve our neighbors by being honest with them, instead of trying to deceive them.

“Lying breaks trust and ruins relationships,” says pastor Daryl Wingerd. “When you lie, you damage your relationship with the person you lied to. Even if the person is unaware, *you* now know there is something broken between the two of you. If your lying becomes a pattern, it will eventually be detected, and that will put that person or group in the unfortunate position of not being able to trust you.” When we fake it with the people around us, we break trust and ruin relationships.

A focus on justice is important as well. Jesus honored the Old Testament prophets and echoed their focus on justice and righteousness. Jesus knew that the prophet Micah spoke against rulers “who abhor justice and pervert all equity, who build Zion with blood and Jerusalem with wrong!” (Micah 3:9-10). These are harsh words, because the rulers of Jerusalem gave “judgment for a bribe,” while its prophets gave “oracles for money” (v. 11).

Does that sound familiar? Even today, justice in the courtroom can be perverted by people who have the money to hire the best lawyers. Some churches ask for donations with the promise that their members will be blessed with prosperity. Often, these appeals are made to people who can least afford to make big donations.

Jesus, on the other hand, wanted people to be treated fairly, in courts of law and everywhere else. Jesus worshiped God instead of money, and Jesus focused his ministry on healing, helping, and feeding the most vulnerable people around him. Honesty and justice mattered to Jesus, and he practiced these virtues in everything he said and did. As Christians, our challenge is not to “fake it till we make it,” but to always speak the truth and treat others fairly. We move up by moving down, as we discover that true greatness comes from serving others.

Prayer: Jesus, Teacher and Lord, when we hear your criticism of the behavior of the scribes and the Pharisees in the gospel today, we wonder what has changed.  People still place unwarranted burdens on others, still demand preferential treatment, still abuse positions of leadership. We are ashamed to confess that this does not only happen in society at large, it happens also within the church. Forgive our participation in practices which inflate our egos at the expense of others.

Jesus, forgive us when we parade our piety and expect favored treatment, forgetting that you emptied yourself of power so that you could be the servant and Savior of all. Forgive us when we care more for impressive outward appearances rather than inner motivations shaped by tolerance and love.

Jesus, forgive us for any behavior which is experienced or perceived as hypocritical — any actions which lack integrity and justice. Renew and refresh us with your gentle and selfless Spirit, Lord, so that we know what it is to be your followers not only in name, but also in word and deed. Amen

**Sources:**

* Barnes, Mia. “Fake It Till You Make It: Is It Really Good Advice?” Science of People, [www.scienceofpeople.com](http://www.scienceofpeople.com).
* Olen, Helaine. “This all-but-forgotten con man sold America on ‘fake it till you make it.’” *The Washington Post*, February 27, 2023, www.washingtonpost.com.
* Wingerd, Daryl. “The Dangers of Dishonesty.” *Bulletin Inserts,*<https://bulletininserts.org>.

**No Faking It with God**

Sunday, November 5, 2023 [Matthew 23:1-12](https://biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+23%3a1-12&language=en&version=NRSVUE)

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

“Fake it till you make it.” I am sure you’ve heard the expression. People use it when they are so anxious to achieve a goal that they pretend to have real confidence and skills. By faking it for a while, they hope they will succeed. A certain amount of “faking it” is part of every person’s life. Starting a new job, you might fake it until you learn the ropes. Newcomers to 12-Step programs may fake it until they adapt to the challenges. If you want to date someone, you might fake self-confidence when asking them out, and if accepted, hope that real confidence will follow. To be a good dancer, you must get out on the floor and fake it for a while. To become part of a new school, church, or business you must throw yourself into the middle of the community and figure it out as you go. But there is also real danger associated with faking it until you make it.

Anna Sorokin got people to give her money by claiming to be a German heiress. By faking her identity, Anna collected nearly $300,000. Sorokin’s story is the subject of a Netflix series called Inventing Anna. Unfortunately, the “fake it until you make it” strategy only goes so far. There is a difference between learning new behaviors and lying about your identity or skills. One can build you into a better worker or friend; the latter can get you into trouble. Anna could only fake it for so long; she was convicted of fraud and is living under house arrest without access to social media.

Salesman Glenn W. Turner told people the key to being rich was investing in his marketing company. Some 60,000 people in 40 states and Canada worked for Turner. These people “would peddle ‘mink oil’ makeup and his ‘Dare to Be Great’ motivational tapes, and they would collect more money by recruiting others and taking a percentage on their sales.” When salespeople struggled to move up in the world, “they were told to ‘fake it until you make it’ by wearing expensive clothes and waving around $100 bills to lure in others.”

They faked it, but they never made it. Prosecutors in more than 30 states went after Turner’s company. One judge said that the phrase “fake it until you make it” was “evidence of malfeasance.” In 1987, Turner was convicted of running a Ponzi scheme, an investment fraud that pays investors with funds collected from new investors. Eventually the money dries up. There is no “faking it” when it comes to the law.