

Learning from the Pharisees

Jesus had many followers and admirers, but he also upset a lot of people and made dangerous enemies. It's surprising to see where his opposition came from.

Interestingly, as far as we know Jesus never said a word against the harsh Roman overlords of first-century Israel; and he seems to have taken no particular interest in Herod, the depraved puppet king in Galilee. He did however strongly rebuke the chief priests in Jerusalem, as they were a corrupt, self-serving elite who ran the temple for their own profit and ruthlessly exploited the common people.

There was one particular group of people who seem to have been Jesus' main opponents throughout his ministry. They constantly criticized and provoked him. It's clear from his fierce condemnation that he saw them as his most dangerous detractors. These were the scribes and Pharisees.

Good, Upright People!

Who were the scribes and Pharisees, and what was it that made them such relentless enemies of the Lord Jesus?

- ❖ **Scribe** is the English translation of a Greek word meaning 'student of the scriptures' (referring to the Old Testament). Their occupation was writing out copies of the scriptures, and teaching people what they said. Scribes were studious men, widely respected for their knowledge, and often addressed as 'teacher'. They served as judges in legal cases, and so were also known as 'lawyers'.

- ❖ **Pharisee** means 'separated one'. The Pharisees were a group who grew out of a Jewish independence movement around 150 years previously. They were highly religious people, who insisted on strict observance of religious laws. The Pharisees were the moral leaders of their communities.

The scribes and Pharisees were the upright, peace-loving, clean-living, God-fearing, respectable pillars of society in Jesus' day. It's interesting, and worrying, to see that it was these people who opposed Jesus most aggressively. When we consider some of the things the Lord said about them, we can learn a great deal.

Ruled by Rules

The scribes and Pharisees loved to make rules. In the book of Exodus God gave a law to Israel, but this group had embellished God's law with a whole lot



of extra traditions of their own. Sometimes they used obedience to their own complicated rules as a way of side-stepping obedience to God's law! The human heart is very devious.

Mark 7:1-13 relates an occasion when Jesus fell foul of one of their

rules by not washing his hands before eating. The scribes and Pharisees were indignant. But he reminded them that God's law was more important than their own laws, and he quoted the prophet Isaiah:

This people honours me with their lips, but their heart is far from me. And in vain they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men (Mark 7:7).

Rules and traditions can be useful: they provide order and structure in daily life, and they ensure good behaviour. The same is true for rules concerning our service to God. But the example of the scribes and Pharisees shows how they can be dangerous:

- ❖ There's always the possibility that our rules or traditions conflict with the Bible. Never be afraid to review them in the light of Bible teaching.
- ❖ However good the rules are, if our religion is just about obeying rules it enables us to tick them off and then sit back thinking we have earned God's approval. That is completely the wrong attitude.

What God wants is that we understand Him, and try to be like Him. This is much more than following rules. As another prophet, Micah, said:

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? (Micah 6:8).

Self-righteousness

You can read in Mark 2:15–17 about an occasion when Jesus and his disci-

ples were invited to a meal, and they were joined by many 'tax collectors and sinners' – the kind of people that a respectable person would not want to socialise with. The local scribes and Pharisees were scandalised. But Jesus said to them:

Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance.

Jesus preached God's message of forgiveness and salvation to anyone who would listen, and the Bible shows that it was often the 'sinners' who responded best.

Fundamental to the Gospel is the call to repentance (that is, turning away from our sins). Those who are aware of their need of forgiveness will appreciate this – but it is meaningless to those who have a high opinion of their own righteousness. The apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans puts it like this:

All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus (Romans 3:23–4).

Hypocrisy

In the week before the Passover when he would die, Jesus was teaching in the temple at Jerusalem. His enemies attacked him on every side, trying to trip him up in his words, but they failed. Matthew 22 ends with the comment:

And no one was able to answer him a word, nor from that day on did anyone dare question him anymore (verse 46).

The whole of the next chapter, Matthew 23, is devoted to a warning about adopting the attitude of the scribes and Pharisees, and Jesus sums it up in one word – ‘hypocrisy’.



A hypocrite was an actor in a Greek play. The actor often wore a mask in front of his face to portray the character he was playing. Jesus uses this word about the scribes and Pharisees, because they were people who presented to the outside world a false appearance. Today we might call them ‘two-faced’.

They say, and do not do (Matthew 23:3).

They were good at telling other people how they should live their lives, but secretly behaved very differently:

All their works they do to be seen by men (verse 5).

They loved to appear righteous, to be admired by other people, but it was only skin-deep. They were concerned about what other people thought of them, not about how God saw them.

It’s easy enough to put on a good show, and we may well fool other people, but we cannot fool God.

The Lord does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart (1 Samuel 16:7).

The Warning

During his ministry, the Lord Jesus preached the message of the Gospel to anyone who would listen. There are wonderful accounts of how his message reached the hearts of the most unlikely people.

However, there was this one group who were largely resistant to his teaching, and we’re given a lot of detail about his analysis of their problem. Obviously there’s a reason the Bible writers provide all this detail. It is a warning to us against falling into the same trap. The scribes and Pharisees are a grotesque caricature showing what it can be like when religion goes wrong.

The apostle Paul had been a Pharisee, but when he was converted to Christianity he renounced his former life. In his letter to the Philippians he reflects on the old life he has left behind:

I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith (Philippians 3:8–9).

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