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# SEVEN HABITS OF HIGHLY HYPOCRITICAL PEOPLE

**L**et's be authentic! I'm as anxious as you are about digging into what it means to be real people, but experience tells me that we can't start examining *authenticity* until we've confronted *hypocrisy*. We won't take seriously the practices of a sincere faith until we see the danger of insincerity. And believe me, there is a lot of pretense out there. All of us know people who wear masks; acting like they're something they're not. But if we're not careful, hypocrisy is an easy act to put on ourselves.

It would be massively hypocritical and truly inauthentic of me to race into this subject without stopping to disclose my own battles with hypocrisy. While, by God's grace, there is nothing "behind the curtain" that would make you want to throw this book in the fireplace, I have had seasons in my life since high school where my "public" outpaced my "private" and led inevitably to relational fallout and bitter tears. Like Peter after his 3-peat denial "**went out and wept bitterly,**"<sup>1</sup> I have felt the sting of being *for* Christ and others *far less* than I desired to be. I have lost my

cool with treasured staff. I have struggled to forgive when extended family has hurt me, and I have neglected my wife and kids for brief periods when the demands of opportunity outshouted personal sanity. I have seen a few things a man of God should not look at and handled pressure in ways that protected self instead of honoring others. I have even had some seasons where my neglect of the disciplines included here has ravaged my soul, requiring me to crawl back for fresh mercy and renewed pursuit. What I have never done, by God's grace, is refuse His discipline, or harden my heart to His calls for humility, confession, and reconciliation, both vertically (with Him) and horizontally (with others).

Nothing will shred your soul faster than acceptance of hypocrisy, so let's deal head-on with the matter of this authentic opposite. We can't read Matthew 23 attentively without feeling just a little uncomfortable, because Jesus didn't mince words when it came to hypocrisy. He went hard after it. The language of this passage is unparalleled in all of the words that came from the mouth of Jesus Christ.

The first verses are a backdrop for everything that happens: **"Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, 'The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat . . .'"** (vv. 1–2). In other words, Jesus recognized that the current religious leaders had inherited Moses's authority. They were supposed to be guardians of the Law, not reshapers of God's instruction. They had no license to revise or rewrite what God said.

Once Jesus acknowledged the leaders' position, He cautioned about thoughtless obedience: **"... so practice and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do. For they preach, but do not practice"** (v. 3). The Pharisees could quote Scripture with the best of them; but their personal lives were a contradiction, not to be imitated. **"They tie up heavy burdens** (one translation says, 'They bind up'), **hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger"** (v. 4). Picture someone filling a large backpack with rocks, tying odd but heavy stuff all over the outside of the pack, and then instructing you to pick it up and carry it joyfully while they

stand back and watch you stagger down the road.

**“They do all their deeds to be seen by others”** (v. 5). The Pharisees were famous for putting on a good show in public while they exempted themselves from their own rules in private. Failure of integrity at the leadership level leads to a casual and even arrogant attitude toward integrity at other levels. *If the leaders can get away with this stuff, why not the rest of us?*

Unchallenged, sham-living at the top results in sham-living all the way to the bottom!

**“For they make their phylacteries . . .”** (v. 5). Devout Jewish people wore special headbands with a little box attached that looked like a headlamp. Inside were small scrolls with meticulously copied portions of Scripture. Their outfits were ostentatious, showing all who saw them they were set apart and special. “I love the Bible so much I’m wearing it!”

OVER THE CENTURIES, THE  
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Over the centuries, the Israelites transformed Deuteronomy 6:8 from a vivid command into a hollow reenactment of God’s truth. The entire context was about God’s law and the fact that it was supposed to be the subject of continual meditation, conversation, and obedience:

**And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.<sup>2</sup>**

Instead of being *as* signs or *as* frontlets (as in, *always immediately accessible to you*), snippets of God’s laws had become trinkets worn for show. The symbols had replaced what they were intended to symbolize. Today’s version might be, *I love God’s Word—I own fifteen Bibles—but no, I don’t*

*actually read any of them.*

Jesus continued in Matthew 23:6–7, “. . . **and they love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces and being called rabbi by others.**” Their role as teachers had become all about them and the prestige that went with the position rather than their responsibility before God! Jesus shifted the emphasis back where it belonged. **“But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one Teacher, and you are all brothers”** (v. 8). The messenger is nothing; the message is everything. **“And call no man your father on earth . . .”** No religious leader is to be called father. How clear is that? Don’t call people “father” for **“ . . . you have one Father who is in heaven”** (v. 9).

