

First Tuesday Class Series

A Closer Look at the Pharisees

Introduction:

The charge of "Pharisaism" is commonly made towards those who try to live strictly by the commands of God as recorded in the Bible. Were the Pharisees condemned in the Bible because of their strict adherence to God's word? The word "Pharisee" or a form of it is used 101 times in the New Testament. That those references are overwhelmingly negative is not news to anyone remotely familiar with the Bible. They are repeatedly condemned in the strongest of terms. Our purpose in this study is to identify why the Pharisees were the repeated object of our Lord's condemnation. In a past generation, supporters of institutionalism commonly labeled as "Pharisees" those brethren holding to the pattern of truth. Leroy Garrett and Carl Ketcherside charged brethren who opposed their "unity-in-diversity" concepts with Pharisaism. Others did the same during the "Grace-Unity Movement" of the 1970's. In October of 1982 through March of 1983, Darwin Chandler wrote a series of 7 articles in *Gospel Anchor* entitled "Neo-Pharisaism" in which he made such charges against brethren who were simply holding to a "thus saith the Lord" while he was in the process of rejecting it in his journey towards ever-increasing error. Today, we hear some brethren charging those who abide within the doctrine of Christ as being "Pharisees." Those who seek to label brethren as a "Pharisees" may well be saying more about the own Bible ignorance than the guilt of those being accused. As we will see, some who have charged others with "Pharisaism" have actually shown some of the very characteristic we see in the Pharisees of New Testament times.

I. Pharisees and Adherence to God's Law

- A. The most detailed statement from Jesus showing the reason for His condemnation of the Pharisees is found in Matthew 15 and Mark 7.
 1. Being written to Gentiles, Mark 7 explains the background more fully, let us examine it:
 2. *"And there are gathered together unto him the Pharisees, and certain of the scribes, who had come from Jerusalem, and had seen that some of his disciples ate their bread with defiled, that is, unwashen, hands. (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, except they wash their hands diligently, eat not, holding the tradition of the elders; and when they come from the market-place, except they bathe themselves, they eat not; and many other things there are, which they have received to hold, washings of cups, and pots, and brasen vessels.) And the Pharisees and the scribes ask him, Why walk not thy disciples according to the tradition of the elders, but eat their bread with defiled hands? And he said unto them, Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, This people honoreth me with their lips, But their heart is far from me. But in vain do they worship me, Teaching as their doctrines the precepts of men. Ye leave the commandment of God, and hold fast the tradition of men. And he said unto them, Full well do ye reject the commandment of God, that ye may keep your tradition. For Moses said, Honor thy father and thy mother; and, He that speaketh evil of father or mother,*

let him die the death: but ye say, If a man shall say to his father or his mother, That wherewith thou mightest have been profited by me is Corban, that is to say, Given to God; ye no longer suffer him to do ought for his father or his mother; making void the word of God by your tradition, which ye have delivered: and many such like things ye do” (Mark 7:1-13).

- B. This passage makes it clear that Jesus condemned the Pharisees because of their failure to adhere to the pattern of Scripture, instead substituting "*the tradition of the elders*" as being on a par with God's word. The process by which they did so is made plain.
- C. Notice the steps given in the text whereby God's law was replaced with human traditions:
 - 1. **They left the commandments of God (v. 8a).** When God's commands are cast away as the absolute standard, the stage is always set for apostasy.
 - a. The same thing was seen during Hosea's time (Hos. 4:6-10). They did not do as God had commanded in loving His law and letting it be their sole guide (Psa. 119:10-11, 72, 77, 103, 105, 167, et. al.).
 - b. When we leave the boundary of divine teaching and doctrine, we are by definition in a way of sin and separated from God (2 Jn. 9).
 - 2. **They held to the traditions of men (v. 8b).**
 - a. They thought that the traditions they set up through their rabbinical traditions were based upon God's command, but their focus for determining right and wrong was on human tradition rather than the Scripture.
 - b. In fact, the process described in the beginning of Rabbinic Judaism wherein the traditions were intended to be a "hedge around the law" to assure that faithful Jews would not violate the law.
 - c. The tradition had a good intent, but its effect was to replace God's law with man's law.
 - d. However good the original intent, the effect was to negate God's teaching by turning attention to a standard other than God's word.
 - 3. **They rejected the commandment of God to keep the traditions (v. 9).**
 - a. They would have denied this charge, but it was true.
 - b. Jesus proved that by noting the conflict which came to exist between the plain command of God and their tradition.
 - (1) God commanded, "*Honor thy father and mother*" (Exod. 20:12; et. al.). The fulfillment of that command obviously involved a monetary responsibility towards one's father and mother.
 - (2) But the tradition to which the Pharisees held taught that one need not help their parents if he declared that the portion of income with which he would have cared for his parents was given to God ("Corban").
 - (3) When such a conflict between human tradition and divine law occurred, which one did the Pharisees uphold? The tradition of men!
 - (4) Thus Jesus rightly charged that they rejected the commandments of God to keep their tradition.
 - 4. **They made void the word of God by their tradition (v. 13).**
 - a. While they added a provision not found in God's law and demanded adherence to the human addition (the washing of hands ritual), they eliminated a command that was found

