

July 8
Lesson 6 (NIV)

JESUS CRITICIZES

UNJUST LEADERS

DEVOTIONAL READING: Luke 14:7-14

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Matthew 23

MATTHEW 23:1-4, 23-26

¹
Then
Jesus
said
to
the



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crowds and to his disciples: ² “The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat. ³ So you must be careful to do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. ⁴ They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them.”

²³ “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. ²⁴ You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.

²⁵ “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. ²⁶ Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean.”

KEY VERSE

“The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat. So you must be careful to do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach.”—Matthew 23:2, 3

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. List some hypocritical practices of the religious leaders of Jesus' day.
2. Contrast a hypocritical religious practice with its opposite.
3. Write a prayer of confession and repentance of a hypocritical attitude or behavior.

LESSON OUTLINE

Introduction

- A. Homes and Hearts
- B. Lesson Background

I. Warnings (MATTHEW 23:1-4)

- A. Esteemed Position (vv. 1, 2)
 - B. Exploited Position (vv. 3, 4)
- Imposing Burdens on Others*

II. Woes (MATTHEW 23:23-26)

- A. Regarding the Law (vv. 23, 24)
 - B. Regarding the Leaders (vv. 25, 26)
- On Gullibility*

Conclusion

- A. One Pharisee's Testimony
- B. Staying Heart Healthy
- C. Prayer
- D. Thought to Remember

Introduction

A. Homes and Hearts

Real-estate agents often emphasize the importance of good "curb appeal" in an effort to sell houses. That expression refers to presenting an attractive outward appearance of the house or property so that passersby will have a favorable first impression. Foliage should be well-trimmed and pruned, fencing and sidewalks should be in good repair, etc.

The intended effect is that potential buyers will want to stop and take a look inside. Needless to say, it is important that the inside be just as well-kept as the outside. But people will likely not go inside the house if the outside shows too many signs of wear and tear. The reasoning is that a poorly maintained exterior signals similar neglect on the interior whereas a well-maintained exterior points to the opposite.

The teachers of the law, or scribes, and the Pharisees in Jesus' day were known for their religious "curb appeal." But in their case a well-maintained exterior did not indicate the same on the inside.

B. Lesson Background

Today's lesson from [Matthew 23](#) covers an incident that occurred during what is often called Passion Week, the final week of Jesus' earthly life and ministry. The week began with Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem ([Matthew 21:1-11](#)) and climaxed with his crucifixion and resurrection.

It is generally believed that the events recorded in [Matthew 21:23-24:51](#) (part of which is today's text) occurred during Tuesday of Passion Week. This segment of text includes Jesus' authority being questioned by the chief priests and elders of the Jews, a series of parables, and various questions directed toward Jesus.

I. Warnings

(MATTHEW 23:1-4)

[Matthew 22](#) concludes with a question *from* Jesus to the Pharisees, a question to which they gave no answer. Having silenced his opponents, Jesus then had some preliminary things to say to his audience before launching a series of condemnations at the teachers of the law and Pharisees. These men were already seeking to arrest Jesus ([21:46](#)); no doubt his words of condemnation in [Matthew 23](#) intensified these efforts.

A. Esteemed Position (vv. 1, 2)

¹ Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples:

Jesus has been attracting *crowds* of people throughout his ministry ([Matthew 4:25](#); [8:1, 18](#); [9:8, 36](#); [12:15](#); [13:2](#); [15:30](#); [19:1, 2](#)). Since this is the week during which Passover will be celebrated, the crowds gathered in Jerusalem are much larger than usual. Some estimate that Jerusalem's population, which generally numbers a few hundred thousand, swells to around two and a half million during Passover week. Jesus is also addressing more specifically *his disciples*.

² "The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat.

The teachers of the law and the Pharisees are considered the scholars in Jesus' day. To *sit in Moses' seat* describes their esteemed position; they are the expounders and interpreters of the law given by God to Moses. In the Old Testament, the scribes were at first primarily officials who kept records of various kinds in a king's administration ([2 Samuel 8:15-17](#); [1 Kings 4:1-3](#); [2 Kings 12:9, 10](#)). The office appears to take a more religious turn with Ezra, who is described as "a teacher well versed in the Law of Moses" ([Ezra 7:6](#)) and who was also adept at teaching the law ([7:10](#)).