**“Neither be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Christ. The greatest among you shall be your servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted”** (vv. 10–12). Now as Jesus was saying these things (remember from verse 1) to the crowds and to His disciples, the scribes and the Pharisees were listening in. And their mouths were falling open. Then Jesus turned His attention toward them directly and used the strongest language of denunciation in the entire New Testament to address Himself to the subject of hypocrisy.

Jesus said, **“But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees. . . .”** He will repeat that word *woe* seven times in the verses that follow. The Greek *ouai* is not so much a word but a heart cry of anger, pain, and denunciation. It expresses grief and profound dissatisfaction. Yet here, from the lips of Christ, it’s not an *exclamation*, as in “Whoa!” or a point of punctuation; it is a divine *proclamation* of judgment. As the second person of the Trinity, Jesus pronounces God’s verdict upon the hypocrites and points to their sentencing in eternity.

The word *woe* on Jesus’ lips that day meant, “How *greatly* you will suffer!” So when Jesus Christ says multiple times, beginning in verse 13, “Woe to you,” we can’t read those phrases softly or casually. It’s “WOE to you, scribes and Pharisees!”

The Pharisees Jesus was chastising were the most religious people of their day. They were the Bible-carrying believers, the most *into it* of anyone. And if you consider yourself *into* God's Word as I do, then we—more than any others—are the possible contemporary parallel for the Pharisees. Of course their error was not their reverence for God's Word but their insistence upon adding to parts while ignoring others. We must check ourselves against the standard Jesus used.

Jesus was confronting men who were serious—even fanatical about their man-made religion. I could go on at length about the Pharisees, Sadducees, and the scribes, but I fear an extended description would be a distraction from the application of the message. Our goal is not to learn how hypocritical the religious leaders of Jesus' day were but to get a mirror and examine ourselves. Let me say at the outset that I have been thoroughly worked over by God's Spirit in the preparation of this chapter and have not failed in my search for significant areas of hypocrisy in my own life—gaps between what I want to be and what I actually am. I encourage you to do the same as you read.

Matthew 23:13 says, **“But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!”** The word *hypocrite* is such a powerful term that instead of trying to translate it, we've simply borrowed it from Greek (*hypocrites*) into English. The expression originated from theatric practices in ancient times where actors wore masks rather than makeup in order to hide their true identities. So much so, that the word *hypocrite* was originally a compliment for actors with theatrical skills. We are all familiar with Hollywood stars who can vividly portray a beautiful, loving, selfless family. And then we learn that they are the very *opposite* in real life. They can act a role convincingly, but they are not truly the person they pretend to be. That disconnect between a part well played and a life poorly lived became the meaning of *hypocrite*—one who portrays himself to be what he is not. We are hypocrites when we assume a position of piety when in reality we are destitute of genuine faith; acting the part of being close to God when our heart is very far from Him.

Jesus said of the Pharisees, “[**They**] **honor me with their lips, but their heart is far from me.**”<sup>3</sup> This phrase describes the general attitude behind what I call the *Seven Habits of Highly Hypocritical People*. As we go through these seven characteristics, I want to encourage you to ask yourself these questions: *Am I like that? Do I do that?* Jot your self-assessment down in the margin beside each characteristic. Let me warn you that no one is entirely exempt from areas of personal hypocrisy. Admitting inconsistencies is a good sign, because none of us have arrived. I would be concerned about a person who could read this chapter and not experience a single moment of personal conviction about falling short of what we profess. We are all, to one degree or another, hypocrites or liars. It’s one of the marks that confirm we are fallen human beings desperately in need of God’s forgiveness and grace.

The Pharisees were spiritually and ethically blind. We are *all* like them to a certain extent when it comes to our own shortcomings. But we need a mirror that will show us who we really are<sup>4</sup> and set us free. We can’t give ourselves sight. Honest, accurate reflection is a miracle done by the Holy Spirit, bringing the truths of Scripture to bear upon our souls; God’s Word wiping away the false and hypocritical.