- in God's law (honoring father and mother).
- b. Jesus went on to make it clear that His example just given was not the only case in which they made God's law of no effect by their traditions. He said, "*And MANY such things ye do.*" The Pharisees practice was replete with examples of supplanting divine commands with human traditions.
- 5. This passage clearly demonstrates that the Pharisees did not focus upon God's law to seek authority from His word for their actions.
 - a. They did not demand "book, chapter, and verse" for all that they did.
 - b. They sought for human law and tradition to authorize their actions.
 - c. For *this*, they stood condemned by the One who had a part in authoring that rejected law.

II. Pharisees and Judging by Proper Standard of God's Law

- A. In Matthew 12:1-8, the Pharisees saw Jesus' disciples plucking grain from the field and eating it on the sabbath.
 - 1. The Pharisees said to Jesus, "*Behold, thy disciples do that which it is not lawful to do upon the sabbath.*"
 - 2. Why did they make this charge? No principle of the law of Moses was violated by plucking corn to eat. So what could be "*unlawful*" about their action?
 - 3. Their charge was based upon their traditions and Jesus corrected such as He taught about how to tell the difference between those who do that which is "*not lawful*" and those who are "*guiltless*" (vs. 3-8).
 - a. Jesus first asked, "*Have ye not read what David did?*"
 - (1) Read where? Obviously, in God's law. The reference is to David's actions in eating the showbread (1 Sam. 21:6).
 - (2) Jesus said that was "*unlawful.*"
 - (3) Why? Because the law which they were to read said only the priest could eat the showbread (Lev. 24:9).
 - (4) Yet, the Pharisees would not condemn David in this action even though it was against the law.
 - b. Then Jesus directed their attention to the law again, this time making His appeal to the actions of the priests in the temple on the sabbath.
 - (1) For anyone else to kindle a fire as the priests did would be to "*profane the sabbath*" (Ex. 35:3). Why? Because the law said so!
 - (2) Yet, the priest were "*guiltless*" when they did so.
 - (3) Why? Because the law authorized their actions (Num. 28:9-10).
 - 4. In applying the principle to his disciples, Jesus, as "*lord of the sabbath*" who gave the regulations governing that day, pronounced the disciples "*guiltless.*"
 - a. Why? Because judgment according to the law showed such.
 - b. Thus, Jesus shows that the Pharisees were the ones to be condemned for judging by a standard other than God's law while His disciples were justified by that standard.
- B. The failure of the Pharisees to appeal to the Scripture as the absolute standard for their conduct

was at the root of many other problems for which they were condemned.

