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## WHERE ARE THE PHARISEES TODAY?

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*Eric L. Johnson*

**T**he Pharisees make up one of the most notorious groups in western history. They are central figures in the gospels in which Christ is the hero and the Pharisees are the villains whose actions lead to the tragic climax (which of course is ironically overturned in the resurrection). The Pharisees are Christ's foils, providing a powerful contrast to Him and His teachings in their practices and views of God, humans, and true religion. And it was these differences that fueled an angry, defensive response to Christ that led the Pharisees to help bring about Christ's eventual death.

The Pharisees, then, are very important characters in the greatest story ever told. But what are we to do with them today? If we only see them as bad guys in the old, old story, we will miss their importance for us today. For the Pharisees also provide a stunning parody of true religion. As passionate followers of God who nevertheless unwittingly fought against God, they offer a perplexing and disturbing picture of humanity's capacity for religious self-deception in the extreme.

To better understand the Pharisees we need to grasp how they saw themselves and God. First, the Pharisees believed they possessed a special standing with God (Matt. 23:6). They thought they were good in God's sight. God had blessed the people of Israel, setting them apart from the pagans, and had given them a set of laws, the

the sight of Christ, the true Light, who taught that goodness belongs to no one except God ("No one is good except God alone" [Luke 18:19]). Even more threatening, Christ taught that the Pharisees were far from the goodness they supposed they possessed. His light revealed their darkness (John 3:20), and, as a result, they killed Him to maintain their false view of themselves as good.

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The root of their error, then, was a lost understanding of God's status as the source of every good thing in the universe. "Every perfect gift is from above" (James 1:17) and continues to belong ultimately to that Sovereign Source. All blessing, honor, glory, and dominion belong to Him (Rev. 5:13). We enjoy God's blessings, but cannot take ultimate responsibility for producing them. They are gifts, and there is but one supreme Gift-

Giver. The Pharisees made themselves, unwittingly, God's rivals. In their zeal to maintain their own goodness, they put to death the God who gave them every good that they enjoyed.

Obviously, as an historical group, the Pharisees will never be seen again. However, the spiritual dynamics that led to the Pharisees exist in all ages. Throughout history, humans have, in effect, stolen the good that comes from God and acted as if it belonged to themselves, and, as a result, have ended up fighting against God and His saving purposes. Assuming that every age has those who bear a resemblance to the Pharisees, for our spiritual well-being today we must ask, "Where are the Pharisees in our day?"

The first group that comes to mind are Protestant fundamentalists. This group holds to a relatively strict moral code focusing on certain behaviors like drinking, dancing, smoking, and swearing, and on certain forms of entertainment like music, television, and movies. Like the Pharisees, their code was influenced by Scripture, but it too goes beyond Scripture in many of its particulars. Moreover, fundamentalists often reveal a sense of superiority when faced with others who do not share their views on skirt lengths and wine. It's not uncommon for some in this tradition to raise serious questions about the genuineness of faith of other Christians who do not share their beliefs and behaviors. As a result, some in this group tend to form tightly controlled churches ruled over by a chief Pharisee, and fellowship only with other entirely like-minded Christians, believing "At least *we* have the truth."

However, another interesting group that can share some features of the Pharisees are evangelical liberals. Contrary to their claims of tolerance and their apparent humility, they can rival the fundamentalists in conde-

scension. For example, this group views fundamentalists with a remarkable disdain. Evangelical liberals have their own politically correct attitude code to address sexism, racism, tolerance, intellectual freedom, and wealth. Again, they are influenced by Scripture but not determined by it. To believe things contrary to this code can invite all kinds of scowls and what we might call a veiled intolerance. The limitations of their humility are seen most clearly when one catches them in an inconsistency, moral or intellectual, for they can become quite defensive toward any who would suggest that they might be deficient in some way. A typical strategy is to hide behind some degree of relativism and ask, "What right have you to judge me?"—a ruse that actually masks their own felt superior goodness.

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Sometimes closely associated with evangelical liberalism is the evangelical intellectual. Pharisaic members of this group are revealed by their condescending assessment of the Christian masses. Having moved beyond a "simplistic" faith, they may deride the faith of others, since it is not characterized by a "healthy" skepticism that keeps away the stench of "dogmatism." However, their new tradition is a tradition that exalts their own rationality above all else. Similarly, they may also look down upon the tastes of the common Christian with regard to literature, music, and the arts. Their awareness of the mediocrity that characterizes the culture of the mass Christian subtly persuades them of their own superiority.

But what of the hidden messages of Christian mass media? Isn't it the case that Christian radio, television, music, and magazines often portray the Christian life as a life characterized by continuous joy, happiness, success, and victory? Yet the Scriptures show that such a view does not accurately portray Christian experience. Consider the sorrows of the Psalms. Trials are normal for Christians (Isa. 43:2; Rom. 5:3-5; 7:7-25; Heb. 5:7; James 1:2). The media organs of Christian culture-formation can foster a dichotomy between a false, "ideal" image of the Christian life and actual Christian experience. Such messages can cause us to feign holiness and deny our actual sins, especially the sins of our inner life, so that our Christianity degenerates into an empty form propped up by repeated image-maintenance activities like church attendance. The Pharisees were very active in their synagogues.