The term *Pharisees* comes from a Hebrew word meaning “to separate.” The Pharisees could be described as “separatists” or “separated ones.” They came to be during the period between Old and New Testaments; many believe their origin may be traced to the time of the Maccabean revolt in the second century before Christ. They interpret the Law of Moses very rigidly in an attempt to protect it from being violated; their added traditions and regulations have become of equal importance with the Word of God, sometimes even serving to negate the intent of Scripture.

HOW TO SAY IT

cumin *kuhm-mun* or *cue-mun*.

fastidious *fah-stid-ee-us*.

Maccabean *Mack-uh-be-un*.

Nicodemus *Nick-uh-dee-mus*.

The Pharisees may be considered a religious “party,” while the teachers of the law hold an office. However, the majority of teachers of the law are Pharisees. Both see Jesus as a threat to their teachings and their authority. Paul, in his staunchness as a Pharisee by the name of Saul ([Philippians 3:5](#)), will later “do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth” ([Acts 26:9](#)).

B. Exploited Position (vv. 3, 4)

3a. “So you must be careful to do everything they tell you.”

Jesus encourages his hearers to respect the teachers of the law and the Pharisees’ positions and their interpretation of the Law of Moses. Jesus has not come to overthrow these authorities, any more than he has come to start an uprising against Rome.

3b. “But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach.”

Even so, Jesus goes on to expose the inconsistency between what the teachers of the law and Pharisees *preach* and the example that they actually set (*what they do*). See examples on [Matthew 23:23, 25](#), below.

It is worth noting that Jesus encourages his listeners not to allow the hypocrisy of the teachers of the law and Pharisees to diminish their respect for the authority of the law. The law is still from Moses (and ultimately from God) in spite of how the teachers of the law and Pharisees have failed to live it out.

4. “They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them.”

The *heavy, cumbersome loads* are the many traditions that the teachers of the law and Pharisees have instituted to guarantee faithfulness (as they see it) to the Law of Moses. But as Jesus noted during a confrontation with the teachers of the law and Pharisees, in certain cases they “break the command of God for the sake of [their] tradition” ([Matthew 15:3](#); see the commentary and Lesson Background to [lesson 3](#)).

At the same time, the teachers of the law and Pharisees offer no compassion to those who struggle to keep the traditions—only contempt for those who cannot measure up to their standards. Even worse, these leaders have created clever (but in reality reprehensible) means by which they themselves can avoid keeping those same standards. In [Matthew 15:1-9](#) (again, see [lesson 3](#)), Jesus gave an example of how this works. As a consequence, they “nullify the word of God” ([15:6](#)). Although these leaders “sit in Moses’ seat” ([23:2](#)), they certainly do not demonstrate Moses’ spirit of humility, which was a distinctive part of his character ([Numbers 12:3](#)).

What Do You Think?

What did you learn from an experience of dealing with consequences of another’s hypocrisy?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

When it affected your family

When it affected your church

Other

When one considers this kind of onerous burden created by these leaders, we can appreciate even more Jesus’ invitation, recorded in [Matthew 11:28-30](#), that ends with his words, “For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” The one through whom grace and truth come ([John 1:14](#)) offers a freedom that is impossible to experience within the rigid, twisted system of the Jewish leaders.

IMPOSING BURDENS ON OTHERS

Wells Fargo, one of America’s largest banks, was hit with a \$185 million fine for setting up bogus accounts for customers who had no idea what was happening. The bank employees who set up these accounts claimed they were forced to do so to meet quotas placed on them by upper management under threat of being fired. Apparently several of these employees had reported the pressure to an internal hotline, only to find themselves fired soon afterward for reasons supposedly unrelated to the whistle-blowing.

Wells Fargo claimed that it had fired more than 5,300 low-level and middle-management employees for these illegal and unethical practices, but federal regulators began to wonder if these workers were being blamed for implementing high-pressure tactics that had come from the highest levels in the corporation instead. Shortly after the exposure of the scandal, a \$2.6 billion class-action suit was filed by many of these employees for the unrealistic expectations placed on them.

Even in our day, leaders of religious, political, and business organizations place unsustainable (even illegal) burdens on individuals. If we ever find ourselves in a position of authority, may we never require that someone carry a burden that we wouldn’t gladly accept ourselves.

