

Pharisees, in the Church

“Woe to you, Pharisees . . . ” (Matthew 23:13,15,16, 23,25,27,29).

“You snakes, you brood of vipers” (Matthew 23:33).

“You are of your father, the devil” (John 8:44).

The origin of the Pharisee religious sect is unknown. It probably grew out of rabbinic Judaism following the reforms of Ezra. But after the Jewish revolt against Antiochus IV, Phariseeism became a more prominent—even dominant—movement. Of the major sects in Judea at the time of Jesus, Pharisees shared leadership with the Sadducees, the Scribes, and to a much lesser degree the Essenes. But the Pharisees were the most conspicuous. Phariseeism began as a God-fearing movement to uphold righteousness in the Land by knowing and following the Law. Although some continued to hold that ideal, in time the whole movement devolved into something ghastly. It was mainly the Pharisees who rejected Jesus as Messiah/King and with whom Jesus had the most confrontation. Let’s discuss what kind of people the Pharisees were, because such traits as they expressed are super-abundant in our churches today.

1. The Pharisees were **self-righteous**. Because of their full-time, scrupulous care in obeying Moses’ Law, they were certain that God would accept them into Paradise when they died. In fact, God would *have* to do that. In perfect justice, so they thought, He’d be obligated to do that in response to all their righteous deeds. The Pharisees didn’t see any need to repent of anything to be in the Kingdom; they were already virtuous, or so they thought. What they didn’t grasp was the infinite moral perfection of a holy God. Nor the deceitfulness of sin.

It is exceedingly easy to slide into self-righteousness as soon as we consciously obey something God commanded. Let’s think, exactly *what* are we trusting in when we say that we “trust Christ” for salvation? We are trusting in either of 2 possibilities: We’re trusting in Jesus’ obedient and righteous life, and His atoning work and resurrection, or we’re trusting in our own goodness. We’re not flagrant sinners. OK. We attend church faithfully and give money to the church. OK. We read the Bible and pray regularly. Maybe we even give out tracts to people. We clearly are better than others we encounter who profess to be Christians. So we congratulate ourselves and quickly enough wind up relying on our own goodness, or our good acts, to gain God’s applause, maybe even God’s love, and maybe admittance to God’s presence . That’s Phariseeism! Only Jesus—the incarnate Son—was (is) self-righteous and perfectly righteous. And only by faith—and that by God’s grace—can His righteousness be reckoned (imputed) to us innate sinners (Romans 3:22). Yes, we should seek to please God in all we think, say and do. But that needs to occur within a personal relationship of biblical trust and love. We must be continually on guard that we don’t lapse into deadly self-righteousness.

2. The Pharisees were **separatists**. It’s what the word “Pharisee” means. They willfully separated themselves from other Jews, refusing to associate in any way with those not of themselves. They thought themselves so morally and religiously superior that they couldn’t possibly condescend to associate with others. They not only had contempt for non-Pharisees, they despised them. They were bigots. They basked in the glory of their superiority. They carried their separatism right into their own personal bubble; they lived for themselves.

Paul says we who are believers are to dissociate from those in the church who are overtly wicked. OK. But nowhere does Scripture warrant our withdrawal from other believers because they don’t have the same doctrines or church practices we do. Nowhere does Scripture warrant a sense of religious superiority that we withhold love from other believers. Some churches [gasp!] have raised separatism to an essential, defining doctrine. What does Scripture say about this? We are to love other believers in the same selfless, sacrificial way that Jesus loved us—or we’re not truly believers at all. We’re to expend our lives ministering to others; no bubbled life is allowed for a follower of Jesus. This is heavy! Separation from other believers—or even from non-believers—out of a sense of superiority is quintessentially Phariseeism at its ugliest.

3. The Pharisees were **proud** people. They glorified themselves. They loved themselves. They craved the praise of others. They were proud of their supposedly righteous deeds, of their understanding of Scripture, and of their goodness. Their contempt for non-Pharisees and their self-righteousness were expressions of pride.

Pride is deadly! Pride blocks us from knowing God, His will and His truths. Pride blocks us from submitting to God's revealed will. Only the humble person is able to do any of these things. Worse, pride blocks the Holy Spirit from engaging with our spirit, so there's not even the possibility of pleasing God. And proud people never realize that they are proud; they *cannot* realize it. So pride is self-defeating. Proud people are easily offended, easily angered. They think that they are always virtuous, always in the right on any issue and cannot bring themselves even to reflect on the views or values or ideas of others. Pride easily slides into haughtiness, into arrogance—even when it involves interpretation of Scripture. Proud Pharisees populate our churches.

4. The Pharisees loved their **traditions**. They lived by them. Traditions get started by somebody somewhere having a good idea and acts on it. In time, the idea becomes adopted, enstructured, and it eventually supplants Scripture. However well-intentioned it was, it was nevertheless only a human invention. The Pharisees had lots and lots of traditions. So many that they lost (if they ever had) any necessary understanding of Scripture. Their traditions dictated how they were to observe the Sabbath, so that when Jesus miraculously and lovingly healed a man on a Sabbath, in horror they despised Jesus!

This Pharisaic characteristic almost defines our Churches. We have entire denominations that are based on this or that tradition. The Reformed churches, for example, baptize infants. Why? They don't know why. They just do it; it's their tradition. The Protestant churches mimic the traditions of the Roman Catholic churches with only small modifications. We attend church on Sunday mornings because of . . . well, tradition. We give thanks before a meal because of . . . tradition. We proclaim the Gospel safely inside our church buildings (and nowhere else) because of tradition. We're so smug in our traditions, we see no need to have to study and reflect on and apply the Scriptures in our lives.