Before we can move forward in the *process* of becoming authentic, we must have the *crisis* of facing what lacks. How can we work through chapters on developing the solutions to a problem we don’t yet acknowledge? So that’s the point of this chapter, to let God take away the masks of hypocrisy keeping us from being who He wants us to be. Our masks of hypocrisy are the habits of our lives that parallel the Pharisees’ offenses.

» *Habit One: Making salvation as complicated as possible.*

“**But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut the kingdom of heaven in people’s faces.**”<sup>5</sup> The expression “**the kingdom of heaven**” is a reference to salvation; entrance into God’s family. A hypocritical believer has the habit of making salvation as complicated as possible.

Salvation is not easy, but it is simple. It costs everything, but it’s

uncomplicated. Jesus said it is so simple that even a child can understand it.<sup>6</sup> Someone very young can grasp the gospel that God loves sinners and that we need His forgiveness. They can put their faith in Jesus Christ who died to pay the penalty for our sins. Even a small child can receive Christ by faith. That's the gospel.

It's not easy (it wasn't easy for Jesus to provide our salvation and it's not easy to turn away from pride and sin to receive the gift with open hands), but it's simple. Hypocrites go out of their way to make it complicated. *"You've got to do these fifteen things. You've got to follow these steps to enlightenment—maybe. You've got to go through these seven sacraments perfectly or you can't be saved. And if the system fails, it's your fault. And you had better come to church and keep all the rules."*

Hypocrites leverage people into religion and out of personal relationship with Jesus Christ, the power and the simplicity of the gospel. Paul said to the Corinthians, **"I fear . . . your minds may somehow be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ."**<sup>7</sup> Hypocrites, though? Their attitude and response if someone should ask, "What must I do to be saved?" is, "It's complicated . . ." Talk about shutting the kingdom in someone's face! I love the kind of testimony that reveals people who want to share the joy of salvation with others. All it takes is one person reaching out to another person in love. The invitation can be as simple and direct as, "You know, I want to pray with you to receive Christ as Savior and Lord." That's what sincere people do: love and care for those who are lost and hurting, while not making it some religious complicated you've-got-to-do-all-these-87-things to get the free gift. What a tragedy when people accept Christ simply and then gradually come to view the gospel as something so complex they don't pass it on. *I got saved but I can't possibly tell you how to get it. It's so complicated, I might get it wrong.* God help us to keep the message of Christ's love and forgiveness simple and available to everyone. Anything else is hypocrisy.<sup>8</sup>



» *Habit Two: Getting what I need from people even if it hurts them.*

Christ said this: **“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you devour widows’ houses and for a pretense you make long prayers. Therefore, you will receive the greater condemnation.”**<sup>9</sup>

The idea behind the word *devour* is, “*you consume for personal gain*,” like a wild dog eats a rabbit. Jesus said, **“You devour widows’ houses.”** The word *widows* represents those with many needs and few resources. We are challenged throughout Scripture to care for the widows in our church, to love them, to help them out. Everyone who has many hardships and few resources is our responsibility.<sup>10</sup> But a hypocrite does the opposite. Jesus was describing a religious person seeing someone in poverty then going and devouring the little bit they have out of an arrogant sense of, “Even though you don’t have much, God wants me to have your meager supply for my uses.” It’s the idea of personal gain even if it hurts others, which brings us to the second part of this highly hypocritical habit.

Jesus goes on, **“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel across sea and land (go way out of your way) to make a single proselyte (convert), and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves.”**<sup>11</sup> Can you believe Christ said that?

*“That’s not my mild-mannered Jesus . . .”*

Well, this *is* Christ speaking. This is who He is. He pulls out the big guns for hypocrisy. **“Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart.”**<sup>12</sup> Jesus was doing a spiritual electrocardiogram on the Pharisees and the results were not good. Supposed spiritual leaders but so consumed with self: *“My situation, my needs, my desires, and my plans. And if I don’t get my way, don’t cross me. Don’t show me up or you’ll pay for it.”* Hypocrites hurt people; they don’t help them. They do damage in the name of God. That’s not the heart of a Christian.

I have to live with the memory of how often I have hurt people without meaning to while leading our church through the years. I’ve done things I could have done better. I’ve made difficult decisions that had to be made that I know hurt people, but were in the interests of what God was doing

in our church. But every time—regardless of whether the error was mine or theirs—I have felt deep grief in knowing someone was injured.