—D. S.

II. Woes

(MATTHEW 23:23-26)

[Matthew 23:13](#) begins a series of woes pronounced by Jesus upon the teachers of the law and Pharisees. A characteristic of these woes is Jesus' description of the religious leaders as hypocrites. In only one of the woes does Jesus not use that word, describing them instead as "blind" three times ([23:16-22](#)). The next part of our lesson text picks up with the woe that follows.

A. Regarding the Law (vv. 23, 24)

^{23a.} "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites!"

The Greek word translated as *hypocrites* describes a stage actor, therefore someone who is pretending to be something he or she is not. The term is quite fitting for the *teachers of the law and Pharisees*, whom Jesus will later describe as "whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean" ([Matthew 23:27](#), not in today's text).

^{23b.} "You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former."

Mint, dill and cumin are garden herbs used either for cooking or medicinal purposes. Tithing items such as these is not commanded in the Law of Moses, but for the religious leaders such an act gives the impression of how scrupulously they follow the law. One thinks of the Pharisee (in a parable) who proudly claimed, "[I] give a tenth of all I get" ([Luke 18:12](#)).

It is noteworthy that Jesus does not criticize the tithing per se of the religious leaders. In fact, he says *you should have practiced the latter*. The problem is that paying such close attention to the details of tithing garden herbs has caused these leaders to miss the *more important* requirements of the Law of Moses. Specifically, those are *justice, mercy and faithfulness*. These must be given first priority, then tithing as the leaders desire to do can be done as private matters of devotion to God.

What Do You Think?

How can our church ensure it gives proper attention to the weightier matters of the gospel?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- In the area of upreach (worship)
- In the area of outreach (evangelism and benevolence)
- In the area of inreach (spiritual growth)

Justice in this context involves intervening to ensure fair treatment for others. This closely relates to *mercy*, or compassion, toward those in need. *Faithfulness* as used here most likely describes active faith supported by works, the opposite of which is dead ([James 2:26](#)).

^{24.} "You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel."

Jesus further illustrates the hypocrisy of the teachers of the law and Pharisees. The conscientious religious leader carefully filters his drinking water through a cloth to make sure he does not swallow a gnat. The gnat is not specifically mentioned in the list of clean and unclean creatures found in [Leviticus 11](#). The *camel*, however, is found in [Leviticus 11:4](#), where it is the first "unclean" creature cited. Jesus' reference to swallowing a camel is his way of pointing out how the religious leaders major in minors as they give painstaking attention to relatively less important details while they ignore the law's "more important matters."

What Do You Think?

How can we protect our church leaders from the danger of spiritual blind spots?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- When they invite us to do so
- When we have not been invited to do so

B. Regarding the Leaders (vv. 25, 26)

^{25.} "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence."

We come to yet another woe of the series. This condemnation is similar to Jesus' earlier description of the religious leaders' zeal to impress others with external displays of piety ([Matthew 23:5-7](#)) while being *full of greed and self-indulgence* internally. The word *greed* highlights the attitude of selfishness that characterizes these religious leaders' approach to spiritual matters. *Self-indulgence* describes a certain lack of self-control (compare [Luke 11:39](#)). Jesus, who "knew what was in each person" ([John 2:25](#)), sees the inside, and he is disgusted.

What Do You Think?

What steps can you take to avoid a spirituality that is oriented toward outward appearance?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- When you think you're not at risk in this regard
- Considering the tension between needing to let your light shine ([Matthew 5:14-16](#)) and doing good deeds in private ([6:1-4](#))

^{26.} "Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean."

We do not know why Jesus at this point calls out only the Pharisees. Perhaps it is because they are the ones who are especially fastidious in their passion for the outward show of purity and piety ([Mark 7:3, 4](#)). What Jesus says here, however, describes not only the Pharisees but the human condition in general. Jesus pointed this out to his disciples following the confrontation with the teachers of the law and Pharisees in [Matthew 15:18](#): "But the things that come out of a person's mouth come from the heart, and these defile them." Real change must happen from the inside out.

Earlier, Jesus had talked about such a transformation with Nicodemus, another Pharisee. On that occasion, Jesus described the necessary transformation in terms of being born again ([John 3:3](#)).

