

ACCIDENTAL PHARISEE

WEEK 1: BACKGROUND ON PHARISEES



Who Were the Pharisees? ¹

The Pharisees were an ancient Jewish group who laid the foundation for what would become rabbinic Judaism. The name, “Pharisee,” likely comes from the Hebrew word *prushim*, meaning **separated ones**.

While the New Testament portrays their emphasis on oral tradition as legalistic and hypocritical, many Jews found it helpful in following the Torah in their everyday, contemporary lives.

The Pharisees were a sect within early Judaism, becoming active around 150 BC and enduring as a distinct party until being subsumed into the Rabbinic movement around 135 AD. The Pharisees’ insistence on the binding force of oral tradition (“the unwritten Torah”) remains a tenet of Jewish theological thought. When the Mishna (the first constituent part of the Talmud) was compiled about 200 AD, it incorporated the teachings of the Pharisees on Jewish law.

Modern Christians tend to see the Pharisees in a **negative light** — mostly because the New Testament authors portray the Pharisees as legalistic and hypocritical. While that might describe their confrontations with Jesus and early Christians, it hardly tells the whole story of this important Jewish group.

By preserving and advocating for the importance of oral tradition, which was believed to have been handed from God to Moses along with the Torah, the Pharisees played an integral role in giving us both the **Talmud** (the written record of the oral tradition) and the **Masoretic Text** (the original Hebrew Bible, which relied on oral tradition to correctly identify and pronounce ambiguous words).

Some of the Pharisees’ biggest contributions to Judaism were:

- Emphasizing the “oral tradition” (which they argued was equal to the written tradition of the Torah)
- Extending Jewish practices into life outside the temple
- Instilling greater piety in “the common people”
- Promoting belief in the afterlife

So at least in part, Christians can thank the Pharisees for ensuring the Old Testament was so carefully preserved. But beyond emphasizing oral tradition, the Pharisees also helped Judaism prepare for life after the Romans destroyed Herod’s temple, and they helped Jews apply and obey the Mosaic Law in everyday Jewish life.

“¹Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, ²The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat, ³so do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do. For they preach, but do not practice.” – Matthew 23:1-3 ESV

Not All Pharisees are the Same

Pharisees don't get a very good press in the New Testament. They are usually portrayed as Jesus' enemies, anxious to catch him out with a leading question or harsh attempt to put him down. In the Jewish Talmud (Şota 22b) they are divided into seven different types and only one of them is sincere in their faith:

Type of Pharisee	Characteristic ^{2, 3, 4}	Jesus' Words
Shoulder Pharisee (shikmi Pharisee)	Wear their good actions on their shoulders for everyone to see	“Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.” – Matthew 6:1 (see also Matthew 23:1-12)
Wait a little Pharisee (nikpi Pharisee)	Always find excuses for putting off a good deed	“Woe to you, blind guides, who say, ‘If anyone swears by the temple, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath.’ You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that has made the gold sacred?” – Matthew 23:16-18
Bruised Pharisee (kizai Pharisee)	Run into walls because they are so busy avoiding looking at women	“But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” – Matthew 5:27-30
Hunched Over Pharisee ('pestle' Pharisee)	Walk bent over in pretended humility	“And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.” – Matthew 6:16-18
Ever reckoning Pharisee (constantly reckoning good deeds vs. bad ones)	Always weighing their good deeds against the bad	“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” – Matthew 6:19-24
Fearful Pharisee (serve from fear)	Are frightened of doing the wrong thing	“Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.” – Luke 12:32
God loving Pharisee	Really love God from their heart and take delight in his law	“But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. ‘Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?’ And he said to him, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’” – Matthew 22:37-39

Background of Pharisees ^{5, 6}

The Pharisees are consistently depicted in the Gospels as Jesus' antagonists. Most Bible dictionaries depict the Pharisees as greedy, hypocritical, lacking a sense of justice, overly concerned with fulfilling the literal details of the law, and insensitive to the spiritual significance of the OT.

- All four gospels link **SCRIBES** and **PHARISEES** – this probably indicates that some scribes were Pharisees (Matthew 5:20, Mark 2:16, Luke 5:21, John 8:3).
- Who were famous Pharisees?
 - Paul (Acts 23:9, 26:5, Phil 3:5)
 - Nicodemus (John 3:1)
 - Gamaliel (Acts 5:34)
 - Zechariah (Luke 1:5)
 - Josephus the Historian

“In Jesus’ day, being called a Pharisee was a badge of honor. It was a compliment, not a slam.”

– Larry Osbourne

Jesus and Paul both referenced Pharisees when they wanted to illustrate the highest levels of spiritual commitment:

“For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” – Matthew 5:20 ESV

“⁴though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: ⁵circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.” – Philippians 3:4-6 ESV

How Can we be Modern Day Pharisees? ⁷

According to Larry Osbourne, here’s a brief list of six of the most telling indicators that we may have inadvertently started down the path of an Accidental Pharisee, looking down on others and trusting in our own righteousness:

1. First and foremost is a deepening sense of frustration and disdain for those at the back of the line. Instead of a Jesus-like compassion for those who can’t keep up, we view them with cynicism and a cocky arrogance.
2. The second warning sign is a spirit of exclusivity. When thinning the herd becomes more important than expanding the kingdom; or raising the bar becomes more important than helping people climb over it, something has gone terribly wrong.
3. A third indicator is the addition of extra-biblical rules and expectations. Few

“It’s not about ancient Pharisees. It’s about accidental Pharisees.”

– Larry Osbourne

of us would see ourselves as legalists. We think we've moved on from old school legalism because we no longer judge people by what's in their refrigerator. But the spirit of legalism still runs strong. We now judge people by what's in their driveway and how big their house is.

4. A fourth symptom is a pattern of idolizing the past. Whether it's the New Testament church or the scholars of old, we tend to give them a free pass for their failures. But the present-day Bride of Christ and the current crop of leaders that Jesus has put in place are assailed for their blind spots, failures, and feet of clay. Like the Pharisees of old, we rip on the living prophets and then build monuments to them once they die.
5. A fifth sign that something has gone wrong is a quest for clone-like uniformity. Jesus had room for Simon the Zealot and Matthew the Tax Collector. Yet sometimes, the more biblically grounded we become, the less room we have for anyone who hasn't yet learned all that we've learned. The result is a circle of fellowship that's tighter than Jesus's circle of acceptance.
6. The sixth and final indicator that we're becoming an Accidental Pharisee is something called gift projection. It's the toxic belief that my calling is everyone else's calling. It disfigures the body of Christ by insisting that ears become eyes and hands become feet. It looks like passion for the mission. But in reality, it's chocolate covered arrogance.

“The bottom line is that as long as my only image of a Pharisee is that of a spiritual loser and a perennial enemy of Jesus, I’ll never recognize the clear and present danger in my own life. I’ll never realize that it’s often a very short and subtle journey from being zealous for God to being unintentionally opposed to God.”

– Larry Osbourne



Larry Osbourne

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¹<https://overviewbible.com/pharisees>

²<https://weekly.israelbiblecenter.com/rabbis-seven-types-pharisees-talmud>

³<https://garydavenport.org/2020/11/23/beware-the-leaven-of-the-pharisees-2-seven-kinds-of-pharisees/>

⁴<https://www.christiantoday.com/article/7.familiar.types.of.pharisee/77087.htm>

⁵The Lexham Bible Dictionary

⁶<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Pharisee>

⁷<https://larryosborne.com/six-signs-that-we-may-be-on-our-way-to-becoming-an-accidental-pharisee>