KEY VERSES
Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them. Matthew 7:15, 16

MATTHEW 7:1–6, 15–23
1 “Do not judge, or you too will be judged. 2 For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. 3 Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? 4 How can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? 5 You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye. 6 “Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you to pieces.” 15 “Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. 16 By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? 17 Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. 18 A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. 19 Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 20 Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them. 21 “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. 22 Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?’ 23 Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’ ”

INTRODUCTION
A. Legalism vs. Liberty
In 1997, Dean Merrill published his provocative book, Sinners in the Hands of an Angry Church. The book expresses what many millennials (those born between approximately 1982 and 2004) believed about the church of their parents. Merrill describes a church acting like a moral bully. From its moral high ground of self-righteousness, it bludgeoned the changes occurring in culture. Though sin was running rampant outside the church, the feeling was that sin was absent within. Woe, then, to the member who admitted to moral failure or weakness, for he or she would feel the full wrath of the church. For some, this is the great debate of the church: legalism or liberty? Do we draw lines restricting fellowship, or do we open the doors for all to come in without enforcing moral guidelines? (And the debate takes on a different tone when framed as being one of legalism or liberty or license?) No one I know willingly admits to being a legalist, for this is always a negative label, always to be avoided. Legalism does exist, however. At its core it is an orientation that treats rules as more important than people. Legalists often occupy themselves with controlling the behavior of others. Legalism can be an attempt to rally a whole community against sinful behavior. Sadly, in its obsession to crush sin, it may crush sinners instead. Wouldn’t the church be a happier place if we ran off all the legalists? Not so fast. In this lesson, Jesus tells his disciples not to judge, then advises them to judge. Where do we find the balance? Can we love the law and love people too?

B. Lesson Context
An ordered society (like the nation of Israel in Old Testament times) needs judges to be third-party deciders over human disputes (see Exodus 18:13–27; Ezra 7:25). Deuteronomy 25:1 defines the role of a judge in Israel as one who makes decisions about “acquitting the innocent and condemning the guilty.” To do the opposite—condemn the righteous and justify the wicked—is detestable to the Lord (Proverbs 17:15). As shown throughout the book of Judges, these leaders were meant to remain faithful to the Lord; only then would the people be led in his ways and enjoy his protection in Israel (see Judges 2:16–19). The Lord himself is the final and infallible judge of all the earth (Psalms 82:8; 105:7). In several places, the Bible portrays God as judge over all humanity (Exodus 12:12; 1 Chronicles 16:14; Romans 14:10; etc.). God does not consult a legal code for his judgments, because he is the author of the law. Human judges depend on laws and function best when they are enforcing clear and fair laws in an impartial way. People, though, are fallible, and even judges can be corrupt or unrighteous (Luke 18:6). Jesus did not embrace the role of judge in human affairs during his ministry (see Luke 12:14; in contrast see Acts 17:31; 2 Corinthians 5:10). Yet his teachings are filled with moral distinctions that identify unrighteous behavior.
Jesus does not hesitate to expose hypocrites, identify their dishonesty, and thus pass a type of judgment. What we see is Jesus moving beyond mere application of laws in a courtroom setting to a discernment of human behavior based on motives and higher standards such as love for others.

I. Poor Judgment (Matthew 7:1–6)

A. Warning to Would-Be Judges (vv. 1, 2)

1. “Do not judge, or you too will be judged.” Jesus previously taught his disciples to trust God rather than worry (Matthew 6:34). One way to do this is not to be consumed with judging others (compare Luke 6:37; Romans 14:13; 1 Corinthians 4:5). A benefit of honoring this instruction is that others will be less likely to judge you in return. This verse, taken out of context, is often tossed in the face of Christians by nonbelievers. If Christians offer opinions about any sort of sinful, antisocial, or aberrant behavior, the cynical response is likely to be “I thought Jesus told you not to judge.” Does this mean that Christians have no moral authority to identify sinful behavior based on biblical standards? While the answer is complicated, Paul later suggests that judgment is reserved for those within the church because they have agreed to be held to the same standards of righteousness (1 Corinthians 5:12; compare James 4:11).

2. “For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.” Jesus moves to define his biggest concern: hypocritical judging (see comments on Matthew 7:5). He warns that when we judge others with our high moral standards, we should beware and be ready: the same high standards and the same judgments will be applied to us in return (compare Ezekiel 35:11; Mark 4:24; Romans 2:1). The television evangelist who rails against sexual sins from the pulpit and is found to have adulterous liaisons will be shown no mercy by his critics. The church leader who insists on tithing and giving back to God in a sacrificial way will be pilloried if found to be skimming money from his ministry for his own enrichment. Jesus illustrates this with an economic practice. It concerns a standard for buying and selling produce such as wheat or barley. Fairness demands that the same measure (such as a calibrated basket) be used for both buying and selling (see Luke 6:38). If someone uses a smaller basket to sell wheat and a bigger basket to buy wheat, that dishonesty will be uncovered and the merchant’s credibility will suffer. The first and most basic step for demanding high moral standards is to hold yourself to them.

