

Lesson 12

Matthew 23: The Pharisees

Introduction

According to some Jewish traditions, Pharisaic Judaism traces its beginning back to Ezra. Most scholars now believe their movement quickly appeared on the scene after the Maccabean revolt of 167 BC. It is thought that the Pharisees are an offshoot of the Hasidim (the “pious ones,” who opposed the Hellenization of Jewish culture under Antiochus Epiphanes). Some of the Hasidim separated themselves, withdrawing from society, with one of the most notable of them becoming known as the Essenes. Those who remained sought to exert their influence on Jewish life and became known as the Pharisees.

In the 150 years leading up to Christ, they played a significant role in Jewish life and religion ... most of the time without a significant amount of political influence. When Jesus appears on the scene they are regarded as religious leaders. They developed an extremely strict interpretation of Mosaic law, developing an extensive set of oral additions to the law designed to maintain religious identity and purity. The word *Pharisee* is Aramaic in origin and means to “separate,” “divide,” or “distinguish.” The Pharisees did separate themselves from commoners and Sadducean aristocracy who were infatuated with Hellenism. It has been said that some of them were so devoted to the rejection of Hellenism that they were willing to take up arms to defend their beliefs. After the temple destruction of 70 AD, which led to the disappearance of the Sadducees and the Bar Kochba revolt in 132-135 which led to the elimination of the Zealots as an influence, the Pharisees became the dominant force in Judaism. This lasted for around 100 years, after which the movement was absorbed by the rabbinical movement. By 500 AD, the Pharisees’ teaching became virtually synonymous with Judaism.²³

The Pharisees refused to be loyal to Rome and served as popular leaders of the people. They were interested in the restoration of Israel. They demonstrated great concern for the keeping of the Law, the sanctity of the temple, the purity of Israel, and pressed for full control of the land of Israel as promised by the prophets. In Matthew 23.2 Jesus said the Pharisees were *seated in the chair of Moses*. By the people they had become to be viewed as God’s authoritative spokespeople.

The Pharisees were especially dedicated to the laws that they liked. Josephus says:

(They) follow the guidance of that which their doctrine has selected and transmitted as good, attaching the chief importance to the observance of those commandments which it has seen fit to dictate to them.²⁴

They also

²³ Johnson, Bradley T. “Pharisees.” *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016.

²⁴ Antiquities 18.12, p. 477. Josephus, Flavius, and William Whiston. *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*. Peabody: Hendrickson, 1987.

passed on to the people certain regulations handed down by former generations and not recorded in the Laws of Moses²⁵

So, in their role as lawmakers, they also stressed what became known as the “Oral Law,” which was a body of traditional interpretations, applications, and *expansions* of the Old Testament law communicated orally.²⁶ For them, the Oral Law came to be regarded as of divine origin. Their additions were added to prevent a person from coming close to breaking the Law. Most of these regulations had to do with purity. It is said in the Mishnah:

- A. Moses received Torah at Sinai and handed it on to Joshua, Joshua to elders, and elders to prophets.
- I B. And prophets handed it on to the men of the great assembly.
- C. They said three things:
 - (1) “Be prudent in judgment.
 - (2) “Raise up many disciples.
 - (3) “Make a fence for the Torah.”²⁷

Their additions and positions were not with the official sanction of God, but by their own self-appointment. Many of them perverted God’s righteousness for their own selfish pursuits. Often their additions to the Law relaxed the divine standard. Mark 7.10-12 gives us one illustration. Here, a rabbinic regulation – the Corban – made it possible for people to ignore the fifth commandment and feel justified in doing so.

Their enthusiasm for the details of the Law might be best described by Isaiah:²⁸

The word of the Lord will come to them: “Law after law, law after law, line after line, line after line, a little here, a little there,” so they go stumbling backward, to be broken, trapped, and captured, Isaiah 28.13.

While not every Pharisee assumed a formal teaching role, they, along with the scribes, saw themselves as the true successors of the Mosaic tradition. Jesus, of course, in Matthew 23, disputed with their claim of being the rightful possessors of that authoritative role.

What the Pharisees Got Right

Besides the New Testament, much of what we know about the Pharisees comes from Josephus. They had a simple lifestyle and were harmonious in their dealings with others, being especially respectful of their elders. This led to their being very influential across Israel, even though at the time of Jesus’ birth there were only around 6,000 of them. They believed in the immortality of both good and evil persons.

²⁵ Antiquities 13.297, p. 355.

²⁶ Scott, J. Julius, Jr. “Pharisees.” Pages 607–9 in *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*. Electronic ed. Baker Reference Library. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1996, p. 607.

²⁷ m. Pirke Abot 1:1 A-C. Neusner, Jacob. *The Mishnah : A New Translation*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988, p. 672.

²⁸ Ryken, Leland, Jim Wilhoit, Tremper Longman, Colin Duriez, Douglas Penney, and Daniel G. Reid. *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000, p. 640.

They believed in the sovereignty of God and human will and choice. They refused to take oaths.²⁹ They took the Law seriously and were “considered the most accurate interpreters of the laws.”³⁰ The New Testament also sheds light on their faithfulness to the teaching of Scripture. They believed in the resurrection (Acts 23.6-8), angels (Acts 23.8), demons, and human responsibility. They observed the Sabbath (Matthew 12.1-2), fasted (Luke 18.9-12), and gave tithes (Matthew 23.23). They also engaged in proselytism (Matthew 23.15).³¹ The Pharisees vigorously sought knowledge of God.