But unintended hurt is not what Jesus is talking about—the way truth sometimes hurts, or the ways we sometimes unintentionally hurt people. **“We all stumble in many ways.”**<sup>13</sup> He *is* talking about people who callously and indifferently set out to take from people. Jesus is talking about a person who couldn’t care less about who they injure. *“I’m going to have what I want. And no one is going to stop me.”*

I wish I could say I have never met some people like that, but in reality I have: ruthless in the marketplace; vindictive and petty in the neighborhood; and self-serving and demanding at church. Take. Take. Take. That’s hypocrisy committed by people still coming to church and singing the songs, raising their hands, and carrying their Bibles. I am always amazed by Christians who can claim to love the Lord but leave a trail of hurting people in their wake and never seem to give a second thought to the damage they have caused.

Let me ask you: Have you injured others and callously turned away? Have you done things knowingly to wound people and then come to church and participated without hesitation? Do your children carry scars from your hypocrisy? Are there people where you work whom you hate? Are there people in your family you hate but you use church as a refuge where you hide from things you haven’t dealt with? *That is* hypocrisy. And it cannot exist unchallenged in a New Testament church or the life of an authentic disciple of Jesus.

Notice that hypocrisy is an anchor that will drag your soul into hell if you don’t repent of it. Your hypocrisy can lead others astray. Jesus said, **“... You make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves.”**<sup>14</sup> Hypocrisy raises legitimate questions about the reality of your faith. Dealing with personal hypocrisy is an exercise in humility and a step in understanding God’s grace. God loves you despite your hypocrisy, but He never wants you to be comfortable with it!

» *Habit Three: Squirming my way out of any promise I don't want to keep.*

Jesus continued to work through His docket of denunciation against the Pharisees in Matthew 23:16–22:

**Woe to you, blind guides, who say, “If anyone swears by the temple, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath.” You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that has made the gold sacred? And you say, “If anyone swears by the altar, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gift that is on the altar, he is bound by his oath.” You blind men! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred? So whoever swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. And whoever swears by the temple swears by it and by him who dwells in it. And whoever swears by heaven swears by the throne of God and by him who sits upon it.**

Here Jesus was describing promise-breaking hypocrisy. *“I say I’ll do something, but then I don’t do it. I commit to action, but what I really mean is, ‘I’ll make good on my promise if it works out for me.’”* This is probably the number one disappointment I’ve felt in almost thirty years of being a pastor; people who say they’ll do things and then don’t follow through. Hypocritical excuses are predictable: *“Oh, everything was good for a while, but now, when I don’t get my way; when it’s not what I thought; when I’m paying a price personally to persevere—now I don’t like it. My promise is now null and void because what I really meant in my promise was to take care of myself.”*

*“What I really promised was to do what works for me. And when you were working for me, you were part of my plan. But as soon as you’re not working for me, you’re off plan and out of the picture.”* These are the statements of those squirming their way out of promises they don’t want to keep. Psalm 15:4 refers to someone **“who swears to his own hurt,”** indicating that the man or woman of integrity is a person who gives their word and keeps it regardless of the cost. I’ve made some big personal commitments in my life:

One Savior for life.

One wife for life.

One church for life—if God would allow.

And trust me, those commitments get tested. There are times when it would be a lot easier to go in a different direction. Recognize that if you give your word on something, it will cost you. Ecclesiastes 5:4–5 says, **“When you vow a vow to God, do not delay in paying it, for he has no pleasure in fools. . . . It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay.”** Pay what you vow. Deliver what you promise, or don’t promise. That’s what sincere, honest people do. Hypocrites, though, squirm out of any promise they don’t want to keep.

Matthew 23:16 gives an example of this habit: **“Woe to you, blind guides, who say, ‘If anyone swears by the temple, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath.’”** The word *swears* is not the idea of cursing but of an oath or vow. *Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth so help you God?* It’s making a solemn promise; giving your word. The Pharisees had a “fingers-crossed-behind-your-back” clause in their commitments. They would say, “I swear by the temple that I’ll do this.”

And then someone would say, “Hey! You swore by the temple you would do it, but you’re not doing it!”

They would respond, “Ah! But I didn’t swear by the *gold* in the temple!” They expected to be released from promises based on a hidden technicality. Sound familiar?

