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How to Have Standards and Not Be a Legalist: Pharisees and Fundamentalists

Matthew 23

In this passage, Christ warns about hypocrites – actors pretending to be something they are not. As we start a series on sensitive issues, it would be good for us to study out what God has to say to this group, and ask ourselves if it applies to us.

Hard Truths about Hypocrisy (vv 1-12)

Anyone can be a hypocrite (vv 1-3)

Too often we define a hypocrite as someone with more standards than us, but the Bible leaves the term more open than that.

Hypocrisy is a matter of the heart (vv 4-12)

Hypocrisy is defined by Christ as wanting other to look well upon you. This fear of man causes a whole host of other problems, which Christ then points out in the following verses.

Characteristics of a Hypocrite (vv 13-36)

Hypocrites are headed for Hell (vv 13-15, 29-36)

The Pharisees were not believers who had things backwards, they were unregenerate people headed for an eternity away from God (although believers can struggle with the same issues they did: Matthew 16:5-12)

Hypocrites are always looking for a loophole (vv 16-22)

The more carefully detailed a certain standard becomes, the more people try to find a way around it.

Hypocrites major on the minor and miss out on the main things (vv 23-24)

The Pharisees actually succeeded at times in getting certain laws right. But they missed getting right the laws of God that mattered most.

Hypocrites are obsessed with the outside (vv 5-7, 25-28)

Since hypocrites care more about what others think than about what God thinks, they make sure their actions look great as their hearts become cold and dead.

Hope for Hypocrisy (vv 37-39)

Jesus reacted the way he did, not out of hatred but of love. He wanted them to come back, and some of them did. Some who heard this rebuke took it heart, but Christ left it up to them. "I would" he said, but he won't make.

You and I are likewise challenged to look at our lives and see if our behavior is motivated by love for God or fear of man. And if it is by fear of man, to allow a love for God to break us of pride and allow us to once again humbly, carefully follow our Lord.