Where the Pharisees Went off Course

Matthew 23 presents us with Jesus’ scathing rebuke of the Pharisees. In Jesus’ condemnation He identifies four major issues:

Their craving for authority and position over the people

Moses’ seat was an expression that summarized teaching authority . . . those officially responsible for interpreting and apply the laws of Moses. While Jesus did not question the authority of the Scribes who occupied this position, *therefore do whatever they tell you*, 23.3a, he does condemn the way they exercised it, *they don’t practice what they teach*, 23.3b. Today we might summarize Jesus’ words as “do what they say, but don’t do what they do.”³²

Jesus then explains. The Pharisees seem to specialize in multiplying the number of ways a person could offend God but were very lacking in providing solutions to help a person please God. Jesus is condemning their legalism, which was apt to impose regulations, but was not interested in providing relief to the lawbreaker. They were characterized by a lack of sympathy. They were loveless and uncaring. This stands in great contrast with Jesus, whose yoke was light and easy, Matthew 11.28-30, and offered rest to the weary.

The Pharisees reveled in their power and position and viewed themselves as superior to and above everyone else. They were filled with a lack of integrity and demonstrated it through their hypocrisy of demanding others to do things they never intended to do themselves.

Their coveting of outward recognition and honor

In Matthew 23.5 Jesus matter-of-factly states: *they do everything to be seen by others*. Their purpose was to glorify themselves, . . . not God. Wherever they went they paraded themselves as the supreme example of holiness and virtue. They practiced their righteousness to be noticed by others, Matthew 6.1. They called attention to all their religious works, Matthew 6.5, 16; Luke 18.9-13.

To flaunt their status and religiosity, they:

²⁹ Julius, Jr., p. 607.

³⁰ Josephus: *War* 2.8.14 (162).

³¹ Manser, Martin H. *Dictionary of Bible Themes: The Accessible and Comprehensive Tool for Topical Studies*. London: Martin Manser, 2009.

³² France, R. T. *Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary*. Vol. 1 of *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985, Vol. 1, p. 327.

They do everything to be seen by others: They enlarge their phylacteries and lengthen their tassels. They love the place of honor at banquets, the front seats in the synagogues, Matthew 23.5-6.

Phylacteries first appeared in the period between the testaments. These were small square boxes made from leather. Inside the phylactery was a copy of Exodus 13.1-10, 11-16, and Deuteronomy 6.4-9; 11.13-21. Phylacteries were intended to be worn during the morning prayer. However, Pharisees wore phylacteries all the time as a sign of spiritual superiority. They even enlarged them to demonstrate their greater devotion to God.³³ Tassels were on the fringes of men's garments. They are mentioned in Numbers 15.38-40. Both phylacteries and tassels were good things in and of themselves. They were designed to call attention to God by reminding them of Him and His word. Instead, the Pharisees had corrupted these things for their own self-exaltation.

They also loved the front seat of honor ... and to be first in everything. This demonstrated their great pride. Jesus tells them, *whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted*, Matthew 23.12.

Their enthusiasm for making converts

In Matthew 23.13, Jesus pronounces woe on the Pharisees for their failure to help people live by the will of God. Instead, their teaching and example kept people out of the kingdom ... and they themselves haven't found the right way in.

In v. 15, Jesus points out their zeal in making proselytes. During the time of Jesus, many synagogues had Gentile members who had been converted out of paganism. Some of these proselytes became extremely zealous for their faith, even more than those who converted them. But by buying into their oral traditions that they held up as equal to or more important than what had been given by God, they had made these proselytes *twice as much a son of hell as (they were)*, Matthew 23.15.

Their over emphasis on observing the minutia of the law

They had magnified the insignificant and minimized the essential. See Matthew 23.23-24. Regulations for tithing produce can be found in Deuteronomy 14.22. The Pharisees took this and extended the provision to extend to the smallest plant possible. Mint, dill, and cumin were garden herbs and were not generally considered to be farm produce. When the Pharisees picked leaves from a mint plant or gathered seeds from a dill or cumin plant, they carefully counted out the leaves and seeds, separating out one for God from each ten counted. They glorified themselves in their self-righteousness of going to such detail.

And yet, Jesus said while giving this attention to detail to insignificant matters, they ignored the weightier matters: justice, mercy, and faithfulness. They were indifferent to basic ethics. The Pharisees were often unfair, unjust, unmerciful, unforgiving, unkind, and abusive of others. In their day-to-day life they were completely contrary to the weightier matters of the law.

³³ MacArthur, *Matthew*, Vol. 3., p. 364.

How did they miss Him?

With their emphasis on the Law, and the constant reading of the Old Testament, the scribes and Pharisees should have been among the first to recognize Jesus. Instead, their great desire for Jewish independence, freedom from the Romans, and lust for power and position caused them to miss Jesus. Here, we have a very important lesson we must learn: Nearness to God and His word does not automatically translate to holy and righteous living. Time spent in the word does not mean that one knows *God*. What started off with good intentions was corrupted by Satan into something God never intended. Mix in a little pride and arrogance, and one can become like the Pharisees – unable to see the reality of one's emptiness before God.

May we all have the humility to evaluate ourselves honestly and fill our hearts with humility. It is not by our own works we are saved ... it is by the grace of God. Praise Him for His marvelous mercy and grace!

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