ON GULLIBILITY

Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union agreed to a nonaggression pact on August 23, 1939. The pact paved the way for Hitler's invasion of Poland a week later, thus beginning World War II.

This treaty of nonaggression, initiated by Germany, was supposed to guarantee nonbelligerence between the two countries. It contained the further promise that neither would come to the aid of the other's enemies in an armed conflict.

This caused the Soviet Union to believe that Hitler would be no threat to them. But while the Soviet guard was down, Hitler violated the treaty and invaded in 1941. The Soviets eventually pushed German forces out of their territory, but only after suffering 26 million deaths. Some historians speculate that Hitler entered into the nonaggression pact as a ruse to lull the Soviets into complacency.

There can be no nonaggression pact with Satan. Jesus did not sign a nonaggression treaty with the Pharisees. Their viewpoint was wrong, and that wrong had to be exposed lest it cause even more damage. In sending us out "like sheep among wolves," Jesus challenges us to be "as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves" ([Matthew 10:16](#)). With discerning, Spirit-filled hearts, may we filter out alluring claims that are inconsistent with the revealed Word of God.

—D. S.

Conclusion

A. One Pharisee's Testimony

Let us revisit the case of Saul, the ardent Pharisee who was second to none in his hostility toward the Christian faith. After his conversion, he became, as the apostle Paul, one of the most passionate spokesmen for that same faith. What made the difference?

Certainly, the appearance of Jesus to Saul on the road to Damascus was the determining factor. But as we read Paul's later testimony, particularly in the third chapter of his letter to the Philippians, we see that something took place in his thinking and perspective. He had come to reject completely the typical set of priorities that guided a Pharisee's outlook on matters of religion.

Paul described himself as someone who, as a Pharisee, had "reasons for [his] confidence" ([Philippians 3:4](#)). His résumé was quite impressive in an earthly sense ([3:5, 6](#)). All the items he lists in that description he refers to as "gains to me" ([3:7](#)). They constituted what he calls "a righteousness of my own" ([3:9](#)).

But Paul discovered something (and someone) far greater than his own self-made faith (which really wasn't faith at all). He calls it "the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord" ([Philippians 3:8](#)). While Paul calls his righteousness obtained through the law "faultless" ([3:6](#)), law is by its very nature cold and impersonal. One cannot have a personal relationship with the law.

What Do You Think?

How do you guard against placing confidence in yourself rather than in God?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- Steps that evaluate whether a problem exists
- Steps that correct an identified problem
- Steps that ensure the problem stays corrected

It was in a person (Jesus) that Paul found what the law could never provide. Among those blessings was a joy (a repeated theme in Philippians) that rigid devotion to the law (any law) is powerless to give. Gladly did Paul suffer losing "all things" (all the ingredients of his self-made religion) and "consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ" ([Philippians 3:8](#)). He was determined to move forward ([3:13, 14](#)), with his ultimate goal of seeing Jesus—not in a vision, but face-to-face in his heavenly presence ([3:20](#)).

It can be hard for us to appreciate Paul's experience fully. It may be difficult to grasp the radical nature of the decision that led him to follow Jesus and reject an upbringing and a heritage that was deeply ingrained within him. Even so, Paul's example and testimony remind us that following Jesus is worth any price we pay to do so.