Jesus crushes this nonsense and then gives another example: **“You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that has made the gold sacred? And you say, ‘If anyone swears by the altar, it is nothing. . . .’”** (vv. 17–18).

Apparently someone would say, “I promise I’ll pay you Thursday. I swear it by the altar.”

Then the one who had loaned would say, “Dude, it’s Thursday.”

And the debtor would say, “Yeah, well, I didn’t swear by the *gift* on the altar, so I’m off the hook.”

Jesus is coming down hard on hairsplitting. **“You blind men! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred? So whoever swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it”** (vv. 19–20). I mean, we’re back in sixth grade here. Jesus was sorting out the nuances of honesty for a bunch of hypocrites.

**“And whoever swears by the temple swears by it and by him who dwells in it. And whoever swears by heaven swears by the throne of God and by him who sits upon it”** (vv. 21–22). How clear could that be?

Someone said promises are like babies: easy to make and hard to deliver. Do you break your promises to God? Do you say to Him, “I’ll tithe; I’ll witness; I’ll obey,” and then look for technicalities to invalidate your commitments? Closer to home, how often do you tell your wife, “I’ll do this, honey. I’ll get that done; you can count on me” and then you don’t do it? It doesn’t matter whether it’s changing a lightbulb or going on a date. If you say you’ll do it, *do it*; keep your word! People who can’t count on your word can’t trust you.

I was reading a biography of John Lennon and found very tragically in the midst of the story a quote about this famous Beatle. John Lennon’s son said, “My dad was a hypocrite. Dad could talk about peace and love out loud to the world. He could sing about it, but he could never show it to the people who supposedly meant the most to him, his wife and his son. How can you talk about peace and love and have a family in bits and pieces, no communication, adultery, divorce? You can’t do it; not if you’re being true and honest with yourself.”<sup>15</sup>

» *Habit Four: Making a big deal of little things and ignoring things of critical importance.*

Jesus continued, **“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel!”** (vv. 23–24).

Inflating random issues out of size and importance is hypocrisy. Do you tend to obsess over little matters at home or at work? Do you major on minors and minor on majors? Are you out-of-balance in your faith? Some things you are so worked up about and other things, “Pssh. I never think about that. My conscience isn’t sensitive at all.” Jesus addresses this in verse 23: **“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin. . . .”** Jesus was mentioning garden herbs that were listed by the Pharisees as subject to the tithe. Tithing is the principle of giving 10 percent of my income off the top to God. In the Old Testament, where everything wasn’t currency, a lot of giving involved actual commodities. If you had an apple orchard, you brought a tenth of those apples to the temple for use in worship and to supply the priests. If you had livestock, you contributed a tenth of the increase. A lot of it was giving in kind, but the Bible never prescribed anything in regard to the little garden out behind your house where you raised some herbs for cooking.

Enter the Pharisees. These guys were so spiritual that they didn’t hesitate to hold a little sprig of parsley and say, *“One leaf for God; nine leaves for me; one leaf for God; nine leaves for me. I am so godly!”* The Bible never asked for that level of measuring the tithe. But microtithing wasn’t the real problem for Jesus. Here was His case: you are so energetic about these little examples, but you ignore the *massive* matters of importance!

We don’t have to wonder what Jesus thinks those are. He tells us: **“... and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness”** (v. 23). He was echoing Micah 6:8, **“He has shown you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?”**<sup>16</sup>

When Christ says *justice*, He’s talking about doing what’s right. You may well be facing a big decision this week. Do you know what you should do? Let me tell you: don’t pray on it anymore—do what’s right. “Yeah, but I’m kind of wrestling with the . . .” Do what’s right! Right action will always get you to a good place. You will never turn out wrong doing right. And you’ll never turn out right doing wrong. Just do the right thing—justice!

And then, notice, Jesus adds *mercy*. Go a little easier on people. “Yeah, well what they’re doing is *not right!*” But the Bible says in James 2:13, **“Judgment is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy.”** As I’ve reviewed a lot of recent interactions, I’ve looked for times when chances were given, opportunities and time for God to work, time for repentance, and time for reconciliation. Giving others room is very important. I want to show more mercy. **“Mercy triumphs over judgment,”** James 2:13 goes on to say.

