

Perushim

Matthew 23

The Hebrew word for Pharisees is Perushim (פרושים) that comes from the verb parash (פרש) which means “to separate”. They became influential in the latter part of the Second Temple period (515 BC to 70 AD). They believed the oral tradition or unwritten Torah was as binding as the Written Torah which consisted of the Pentateuch or the 5 books of Moses. According to Jewish tradition, the Oral Law was handed down from generation to generation in an unbroken chain and included teaching from God that was received by Moses but not written down but passed orally to his successors. They also believed in angels, demons, heaven, hell and life after death. When the Mishna, or first essential part of the Torah, was compiled in 200 AD, the teachings of the Pharisees were included into Jewish law shaping Judaism as we see it today.

They were one of three predominant Jewish sects at the time of Jesus, determined to craft an intricate system of rules designed to keep them from breaking the law. It seems like a noble cause, a cause that would result in Jesus affirmation and support. Since they were so in tune with the commandments and laws of God, one would also think that they would have been the ones to support, defend and follow Jesus Christ. But as we know they were not allies of Jesus, they were opponents who hounded Him throughout His ministry.

To the Pharisees, God was not gracious, merciful, slow to anger and abounding in love (Mat 12:1-37) but One who had provided His expectations to mankind in the rules He established. These laws must be kept, no matter the cost, so they crafted hundreds of rules, 613 of which were commandments, 365 were negative while 248 were positive. Every time a new situation arose, another rule had to be written. (Sounds like the government or military 😊) Even though they started off as devout men, by the time Jesus comes to earth, the Pharisees had added over 6,000 laws, in addition to the 613 commandments, 1500 of these laws specifically addressed the Sabbath. Needless to say, the process often created inconsistencies, confusion and sometimes violated both the letter and spirit of the law. The Pharisees of Jesus’ day had become arrogant, proud, self-righteous, myopic hypocrites, who missed the most significant moment in the history of mankind because Jesus and His disciples did not listen to their rules or kowtow to their authority.

In this chapter, we have Jesus’ denunciation of the religious leaders of His day but before he addresses them directly, He speaks to the “multitudes and to His disciples” about them. Jesus tells them, “...the scribes and Pharisees have seated themselves in the seat of Moses, therefore all they tell you do and observe...”. The word chair or kathedra καθηδρα in Greek refers to a place or seat of authority. Unlike the schools in the United States where the students sit and the teacher stands, in the ancient world the teacher sat in a chair and the students sat on the floor at the feet of their teacher. Jesus acknowledges the scribes and Pharisees position, responsibility and instructs the multitudes and His disciples to “do and observe” what they tell you. They loved the seat of Moses, taught that which conformed to scripture but they “...say things but do not do them”. Jesus is not affirming all Pharisaic teaching is to be followed but they should follow it only when their teaching adheres to a correct exposition of the Law. Jesus condemns the Pharisees for not practicing what they preach and provides specific examples of their shortcomings; “They tie up heavy burdens and lay them on men’s shoulders, but they themselves are unwilling to move them with so much as a finger. But they do all their deeds to be noticed by men; for they broaden their phylacteries and lengthen the tassels of their garments. They love the place of honor at banquets and the chief seats in the synagogues, and respectful greetings in the marketplaces, and being called Rabbi by men. Then He goes on to tell them, do not be called Rabbi but do not be called Rabbi; for One is your Teacher, and you are all brothers. Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. Do not be called leaders; for One is your Leader, that is, Christ. But the greatest among you shall be your servant. Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted.”

Jesus then turns from the multitude and his disciples and focuses on the Pharisees. His chastisement of the religious leaders is specific, direct, harsh, and condemnatory. Jesus says they have shut off the kingdom of heaven, devoured widows houses, travel about to proselytize but make them twice a son of hell, tithe their mint and cumin but miss the weightier provisions of the law, clean the outside of the cup while the inside remains dirty and defiled, are like white washed tombs full of dead men’s bones, and are those who will join their ancestors who killed the prophets when they call for the crucifixion of Christ.

As you look at your life, is it more like the prideful Pharisees or the humility and sacrifice of your Savior.

1. What does Jesus tell the crowd and His disciples to do in regard to the teaching of the scribes and Pharisees? What does Jesus commend and what does He condemn? Why? (1-7) What does Jesus tell the teachers of the Law?(8-11)

2. Look up the word “woe”, What does it mean? What does Jesus call the teacher of the Law in verses 13-32? Describe the first two woes, what was the problem and how is each described?

3. What is addressed in the third woe? What is the point and is it a problem today? Why or Why not? What is addressed in the fourth woe? What is the point and is it a problem today? Why or Why not?

4. What is addressed in the fifth woe? What is the point and is it a problem today? Why or Why not? What is addressed in the sixth woe? What is the point and is it a problem today? Why or Why not?

5. What is addressed in the seventh woe? What is the point and is it a problem today? Why or Why not? What is addressed in the eighth woe? What is the point and is it a problem today? Why or Why not? Read verses 37-39, what do we learn from these verses?