B. Advice to Obvious Hypocrites (vv. 3–5)

3, 4. “Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when all the time there is a plank in your own eye?” As he often does in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus uses hyperbole (exaggeration for emphasis) to make his point (see Matthew 5:29, 30, 38–42; etc.). A man can never have a plank in his eye while offering to remove a speck from another’s eye. The absurd picture is of a man with a two-by-four piece of lumber protruding from his face offering to remove a piece of sawdust from another’s eye. First, the plank would get in the way and make the speck removal impossible; he would be more likely to injure the second person than to help. Second, and more to the point, it is ludicrous for the first person to even think about offering this service when he has such grave personal matters to attend to himself. He has no credibility.

5. “You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye.” Jesus’ declaring the man with a plank in his eye to be a hypocrite is instructive. The word hypocrite has a background in Greek drama and refers to an actor, one who plays a role. By implication, this person hides his true identity. What the public sees in the theater does not reveal the actor’s true personal life. With Jesus’ example, any pretense at hiding is demolished. The hypocrite attempting to extract a tiny speck from his friend’s eye is not concealing a few little specks in his own eyes that no one detects; rather, he has a plank protruding that is easily observed by anyone! Jesus unmask the judgmental moralists of his day, declaring that all too often their own moral failures are showing. Jesus advises the obvious: take the plank out of your own eye. Then, with unimpaired vision and better mobility to do close work, you can help get the tiny speck out of the other’s eye (see Galatians 6:1).

C. Plea to Undiscerning Teachers (v. 6)

6. “Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you to pieces.” Jesus circles back to his disciples, the ones he advises not to judge lest they be judged themselves. He does not want them to be hypocrites like the teachers of the law and Pharisees (Matthew 6:2, 5, 16), yet Jesus also knows the potential for misuse of his exhortation not to judge. Neglecting to judge wisely allows evil to be called good and good to be called evil (Isaiah 5:20). In the hands of unrepentant sinners, the directive to avoid judging becomes a license to sin (compare Jude 4). Reserving judgment is often appropriate and comes with benefits, but Jesus clearly acknowledges that judgment cannot and should not always be avoided. Jesus uses two vivid metaphors for those against whom he is warning, likely false prophets (see following section). First, he calls them dogs. These feral animals will turn and devour one of their own if it falls with a mortal injury. Second, they are called pigs, the archetypical unclean animal for Jews,
II. Telltale Fruits (Matthew 7:15–23)
A. Fruits of False Prophets (vv. 15–20)

15. “Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. Jesus issues a warning about false prophets, those who would lead his disciples astray by denying Jesus and his teachings (see Matthew 24:11, 24; Luke 6:26). The image of a wolf wearing a sheepskin to blend in with genuine sheep invites ridicule just as does a person with a plank in his eye performing eye surgery (see Ezekiel 22:27; Acts 20:29). No wolf should get away with this, especially with the shepherd watching over the flock (see John 10:5, 11, 14–16). Still, infiltration of the community of God’s people by false disciples is all too common. It must be guarded against (see Jeremiah 23:16; Galatians 2:4; 2 Peter 2:1; 1 John 4:1).

16. “By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? How do we detect these false prophets, these fake disciples? These are not inconsistent disciples who struggle to live exemplary lives (a category into which most of us fit). Rather, these are non-disciples who infiltrate the church with allegiance only to themselves, not loyalty to Jesus in any way. We cannot know their hearts like God does, but we can look at their lives. What is the “fruit” of their conduct (compare Luke 6:44; James 3:12)? If they are not fruits born of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22, 23), we must suspect false prophets in our midst. Jesus appeals to the agricultural knowledge of his hearers. No one looks for clusters of grapes among thornbushes. Grapes grow on grapevines. Likewise, no farmer seeks figs among thistles, a variety of weed. Figs grow on fig trees. Good works come from a heart devoted to serving God and loving other people.

