

Pharisees: Then and Now

(by Bob Pulliam)

I think it's pretty clear that when someone is called a Pharisee, it's not a good thing. With all of Jesus' rebuke, and their own hypocrisy, Pharisees earned a pretty infamous name for themselves. They have been commonly associated with a particular zeal for keeping the law. Unfortunately, if you wave your Bible around a little too much today, someone's going to pull this term out of their hat and throw it at you. It is interesting to note, however, that they usually don't do so until their own toes get stepped on. You can actually beat someone over the head with scriptures, and if they agree with you, you'll get a hearty "amen". But show them the error of their way and you're a Bible beating hypocrite. Something's wrong there!

On many occasions the people of God have been called Pharisees. But we must remember that calling someone something doesn't make it so. False teachers live for labels to place on lovers of truth. If they can make you believe the negative label, there will be much less chance that you will listen to truth.

I know of no one who professes the law to be wrong, but some believe it is only a general guide, and that we should have a great deal of tolerance for different interpretations of it. This assumes that we cannot understand the Bible. So if someone quotes scripture and shows someone else the error of their way, are they a legalistic Pharisee? Do you know who the Pharisees really were? And more importantly, do you understand where the Pharisees were actually wrong? Most people assume such things, but you may want to read on... You may be surprised...

Pharisees in the Bible...

Laid Aside the Law

"For laying aside the commandment of God, you hold the tradition of men; the washing of pitchers and cups, and many other such things you do." (Mk 7:8)

You commonly hear people say that the Pharisees' problem was that they were always demanding that people keep the law. The problem Jesus had with these people was not that they wanted to keep every point of God's law! Their problem was that they were not keeping the law of God. Instead, they were binding the traditions of men. So Pharisees lay aside the law! Hmmmmm...

Hypocrites

"The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. Therefore whatever they tell you to observe, that observe and do, but do not do according to their works; for they say, and do not do." (Mt 23:2f)

To Be Seen of Men

"They love the best places at feasts, the best seats in the synagogues," (Mt 23:6)

They loved special attire which set them above others (Mt 23:5). Sound like anyone you know?

Swallowed Camels

"Blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!" (Mt 23:24)

Have you ever heard someone say, "Oh, you're straining at gnats!" Straining at gnats is wrong? Is that Jesus' point here? Many people have no idea what this passage is all about. Straining a gnat out of your soup is not wrong, but it is the height of folly if you then proceed to swallow a camel. The Pharisees had strained the little, and swallowed the big. The error was not in straining, it was in swallowing what should not have been swallowed to begin with!

Who Is the Pharisee?...

When we look at the Pharisees in Jesus' day, we do not see law keepers who were condemned for striving for the letter of the law. Instead we see hypocrites who usurped the law with the traditions of the elders. They lifted themselves up above others, and picked at the law, choosing only what they wanted to keep for themselves.

Are there Pharisees today? There are people who closely resemble the description of the Pharisees in the Bible. Ironically, they are usually the first to use the term 'Pharisee' to discredit others. "He who draws his sword first..." I suppose. For the seeker of truth, their tactics are clear. They still wear the religious clothing to set themselves above others. And they honor the traditions of their particular denominations above the word of God. In this regard they often strain at gnats to justify their peculiar doctrines, and then swallow camels whole. Note these points...

Fine Definition of Law...

The law of Moses lacked the definitive razor sharp edge that the Pharisees wanted. This was corrected by the traditions of the elders which built an hedge about the law to clearly delineate it. Who today believes the Bible isn't clear enough? It isn't us! We claim the New Testament law is clearly defined, those who would call us Pharisee tell us that it is not clear and that we should therefore be tolerant of diverse doctrines (so long as those doctrines aren't out of line with their creed, that is). Who is closer to being a Pharisee here?...

Seeking a Sign...

On at least two occasions the Pharisees sought a sign from Jesus (Mt 12:28; 16:1), even though He had already worked signs. While we are satisfied with the signs that Jesus worked in the New Testament, many who would call us Pharisees still seek after signs and miracles. John said that what he wrote was sufficient for faith (Jn 20:30f). I believe he was absolutely correct. But others want the Lord to do something special for them. Who is closer to being a Pharisee here?...

False Accusations...

False accusations were leveled against Jesus by the Pharisees (Mt 12:24). While we seek only to debate truth and error on the basis of scripture, many resort to false accusations in

an effort to discredit their adversaries before their position can be weighed... Those who would call us "Pharisee" is a case in point. Who is closer to being a Pharisee here?...

Notoriety...

"But all their works they do to be seen by men. They make their phylacteries broad and enlarge the borders of their garments. They love the best places at feasts, the best seats in the synagogues," (Mt 23:5f) You can see this all around! In pulpits all around the country men adorn themselves to appear better suited to tell others what God wants. This is what the Pharisee did. Who is closer to being a Pharisee here?...

Conclusion...

You may call me a Pharisee for demanding authority in religion, but the truth is, no one was ever condemned (by God) for keeping the law of God in the New Testament. It is certain that we are nowhere near being modern day Pharisees. Such a charge is an obvious attempt to taint minds against the truth before it is heard. Many times the one who makes such a charge are nigh unto being Pharisees themselves.

The law of God is a lamp and light to guide us as God would have us walk, and we must use it just as He has given it. Never use someone else's lamp to light your path through life. And never stop seeking the light which is only found in the Word of God, the Bible.