And what’s Jesus’ last concern? Faithfulness. Just keep going. Don’t let anything stop you. I’m on it right now: heart, soul, mind, and strength. I am praying and believing that this is going to be my best year spiritually ever . . . ever! I’m praying the same for you as we travel this journey together. We’re not going to get sidetracked when life gets difficult sometimes. And I am going to be pushing and driving for that in every chapter as we go through the disciplines of a sincere faith. I’m going to be challenging you to look at your own walk with God—*your* walk with God. If you’re reading this and thinking to yourself, “I can’t wait to get my sister this book,” you’ve already missed it!

This is for *you*. And these matters are where it has to start: justice, mercy, and faithfulness in your walk with God.

Verse 23 goes on, **“These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others.”** Jesus was saying, “You want to tithe your spices? Really?! Knock yourself out. That’s fine.” It’s not the wrong of the micro; it’s the absence of the macro. It’s claiming to love God in little actions while ignoring Him in what really counts. “Well, I’ve memorized four Scriptures last week. And I’m reading this good book right now.” But do you love people? God is fine with the little things, but don’t overlook the big opportunities for obedience!

Jesus adds an unforgettable illustration in verse 24, **“You blind guides, straining out a gnat . . .”** So this is a picture; we’re making a nice chicken stew. Our kitchen is in the Middle East, where the windows are open and the bugs visit regularly. And just as it’s time to serve the meal,

you realize, “Wait! I have discovered a gnat in the soup. I’ll have to use a colander to strain it out.” And you go to great care to remove the offending insect. Meanwhile, a camel sneaks in the kitchen and dives into the pot—and you don’t even notice! This is Christ’s picture of hypocrisy: so focused on certain things; so determined to be pure in matter A (gnats); and so completely unplugged from the reality and offense of my impurity in matter B (camels).

**“You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel!”** (v. 24). Making a big deal of little things and ignoring things of critical importance. We do this in parenting. We do this in our work life. And we make this mistake in our walk with God and in our relationships. It’s time for a total hypocrisy makeover—which *won’t* happen if we are practicing the next habit.

» *Habit Five: Exhibiting laziness in all matters of the heart.*

**“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean”** (vv. 25–26). In this judgment, Jesus pointed to all matters of the heart—anything having to do with my soul, my faith. He exposed the laziness of hypocrisy in spiritual life—not willing to extend energy in loving God. Can you see the guy Jesus is describing? *“I’m about to take a drink, but before I do, I want to make sure I drink from a beautiful cup. So I’m going to clean up the outside of this mug so it shines.”* And though the inside of the cup is filled with stench, you drink it down, delighting in the *appearance* of the container but imbibing the filth it holds.

Jesus doesn’t mince words in describing what’s inside the beautiful cup: **“... but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence”** (v. 25). Notice this very, very bad combination. Greed is, *“I can’t get enough;”* self-indulgence is, *“I have no restraint in the consumption of what I have.”* The Bible says, **“If riches increase, set not your heart on them.”**<sup>17</sup>



Not so long ago, my wife and I had a conversation about a useful object we no longer need. I asked her, “Honey, what should we do with this?”

She said, “We should put it aside and look for someone to give it to.”

There’s wisdom. But greed says, “I can’t have enough. And I have to hold on to everything I have.” And self-indulgence says, “I can’t be satiated. I will always consume all I have.”


Are you someone who always has to have more? Once you have it, must you consume it? *“We’re living at the edge. We are existing paycheck to paycheck, and we like it this way. We spend everything we make and a little more all the*

*time—right up to the limits. We could cut back, but we won’t.”* These are the struggles of someone who is lazy in matters of the heart.

If you find yourself identifying with this hypocritical attitude, listen to Jesus’

remedy: **“You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean”** (v. 26). This once in the chapter Jesus makes “Pharisee” singular. It’s almost as if the laser of His words is seeking out the individual who is vulnerable to the truth and piercing his condition. You blind Pharisee! How can you not see this is wrong? You extend great effort to beautify the exterior while the internal filth is treated with laziness. Too lethargic to work? You steal. Too lazy to discipline yourself? You feed on what you steal without restraint. Not willing to extend the effort for matters unseen. Here’s a heart sentence: We are all who we are when no one can see us. When we think someone will see, when others will know, all of us optimize the appearance of what we do. But what do you do when no one is watching and no one will know? That’s who you truly are.