1. Their rejection of Jesus for doing miracles on the sabbath was a result of that false concept. Their attempts to trap Jesus in speech were not the result of a close investigation of His conduct in light of Messianic prophecy, but because He violated their traditions and so posed a threat to their authority.
2. Their self-righteousness and pride was a result of their looking to their traditions as the standard for judgment, rather than God's law.
3. Their failure to understand the weighty matters of the law came, not as a result of carefully scrutinizing the law, but from a failure to put their focus on that law sufficiently. Jesus said they should have paid close attention to even small matters of the law, but not to the exclusion of the principles which should have been seen as foundational to that law (Matt. 23:23).
4. The Pharisees pretentious prayers, permitted by their traditions, were an abomination to God and the true, quiet reverence demanded of His people (Matt. 23:13-14; 6:5-8).
5. Their hypocrisy so strongly condemned by Jesus in Matthew 23 was the result of leaving the commandments of God and holding fast to human tradition.
6. Pharisees never came under condemnation of Jesus for holding too closely to the provisions of God's law. No one ever did!
7. The condemnation of the Pharisees came, simply put, from a failure to seek authority from God for all that they did and confine their judgments to that law. Book, chapter and verse preaching and application would have helped them to judge correctly.

III. Characteristics and Doctrinal Views of the Pharisees

- A. How can we identify those who are in danger of being like the Pharisees whom Jesus condemned? As we any other challenge of proper identification, we must look at the traits given and compare one to those traits to see if the identification matches.
- B. The following are some characteristics of the Pharisees condemned by Christ and the passages that give us an explanation of those traits:
 1. The Pharisees were self righteous (Luke 18:9-14).
 - a. They sought to justify themselves despite being rightly condemned as lovers of money (Luke 16:14-15).
 - b. The case of the lawyer asking, "Who is my neighbor?" was likely a Pharisees, or one heavily influenced by them (Luke 10:25-37).
 - c. Those who seek to uphold themselves as the standard for judgment or justify themselves despite their failure to obey God's law are like the Pharisees of old.
 2. The Pharisees were guilty of hypocrisy (Matt. 23:1-36). Their hypocrisy was evident in:
 - a. They had differing standards for themselves and others.
 - b. Their actions were for show, not a result of true piety.
 - c. While they made a pretense of spirituality outwardly, they were vile within.
 - d. They emphasized the outward to the exclusion of the inward.
 - e. By encouraging imitation of their own actions, they made their disciples worse than they were previously.
 - f. They made meticulous rules for proper conduct based on their will, not God's.

- g. They pretended to respect truth and past proclaimers of it, but they showed their disdain for both the provisions and preachers at the present time.
 - h. Those who show the signs of such hypocrisy today are like the Pharisees.
3. The Pharisees created man-made additions and subtractions to God's law (Matt. 15:1-9; Mark 7:5-13).
 - a. They added traditions not found in the law about the rituals of washing hands.
 - b. They subtracted the honoring of father and mother in some circumstances despite it being commanded in the law.
 - c. When people add to and subtract from God's law today, they are being like the Pharisees.
 4. The Pharisees rejected Christ's law on divorce and remarriage (Matt. 19:3-12).
 - a. They wanted to abide, not by the more strict law announced by Christ, but by the more lenient provisions found in Deuteronomy 24.
 - b. The reaction of the disciples and Jesus' response to them made it clear that Jesus' law was indeed more strict than the Pharisees were prepared to follow.
 - c. Today, those who belittle and seek to evade the strictness of Christ's law on divorce and remarriage are like the Pharisees.
 5. The Pharisees would not repent before baptism (Matt. 3:7-8).
 - a. They came to be baptized of John the Baptist.
 - b. John told them to repent first and show the fruit of that repentance before being baptized.
 - c. When one today says we may baptize those who have not yet repented of their sins, that one is in agreement with the Pharisees, not the teachers of truth.
 6. The Pharisees rejected the necessity of water baptism (Luke 7:29-30).
 - a. The people and the publicans justified God as they were baptized according to the commandment of God through John.
 - b. The Pharisees and lawyers rejected the counsel of God because they were not baptized as God had commanded through John.
 - c. When people today deny the necessity of water baptism despite the commands of the gospel to be baptized for the remission of sins (Acts 2:38; 22:16; etc.), they are identifying themselves with the Pharisees by their actions.
- C. When we examine the facts, those who charge others with being "Pharisees" are often the very ones guilty of teaching and acting like the Pharisees. Let us be careful to scrutinize the charges made to see if they are true or not. The next time we hear someone condemning another as a "Pharisee," let us ask ourselves the question, "Who is really guilty of the charge?"

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