17. 18. “Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Jesus knows that recognizing false prophets is not always as simple as discerning between a fig tree and a thistle plant. A good tree with good fruit might look nearly identical to a bad tree with bad fruit. This is like the difference between a crab apple that produces tiny, ill-tasting apples and an apple tree that yields healthy apples of good size and taste. Although the trees may look similar, they are easily distinguished by the fruit they produce. Some false disciples are masters at hiding their inner identity. They know the community, and they blend in well. The personal lives of those who have influence in the church should be scrutinized. Do they work primarily to enrich themselves? Do they seek to make disciples of Christ into their own disciples? Are their teachings in conflict with Jesus’ teachings? These and other questions must be asked when evaluating the fruit of teachers and leaders (Matthew 12:33; Luke 6:43).

19. “Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. The wise farmer has no desire to care for an unproductive fruit tree. Instead it will be cut down and used for firewood (Luke 13:7–9). Being thrown into the fire is a consistent symbol for God’s judgment in this Gospel (Matthew 3:10, 12; 13:40, 42; 18:8, 9; etc.). That is the ultimate fate of the hypocritical false prophets. God knows their hearts and will not be fooled. Their judgment is sure. The bad tree will be replaced by another that will produce good fruit.

20. “Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them. Jesus ends this section by predicting that false disciples will be revealed. They will be known. They cannot hide their false, unloving, and selfish hearts forever. Such a prediction is sad when it comes true. We take no joy in witnessing the exposure and fall of false-hearted church members. But when unveiling comes, Christians must not hesitate to remove such people from positions of authority and influence.

B. Wonders of False Workers (vv. 21–23)

21. “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. The fruit Jesus desires is to see disciples doing the will of Jesus’ Father who is in heaven. This tests the sincerity or dishonesty of one’s discipleship to Christ. No one can be a follower of Jesus if he or she constantly resists yielding to the will of God. The affirmation Lord, Lord does not take the place of actions (Hosea 8:2, 3; Matthew 25:11, 12; John 13:13, 14; contrast 1 Corinthians 12:3). Earlier in his sermon, Jesus said that a righteousness that exceeds that of the teachers of the law and Pharisees is required to enter the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:20). Who will be allowed to enter the kingdom? This is promised to “the poor in spirit” (5:3) and to those who suffer persecution for their loyalty to Jesus (5:10). True members of the kingdom recognize their spiritual dependency on the Lord. They endure suffering for following Jesus and align their hearts and their actions to the will of God (Romans 2:13; James 1:22; 1 John 3:18). These are proper and rightful kingdom members (Matthew 12:50).

22. 23. “Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’ ” Jesus finishes with a dramatic flourish. Imagine people who have dynamically spoken for the Lord in public (prophesy; see 1 Corinthians 13:2), who have performed exorcisms...
(drive out demons; see Luke 10:20; Acts 19:13), and have performed many miracles. This three-part list contains some of the most dramatic displays of Christian work we can imagine. But God is well aware that these people are evildoers. Jesus’ verdict is that he never knew them as his disciples because they never knew him (see Psalm 6:8; Matthew 25:12; Luke 13:25–27). There is no faith relationship. Even fantastic works can cover a selfish and unrepentant heart for only so long.

CONCLUSION
A. Confessions of a Reformed Legalist
Churches of my era led many to believe that Christians were morally superior people because we kept the rules. Obedience was compelled by fear of ostracism. Those whose lives did not match traditional standards of the church were shamed, shunned, or expelled. This was the mind-set I and many others of my generation grew up with. The result was a tendency to lump together the outright hypocrites (who should have known better) with the spiritually immature who stumbled back into sin. I abandoned my sense of moral superiority as I grew older. I still acknowledged the fact that there were people in my church who hypocritically hid their private sins. Some of these folks were the quickest to censor and condemn anyone they believed to be breaking the rules. Their legalistic orientation caused them to be more concerned with controlling the behavior of others rather than repenting of their own secret sins. But I distinguish them from fellow believers who stumble back into sin but then return to the Lord with repentance and humbled hearts. Rather than jump to judgement, I am determined look to the fruit of repentance. Do I see the fruit of the Spirit in spite of their past failings? Paul says there is no law against this fruit (Galatians 5:22, 23). Make no mistake: I still care about godly behavior. I care deeply about injustice. I seek to live to please my Lord. But I also know I will never live without any sin on this earth. I also realize that others are in the same condition. I regret having lived as a legalist, and I now attempt to live in such a way that my own fruit is founded on “a broken and contrite heart” (Psalm 51:17) in keeping with repentance (Matthew 3:8). Such a heart is yielded fully to God. Most assuredly, Philippians 3:13, 14 applies!

PRAYER
Holy God, although we love your laws, help us not to fall into the trap of thinking that we are saved by those laws. Forgive us when we have treated rules as more important than people. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.1

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