But are you satisfied with your condition? Who could hear Jesus’ words and not be convicted? You may be thinking, “Why am I having to consider this on Bears’ game day (substitute your favorite distraction)? Man! I don’t want to think about this kind of stuff right now!” That’s hypocritical apathy—exhibiting laziness in matters of the heart. Being stuck and



**WE ARE ALL WHO WE ARE  
WHEN NO ONE CAN SEE US.**

not caring enough to admit it. “*I don’t want to do the work!*” What a tragedy to display hypocrisy with Jesus’ word “Woe” ringing in your ears.

» **Habit Six: Looking good to others, no matter what the cost.**

This offensive habit takes hypocrisy to a new level. “*I’m going to look good. I’m going to wear and flaunt my façade. I don’t care what it costs.*” This is a person who is satisfied with their condition. Jesus said, “**Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs . . .**” (v. 27). If you stand on the Mount of Olives in Israel, the valley between you and the city of Jerusalem is a cemetery—a wall-to-wall burial ground. Graves as far as the eye can see. And every year before the Passover, they would clean off the grave covers stained by the weather or dirtied by birds and then whitewash everything. It was said Jerusalem gleamed in the sunlight in the weeks before the festival.

Of course, the fact that the tombs had been whitewashed outside didn’t change the insides filled with rotting corpses and dried bones. Jesus’ hearers knew the reality behind the picture when He said, “**For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people’s bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness**” (vv. 27–28). He was saying, “Crack your shell, and inside all we’ll find is a pattern of you saying one thing and doing the other. And your lack of concern about your spiritual condition will lead to lawlessness.” The hypocrite says, “*I don’t care what the Bible says. I’m going to do what I want to do.*”

At first this might sound a little too obvious to fit us, but, how many times do we come to church looking great, not a hair out of place but missing even a shred of spiritual readiness inside? You would never think of arriving at church with bed-head and wrinkled clothes. Yet how often do we enter worship looking appropriate, but not a moment has been devoted to prayerfully preparing our hearts; no time has been spent in God’s Word cultivating a teachable spirit? If we roll in to a worship

service fifteen minutes late, thinking that someone should congratulate us for putting ourselves in the seat, we are failing to recognize the God who intends to meet with us. Do we really want to keep the Lord of the universe waiting? What disregard we show! What could be so important any morning that would result in a worship auditorium being half-full of worshipers when the first note of praise was sung? And only full as people came at their own convenience? But looking good! What does external performance with no internal hunger say about our hearts?

*“Oh man! For me to get to church on time, do you know how early I would have to get up?”* That’s the statement you want to make about the way you value the gift of salvation in Christ—you can’t get up a little earlier?

What bothers you more, seeing your children misbehave or God seeing *your* disobedience? Arriving at church with your hair out of place or your heart unprepared?

What upsets you most, a spot on your shirt, a stain on your dress, or a lump of repentance in your heart? The habit of contentment with an external shell that misleads others into thinking that all is well on the inside is an attitude God will not leave untroubled. So, are you troubled? How are you doing with the basic questions? *Am I like that? Do I do that?*

» ***Habit Seven of Highly Hypocritical People: Pretending to be better than others, no matter what the evidence.***

Jesus ended His list with: **“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and decorate the monuments of the righteous”** (v. 29). The people of Jesus’ day had a great heritage featuring the prophets of the Old Testament like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and many more. They would decorate their tombs and hold religious ceremonies at the gravesites of the departed prophets. Jesus did not affirm this practice, whatever its motive. They were behaving more like pagans than biblical believers. But Jesus addresses their hypocritical claim: **“... ‘If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets’”**

(v. 30). They would stand at the tomb of the murdered prophets and say, “*If we had lived in their day, we would not have done this. We’re better than our ancestors.*” Blind! Within days, these people will murder Jesus Christ. They are going to call for His unjust crucifixion. And in their hypocrisy—the Gospels tell us—they will only come to the courtyard of Pilate’s house. They won’t go *into* Pilate’s house because doing so would make them unclean as they approach the Passover. But they’ll stand outside and call for the unjust *murder* of Jesus Christ! *Blindness* to their true condition.