One group that seems especially susceptible to a superior attitude is those who subscribe to some form of second-blessing teaching, whether of the spiritual gifts or the higher-life variety. Spiritual gifts easily become spiritual possessions rather than gifts, in which one

comes to see oneself as good. Our "status" can be enhanced by evidence of some spiritual distinctives, so that we see ourselves as better than those without such gifts. Most bizarre, even holiness can become a basis for such pretensions. After experiencing an unusual awareness of God's presence and power (and as that experience deteriorates), one can use its memory to inflate his own comparative status, so that, again, others are regarded as inferior.

Another group that is given to spiritual ostentation are those who vigilantly guard theological doctrine in the interests of maintaining the pure truth (which is, of course, *their* particular system of truth). These guardians of the church are constantly on the lookout to detect in their spiritual siblings the influences of secularism and other bad beliefs (i.e., ideas that don't fit into their system). To add to the tragedy, they often defend minuscule doctrines as if they were the heart of the faith. If they don't disown their brothers and sisters with whom they disagree, they make it clear that, in their minds, their own views (from top to bottom) are God's views and the beliefs of their opponents are dangerously wrong. Of course, truth is important. Christ died for the truth. He Himself is the Truth. And it is through being conformed to the truth that we are being saved. Truth is very important. The difference is that in the hands of Pharisees the truth has become their own personal possession and the source of their goodness rather than God. Other Christians can never measure up and are treated as inferior.

However, on the opposite pole are the pietists and the practical-minded. These Christians are aware of the hypocrisy of the theology-worshippers and so can pride themselves on the lack of thought that goes into their beliefs. They spend little energy reflecting upon what

they believe and pour their energy instead into their worship of God or their evangelism or their loving activities for their neighbors. Such believers sense the importance of love in the Christian life and dedicate themselves to loving service. However, along the way, they begin to demonstrate an intolerance of thoughtfulness. The faithful reasoning of others in books, sermons, or conversation turns them off because it reflects upon their own felt shortcomings. So they turn their weaknesses into strengths and declare that such intellectual efforts are misguided, if not inherently corrupt.

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*There is at least one other group who can look like the Pharisee: those who feel called to social action for the sake of Christ. Whether pro-lifers or advocacy workers in the inner city, these kinds of Christians have taken on important causes within the church and culture, only, in some cases, to mistake the cause for the Christ.*



There is at least one other group who can look like the Pharisee: those who feel called to social action for the sake of Christ. Whether pro-lifers or advocacy workers in the inner city, these kinds of Christians have taken on important causes within the church and culture,

only, in some cases, to mistake the cause for the Christ. Believers on this path cannot understand the ignorance of the rest of the church and are given to private, and sometimes public, denunciations of the faithlessness of the rest of the lukewarm Christians that fill the church. Most often, they are attracted to their causes for legitimate, biblical reasons. But it is this biblical basis that paradoxically fuels their arrogance and causes them to see in their own values the source of their goodness before God and others.

Where does all this leave *us*? Grateful! Grateful that we're not like them. We can thank God that we're not like them! But that is the point, isn't it? That is the point of the Pharisee. Where is the Pharisee today? Right here. I am the Pharisee. We are the Pharisees. That is the point of the Pharisee in the gospels. The Pharisee is the archetype of the hypocrite in every believer. Christ's battles with the Pharisees do us no personal good if we can see only other persons or groups as the enemies of Christ and the promoters of themselves. That would only confirm us in our likeness to them. We are all tempted to turn our relationship with Christ into a form of pride over others in a way that makes us feel secure in our own goodness. The Pharisee is the prototypical example of every follower of God in every age, insofar as we act apart from God's saving grace and the gift of holiness. The Pharisees serve as an example of the best religion that humanity could come up with, exposed to the revelation of God. Yet these devoutly religious persons crucified the Lord of glory. We are no better than they; in ourselves we are all Pharisees and we all naturally drift toward a superior stance in relation to our brothers and sisters and desire to equate ourselves with the Light. (And if we pay close attention, we may even detect a tendency to put God out of our lives.)

Permanent Pharisees remain opposed to the light and resist such knowledge. What is to be *our* response? "God, be merciful to me, the sinner" (Luke 18:13). Again and again, day after day, in our hearts and lives God is to be declared good and ourselves sinners. Only in Christ can we find the gift of God's special standing: adoption into His family and a perfect righteousness. Praise God! We become very good in Christ.

Fortunately, God loves the Pharisee. How do we know? For one thing, God loves the world and that obviously includes everyone. But we also know because Christ spent a lot of time addressing the Pharisee, tacitly calling him to face his hypocrisy and repent. His harsh words were not words of final judgment (He did not come the first time to judge but to save [John 3:17]); His words were a firm call of grace to examine their hearts, acknowledge their sin, and seek God as the tax collector did in Christ's parable.

God is still calling Pharisees to a deeper relationship with Him through the Word and the Spirit in grace. But it is hard for us to hear. It goes something like this:

Grace to you, Pharisee! Stand in the light and own your sin, not in the abstract ("We are all sinners"), but in person ("Be merciful to *me*, the sinner"). Daily recognize and repent of your sinful pride and receive My forgiveness. Confess that I alone am good and receive My goodness in your life as My gift. Then, walk in My grace.

How quickly we forget that Christ's church is a church of sinners, albeit saved sinners being saved (1 Cor. 1:18). By grace we grow in the experiential knowledge of God as well as in the experiential knowledge of ourselves. By grace we can exalt in God's holy standards while becoming more humble and less defen-

sive. By grace we can become more open to the searchings of the Spirit and the admonitions of our brothers and sisters. By grace we can increasingly develop into the kind of communities that see God alone as good. The more we do so, the more sinners will feel welcome in our midst.

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