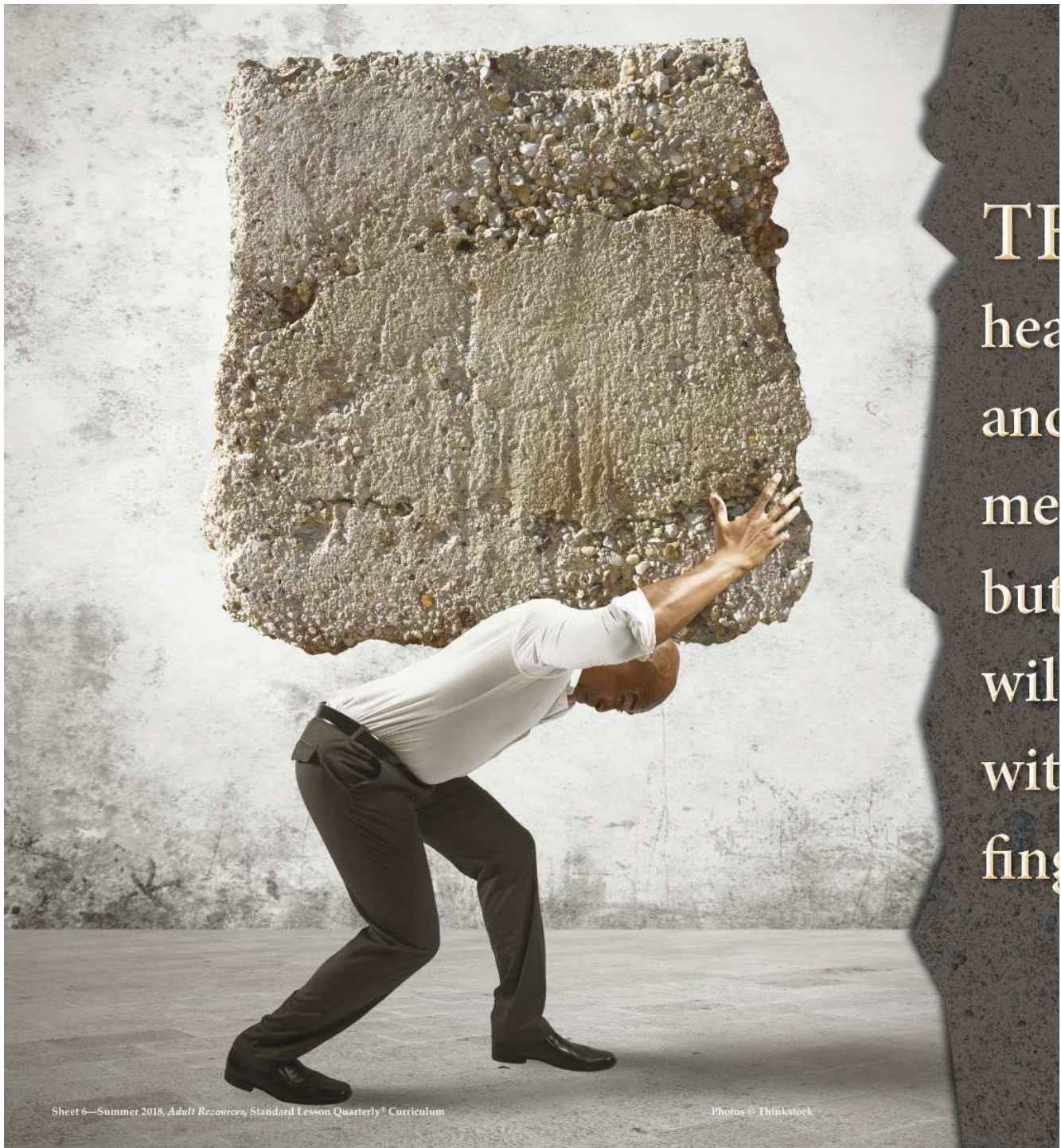
B. Staying Heart Healthy

The spiritual condition of the religious leaders, as exposed by Jesus in our text, was, sadly, nothing out of the ordinary. God's people in both Old and New Testaments were always subject to the temptation to focus more on external acts of worship or devotion to God while neglecting the condition of the heart. This can be an especially serious pitfall for leaders of God's people (the focus of today's lesson title). They can become so enamored with their authority and the title they hold that they forget to give proper attention to their own spiritual condition as a model for others to emulate.

Wise King Solomon advised, "Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it" ([Proverbs 4:23](#)). Yet Solomon failed to follow his own advice and allowed his heart to turn from the Lord through the influence of his pagan wives ([1 Kings 11:1-4](#)). We too must be cautious of how we care for our hearts. We cannot just point our fingers at the Pharisees and highlight their faults, lest we too fall prey to the pride that acted like a cancer on their hearts.

Our society is very conscious these days (as it should be) about taking care of the physical heart by eating right, exercising, and getting sufficient rest. The spiritual heart, however, is for the most part ignored or viewed as one's own business. Clearly, though, the corruption and decay going on in our world spiritually and morally (and with increasing speed, it seems) cannot be good for the spiritual heart.