**“Thus you witness against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets”** (v. 31). Jesus was making it clear the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree. They were just like their fathers.

What follows is one of the hardest statements in all of Christ’s teaching: **“Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers”** (v. 32). He’s implying here, “You are about to murder Me. Do it! You think you’re so much greater than your forefathers? You’re about to repeat their mistakes and more!”

**“You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell?”** (v. 33). A lifetime of unrepentant hypocrisy reveals that a person has never truly been born again. As you read these words, if God’s Spirit is provoking conviction in your heart about areas of your life that need to improve or change, those are good signs. There’s hope for you! But if all you’re thinking about is what *others* need to learn and what a fine Christian you are, those are very bad indications. Jesus’ words for you are ominous: **“... how are you to escape being sentenced to hell? Therefore I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and persecute from town to town...”** (vv. 33–34). I think of all the pastors and leaders through the years who have been rejected, ridiculed, and run out of town by church people who didn’t want to hear the truth. I shake my head in sadness over the price to be paid on a fairly regular basis to stand for what’s true regardless of who likes it. I grieve over the punishment exacted on God’s servants by those who chose capriciously to refuse the message. Jesus’ words still hit their mark today: **“... so that on you**

**may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah the son of Barachiah, whom you murdered . . .”** (v. 35). I’m sure they thought, “What!? How does He know about *that*?”

He continues, “**. . . between the sanctuary and the altar. Truly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation**” (vv. 35–36). Within days these men will add more condemnation when they loudly call for Jesus’ blood to be on their heads and their children’s heads.<sup>18</sup>

The last two words should give us pause—“**this generation.**” Jesus was speaking directly to His audience. But much of what He said applies today. The question is, what would He say to *this* generation about the seven habits of hypocritical people? Are we like that? Do we do that?

## CONCLUSION

Let’s take a closing look at the Lord’s heart in this matter of hypocrisy. Because if you think Jesus Christ is standing over you today, saying, “You hypocrite!” and turning His back on you, you don’t understand what was behind even these harsh words from the Lord. If you miss His heart, you lose so much! He goes on to say, “**O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!**” (v. 37). The offer from heaven flows in these words, alongside the sadness over the many who “will not”! They will hear the invitation and turn away. God will call; they won’t answer. Stubbornness of the heart is a terminal sickness. There is no solution for that condition apart from repentance and God’s work of grace to break the heart.

And then Jesus says the most ominous words: “**See, your house is left to you desolate**” (v. 38). You eventually get the spiritual condition your hypocrisy produces. The hypocrite thinks everything is going along fine, but there will be a rude awakening. Others may be fooled; God sees the heart. He sees your intentions, right now. He knows exactly what

condition you are in to undertake the rest of this study. I pray as you turn the pages and begin this journey through the disciplines of a sincere faith, you will acknowledge deeply any tendency toward hypocrisy and ask God to prepare you for what He has in store. In fact, pray with me these sincere words recorded by David in Psalm 19:7–14.

**The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever; the rules of the LORD are true, and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb. Moreover, by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward.**

**Who can discern his errors? Declare me innocent from hidden faults.**

**Keep back your servant also from presumptuous sins; let them not have dominion over me! Then I shall be blameless, and innocent of great transgression.**

**Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.**

You have just prayed the *crisis* that lays the foundation for the *process* we will describe in the rest of this book. Believe me, the crisis is crucial. Just ask: *Lord, where am I hypocritical? In what ways am I hypocritical?* And as the Spirit of God pricks your heart about specifics, confess them in that moment. “You’re right, Father. You’re right and I’m wrong. I want to be authentic. I want to be sincere and genuine with nothing else mixed in. Show me, God, Your true holiness. What do I know of true holiness? Open my heart and mind to You.”

Allow me to pray for you as you dedicate yourself to the disciplines of an authentic faith:

*Father, I ask You in this moment to grant to this Your child a genuine release from any burden they might have about reading these insights for someone else. Even if they're burdened for someone close to them, release them and give them, by Your Spirit, great freedom to look inside at their own hypocrisy. Help them see how quick they are to judge others, to take up offense, to mount the horse of self-righteousness, demanding of others what they do not demand of themselves. Free us from hypocrisy, Lord, so we may be free to develop the disciplines of an authentic faith. In the strong name of Jesus, I pray, Amen.*