

WHERE DID THE PHARISEES GO WRONG?

The Pharisees get a bum wrap. Think about it for a moment. Preachers vilify them in sermons, Christians point out their legalistic ways, and everyone remembers their fierce opposition to Jesus and persecution of early Christians. Essentially, they're the all-around bad guys of the New Testament. But were they really that bad? Could we be overdoing it? Let's take a closer look.

The Pharisees were the most powerful of the Jewish sects in first century Israel. The Bible includes almost 100 references to them, and other ancient historians confirm their influence. They emerged during a turbulent time when Judaism was struggling to maintain its identity. The priesthood was corrupt, immorality was rampant, and the dominant spread of Greek culture threatened the Jewish way of life. In light of this crisis, a group of pious laymen responded by sounding the alarm on their brethren. Only separation from all that was *not* Jewish would save the people and their faith. People began to call this group "the separated ones," or the Pharisees.

Other sects controlled the Jewish priesthood and politics, but the Pharisees gained a foothold in local synagogues and among the common people. They were educated, received extensive training, and became the primary Bible teachers in each village. When it came to theological debates, the Pharisees were sharp, biblically-based, tradition-honoring, and conservative in their views. They held an extremely high view of the Torah (God's Law from the first five books of the Old Testament). Strict obedience to the Torah – both the written commands and the oral traditions – was essential to their faith and identity. Ultimately, the Pharisees believed that if the Jewish people as a whole would turn back to God and obey the Torah down to the smallest details, then and only then would God bless them as a nation once again.

Interestingly enough, Jesus probably fits more in the company of the Pharisees than any other Jewish sect during his time. A study of the gospel accounts reveals:

- Jesus taught in the synagogue and called disciples to himself, much like the leaders of the Pharisees.
- Jesus had a high view of the Torah, and was very knowledgeable of the oral traditions.
- Jesus affirmed many of the same beliefs as the Pharisees in contrast to other Jewish sects.
- Many of Jesus' famous teachings were similar to those of the leaders of the Pharisees, especially the famous Rabbi Hillel.
- Jesus frequently conversed and socialized with the Pharisees.
- Several Pharisees seemed positive or at least sympathetic toward Jesus' ministry.

Of course, there were major differences, as well: Jesus' view of the marginalized (e.g., the poor, women, and Gentiles), his interpretation of the Law, and his teaching on the kingdom of God. And let's not forget Jesus' scathing criticism of the Pharisees' behavior in Matthew 23.

But to be quite honest, as a group, the Pharisees were the best Judaism had to offer at that time. They read their Bibles, defended the faith, respected tradition, called the people to obedience, sought purity, denounced worldliness, maintained high standards, and attended synagogue at every opportunity. Sounds pretty good, doesn't it? Like something we would aspire to. So why do we disparage them so? Why do we scorn their well-intentioned pursuit of righteousness?

Perhaps, it's because we see ourselves in the Pharisees. Maybe an accurate portrayal of the Pharisees would hit a little too close to home. It could be that we vilify them to distance ourselves from their misguided ways. Perhaps we're as threatened by Jesus' teaching as they were and that scares us. Maybe the only way we can feel good about our own pursuit of God's approval is by ridiculing theirs. After all, we all have a little Pharisee in us, which begs the question – how did we get that way? Like the Pharisees, why do we become so consumed with the rules of God that we miss a relationship *with* God? Why do we replace his love with his law? Eugene Peterson probably answers this question better than anyone else:

Imagine yourself moving into a house with a huge picture window overlooking a lake with a grand view of mountains beyond. Snow-capped mountains, beautiful mountains. You have a ringside seat, before all of this beauty, the cloud formations, the wild storms, the entire spectrum of sun-illuminated colors, and the rocks and the trees and the wildflowers and the water. At first you're just captivated by this view. You sit and you stand and you look and admire; you catch your breath. Several times a day you interrupt your work and stand before this window to take in the majesty and the beauty. And then one day you notice some bird droppings on the glass, and you get a bucket of water and a towel and you clean it. A couple of days later, a rainstorm leaves the window streaked and the bucket comes out again. One day some visitors with a tribe of small dirty-fingered children come, and the moment they leave you notice there are smudge marks all over the window. They're hardly out of the door before you have the bucket out again. You're so proud of that window, and it's such a large window. But it's incredible how many different ways foreign objects can attach themselves to that window, obscuring the vision, distracting from the vision. Keeping that window clean now becomes compulsive neurosis. You accumulate ladders and buckets and squeegees. You construct scaffolding outside and one inside; you have to get to all the difficult corners and heights. You end up having the cleanest window in North America, but it's now been years since you've looked through it. You've become a Pharisee.

The Pharisees became obsessed with the Old Testament Law. But they missed the point of the Law. It wasn't supposed to be the means of earning a relationship with God or even earning God's blessing. Rather, the Law was the tangible framework by which one saw God's heart, understood God's character, discerned God's will, and then lived out one's relationship with God. Nothing has changed for us. The rules are still important, whether it's the Ten Commandments or the Sermon on the Mount. But when we focus only on the rules, we miss the point of the rules. And ultimately, we miss God himself.