At the grocery store, certain foods are now marked as "heart healthy." If an individual has concerns about his or her heart, that person watches out for such a label. Wouldn't it be nice if certain items (TV shows, books, movies, music) came with a (spiritual) heart unhealthy warning attached? What if we started watching, reading, or listening to one of these and a siren or alarm went off as if to say, "Careful, this is bad for your heart"?



Sheet 6—Summer 2018, *Adult Resources*, Standard Lesson Quarterly® Curriculum

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Visual for Lesson 6. *Start a discussion by pointing to this visual as you ask for examples of burdens Jesus is talking about and their modern equivalents.*

The Bible is meant to serve as that kind of alarm. But it has to become a part of our spiritual heart to the point that we know it well enough (a good reason to memorize Scripture!) to call on it for guidance in times of temptation, tragedy, or other circumstances that have the potential to draw our hearts away from God.

Perhaps the words of [Psalm 119:11](#) say it best—words that are part of the “pledge to the Bible” that is often recited by young people in Sunday school or Vacation Bible School classes: “I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you.”

C. Prayer

Our Father, in the world around us is so much spiritual darkness that poses a grave threat to the health of our spiritual hearts! Help us to exercise discernment: to listen to, to watch, and to read what will keep our hearts in tune with yours. May the source of our discernment be your Word; may it always be the lamp to our feet and the light to our path. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

D. Thought to Remember

Let the great physician keep your
spiritual heart healthy.

INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

Enhance your lesson with NIV® Bible Student (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at www.standardlesson.com or in the back of the NIV® Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition).

Into the Lesson

Ask students to name some of their favorite actors and actresses and the roles they have played. Jot responses on the board. After several are listed, ask how the roles they have played contrast with their real life personalities.

Alternative. Have students role play a conversation in which they take the parts of characters whose personalities and values are completely the opposite of those of the students in real life. When the activity is over, encourage participants to talk about how hard (or how easy) it was to pretend to be someone they are actually nothing like in real life.

Make a transition by saying, “The word *hypocrite* is a Greek word that means ‘actor,’ one who pretends to be someone other than himself or herself. Today’s lesson is about Jesus’ frustration with people who put on a godly appearance, but inwardly they were much different.”

Into the Word

Give students each one sheet of paper, and ask them to draw a line down the middle to create two columns. Have them head the left column *What They Were Doing* and the right column *What They Should Have Been Doing*. (Option. Create this yourself and distribute as handouts.)

Next, read the eight verses of lesson text, then have everyone spend no more than one minute making entries in the columns concerning what the Pharisees were actually doing and what Jesus said that they should have been doing in the last four of the eight verses.

Call for responses after exactly one minute. As students give “surface” responses, push deeper by asking for specific examples from Scripture passages that are not part of today’s lesson text. An expected surface response is that the Pharisees were so focused on their own interpretation of the Law of Moses by tithing their spices that they neglected more important matters of mercy, faithfulness, etc. Anticipate that some learners will push deeper by mentioning the handwashing of [lesson 3](#) as a specific example of majoring in minors.

Next, draw the learners’ attention back to the first four verses of the text and read them aloud. Pose this question: “Would it be fair to summarize Jesus’ instructions as ‘Do as they say, but not as they do?’” Be prepared to allow a silent pause of up to 15 seconds for someone to respond. Discuss implications of this instruction.

Alternative. To better grasp the practice of the Pharisees of tithing their spices, distribute copies of the “The Spices of Life” activity from the reproducible page, which can be downloaded. Bring salt and pepper shakers, as well as about ¼ cup of cinnamon and ¼ cup of sugar. As the activity begins, put ½ teaspoon of one of the spices on the big circle at the top of each of the participants’ papers. Then they will try to “distribute” their spice to the other people in the class, putting a little of their spice in the appropriately labeled small circle on their activity page.

Into Life

Say, “Jesus described some of the Pharisees as dirty dishes: clean on the outside, but full of crud on the inside.” Poll students for modern examples of this; stress that real names should not be used. Responses can be in terms of things rather than people themselves (example: a car that is kept meticulously clean on the outside, but the engine oil is never changed).

Alternative. Have students complete the spice matching game on the reproducible page. Allow them to score their own results. Tie this to the lesson by discussing the importance of using dishes that are clean both inside and out when preparing and serving food. Use this as an illustration of the importance of making sure our souls are clean so we can serve God with hearts free of hypocrisy.