5. The Pharisees were **legalists**. Legalism is an attitude. The Pharisees deliberately kept the Law (or tried to) because they believed that keeping the Law would guarantee being in heaven. They supposed that observing the Law as scrupulously as they did was what God required of them. So they missed the core issue in the Scriptures: the need to have a heart of flesh instead of a heart of stone. The Pharisees took the easy path, they followed a set of externals in the (vain) expectation that God would exalt them, instead of the vastly more difficult path of internal transformation, a transformation of the soul.

In our churches today, we repeat that same Pharisaic attitude. We don't want to submit to a Spirit-empowered transformation that comes by obedience to Jesus' teachings and commands, by imitating Jesus' Person, so we follow the easier path of scrupulously attending church, in the expectation that God is satisfied with that. We'd be horrified to suppose we're "legalists," because we suppose we're saved entirely by grace, yet . . . what else to call it? The Gospel calls us to personal, loving transformation into the likeness of the beloved Son, into becoming self-sacrificing, humble people obsessed with loving others. Few of us are even interested in doing that.

6. The Pharisees were intensely **nationalistic**. They loved their nation, Judea, and so they craved the autonomy of a previous era, an autonomy that Rome wouldn't allow. They were certain their nation was superior to any other nation on earth for, after all, God had chosen them. So they despised the Gentile nations. They despised assimilation into the life of the Gentile nations and they despised those who did. They knew that a Messiah would come to deliver their beloved nation from Rome's dominion so they could be free again. They didn't want a sin offering—they had no need for that. They wanted liberty so that they could indulge their beliefs and ideals in selfish complacency. It was in large part this desire to be free from Rome and that they saw no intention by Jesus to do that for them, that they had no use for Him. They should have understood from Scripture (Daniel, Isaiah, Zechariah, and others) that God was doing something else, something far more important to God.

Evangelicals today are nationalistic just like the Pharisees of old, except that the treasured nation is now America. A grotesque, irrational, and unbiblical (even idolatrous) pursuit of nationalism permeates our churches. We've idolized personal or political liberties, and comforts and prosperity, and so we suppose that patriotic zeal will maintain them. We should understand that America is just another of the Gentile nations included in the Daniel 2 statue. But we don't because, like the Pharisees, our desires have priority over God's Word. The Make America Great movement that evangelicals heartily support implies Pharisaic (and ungodly) contempt for other nations.

7. The Pharisees preferred their **man-made religion**, something the rabbis had invented, to a new life and a new relationship with the Creator God that Jesus was offering. It was a hybrid religion, incorporating revealed truth with well-intentioned human nonsense. The Pharisees couldn't hear what Jesus was offering because they didn't want to hear it, and they couldn't see the attesting miracles He performed right in front of them because they didn't want to see them. They wanted only their own religion. And they had the entire Hebrew Scriptures open to them, and if they understood what was in print right before their eyes, they would have embraced Jesus as the promised Anointed One sent from God. But that was the problem! They couldn't understand their Scriptures, because they didn't want to. They had an arrogant certainty that their beliefs were true and uncontestable. Phariseeism was a Satan-inspired counterfeit. It existed to keep people from the reality then on offer. It was (is) death to all who participate.

Today's Western churches, including the evangelical ones, are saturated with Pharisaic, invented religion. And we love it. We much prefer it to the reality revealed in the Word of God. That's because all human-invented religion satisfies the flesh, the sin nature; it leaves us free to pursue worldly lusts or whatever interests us; it makes no (or trivial) demands. So we give lip service to what is in the Word, we honor it in our minds, in the abstract. And we pretend that we're obeying the Word. We have no intention however of actually conforming our lives to the Word. Our desire is not for God. It's for self, for our comfort and for our freedom to live as we please. So we have such monstrosities as "decision salvation" and the "Free Grace" Gospel. And there's a Prosperity Gospel, a civic Christianity, and of course Roman Catholicism. And all who participate in these believe that they're loved by God and will be in heaven when they die, without ever thinking (or looking in the Scriptures) if that's a delusion. We're just as smug about our beliefs as those Pharisees were about theirs.

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We live in a world defined by moral conflict. Good versus evil surrounds us, pervades all existence, all history and all that we know as modern life. It's the metaleptic of the Bible, between the lines of text on every page. It's the drama that the Scriptures were written to reveal and to deal with. The "good" is God's goodness, His will, His truths, His Person, His Word. The "good" is Jesus, the Son incarnate. The "evil" is everything else. *Everything* else. We necessarily take either one side or the other; there is no neutral state and there's no hopping back and forth from one side to the other. Why is this so difficult to grasp?

If we are in a personal, loving, trusting relationship with the living, exalted Jesus, we have new life. And so we dwell in the here-and-now expressing that new life, which is Christ-likeness. It is godliness. It is the life of the "good," as revealed in the Word. It involves self-sacrifice. It involves humble obedience. It involves loving others selflessly. It involves a lot! With privileges come responsibilities. But the new life has the gift of Christ's Spirit to enable us to live godly and to do righteousness, and so to glorify God.

I suspect that there's an element of Phariseeism in most of us. In some more, in some less. But there shouldn't be *any*. We live *coram deo* (as Luther would say), that is, before the face of God. We therefore must—*must!*—live godly and be godly. We're not at liberty to be Pharisaic, or worldly, or fleshly, or unsanctified, or immature. It's why Paul, reflecting the teaching of all Scripture, demands spiritual transformation. It's why Jesus demands complete self-denial. It's why God demands total loving commitment to Him and to Him alone. So dear reader, while there still is time left, let's be faithful to our calling *now*.