

RT Kendall: You Might Be A Pharisee If ...

My colleague Jack Taylor used a phrase in a sermon—"Chances are you are a Pharisee if ..."—and I have been intrigued by the idea ever since. We all need to learn to laugh at ourselves and not be defensive when our weakness is touched on. Meekness, a great virtue, could be defined as the ability to accept a hard criticism without being the slightest bit defensive. A certain measure of meekness is required to work through this article because I think it hits all of us.

I lead the way, I assure you, in being an expert in Pharisaism because too much that follows continues to hit me between the eyes. I am not proud of this. But I want you to know I do not see myself as being fully emancipated from this bondage. And yet we are going to look further at the very sins that angered our Lord Jesus most.

Sometimes we get angry at church, even in a prayer meeting. Prayer meetings are the backbone of a good church but can also be the most painfully boring times of the week. This is because there are those who love to hear themselves pray—and drive others mad. Pharisees, though good people in so many ways, are alive and well in the church today. If, however, Pharisaism makes us angry when we see it in others, we need to see it in ourselves and how it must equally grieve the Holy Spirit.

What is the possibility that you or I could be a Pharisee? What are the signs—or warning signals? Chances are you and I are Pharisees if:

We love to point the finger. It comes easily. The devil does it best. He is called "the accuser" (Rev. 12:10). You must choose whether you want to play the devil and point the

finger, or be Jesus who lets us save face. Jesus actually gave us a selfish motivation for not pointing the finger: "Do not judge, and you will not be judged" (Luke 6:37a, NIV). I will forfeit the benefit of this promise if I play the role of accuser.

We love to say "Gotcha." We love to catch people in the act or see them squirm when they are found out. God knows we all have skeletons in the cupboard, and if He decided to tell the world what He knows about us, we would die on the spot. But there is a better way to live. Joseph fantasized that he would see the dream fulfilled of his brothers bowing down to him after the wicked thing they did to him, and say "Gotcha" to them. But when the dream was actually fulfilled, he was a changed man, and instead of looking at them with glee in their helpless state, he wept over them and totally forgave them (Gen. 45:1-11). That was the secret of his greatness and the reason God trusted him with such a lofty status.

We are good at sending people on a guilt trip. The Law invariably finds people guilty. When you have interpretations of the Law that exceed the Law—or rules of your own you think are valid—it only widens the scope for the possibility of guilt. And when we superimpose our rules and wishes on friends or enemies in order to require that they come up to our standard, we become Pharisees. They loved to make people feel guilty. God is not that way. Believe it or not, once we are justified by faith in Christ alone and walking by faith, God does not want any of us to feel guilty. On the contrary, He gives us the Holy Spirit, whereby we say to Him, "Abba, Father" (Rom. 8:15). When the guilt is gone and we have fellowship with the Father, the joy is greater than any this world can offer. Total forgiveness means we do not send another person on a guilt trip; we are aware of what we have been forgiven, and we treat others as God has treated us.

We require standards of people not written in Scripture. I grew up in a church in which they often spoke of godly

standards. I could not go to the movies as a child. My mother did not wear lipstick. My father would not read a Sunday newspaper. When we impose rules on people—even if we justify them for some reason or another—that are not solidly written in the Word of God, we risk being the Pharisees of our day.

We practice guilt by association. We accuse people of being unclean, unrighteous or out of order when they mix with people of other faiths, varying views or questionable lifestyles. If I accept an invitation to preach to a group with whom I do not agree theologically, does it make me guilty of condoning what they believe? No. But some would accuse me. Pharisees would. Not Jesus. If I try to make you feel shameful because of whom you choose to spend time with, I am a Pharisee.

We assume something or someone is of the devil when the person's ministry makes us uncomfortable. The Pharisees could not deny that Jesus performed miracles. If they said these miracles were done by God, it would have condoned Jesus' behavior and put them to shame. So they resorted to a trick that has been repeated many times since. They attributed what was done to the devil. If you and I are threatened by others' success and notice how popular they are but have no answer but to say, "They are of the devil," we are Pharisees. It is fair to say they are misguided or in theological error. But to claim they are of the devil is dangerous stuff.

We say a person is not a Christian if he or she disagrees with us. Instead of saying politely that individuals for some reason disagree with us, we glibly say, "These people aren't even saved." There is always the possibility that those who attack us are not truly converted. But why say that? Why not give them the benefit of the doubt? A good rule of thumb: When you fall out with a person, treat that person with such dignity that he or she will respect you when you make up.

We esteem "the way we've always done it" above change, even when the latter is not heretical. Remember that the Pharisees

made the Word of God of no effect by their traditions (Matt. 15:6). Their own traditions were based not on Scripture but on their peculiar rules. When new ways emerge that are not contrary to Scripture, beware of falling into the trap of always wanting the old wine. Those who say, "The old is better" (Luke 5:39b) want to stay in their comfort zone—to keep the taste they are used to. All new movements God raises up require change. Every person described in Hebrews 11 had to move out of his or her comfort zone.

We do not practice what we preach. Jesus plainly said of Pharisees that "they do not practice what they preach" (Matt. 23:3b). I cannot think of a greater hypocrisy on the planet than demanding of another person what I would not do myself. This does not mean we are perfect or never sin (1 John 1:8). But if our faces, hearts and lives reflect the love of Jesus, people are going to want what we have.

We are more comfortable talking about the mighty movements of God yesterday than today. God does not always do the same thing twice. We must be willing to lose face for God's glory and recognize that God may be working right before our eyes.

We take ourselves too seriously. The Pharisees thought they were God's remnant, and it was up to them to preserve the Law by their traditions. They took themselves very seriously by the attention they demanded, the way they dressed, the way they tried to trap Jesus, the way they demanded to be called "Rabbi" and insisted on seats of honor. This is the lifestyle of a Pharisee, and it is not a good sign at all when we take ourselves very seriously. This means we can't laugh at ourselves—certainly we can't cope with being laughed at, listen to criticism without being defensive or be passed by without sulking when we thought we should be invited. The most secure people are those who can laugh at themselves, accept criticism without being defensive and be passed over when they think they should have been consulted or invited. The main psychological problem of the Pharisees was that they were

insecure.

We judge by outward appearance. This borders on guilt by association but is slightly different. I refer to when we don't like the way people dress, their accent, their neighborhood, their friends, their education or lack thereof, or their theological or church background. Pharisees are masters at this. If I seek significance by my appearance or my clothes or whether or not I wear a suit or tie, I have lapsed into a pharisaical mode that is certainly not good.

We care more about people's opinions than God's. Jesus said the Jews could not believe in His Messiahship because they preferred the praise of one another rather than making an effort to receive God's praise. We must make a choice: Whose opinion matters? If we care more about what people think, we are Pharisees. I fear more than anything else in the world that I should want your approval more than God's.

We need to be sure people know about it if we give, pray or fast. Jesus made it clear: If we do what we do to be seen by men, we will get our reward, but it is only in the here and now—the praise of people, not of God.

We are motivated by money. You will recall that the Pharisees loved money and were motivated by the love of money (Luke 16:14). Pride runs almost parallel with our love of money. In other words, we hang on to our cash and assets, but if someone dangles a promise that our giving—whether to a church or charity—will be known by our getting special recognition and credit, the motivation to give is increased adequately to make us give. God gets no glory in this case; neither do we receive a reward from Him. What is more telling, however, is that we spend lavishly on ourselves and feel totally at ease.

We feel righteous by comparing ourselves to others. Rather than measuring ourselves by the Word of God, we measure others. When we get a righteous feeling by selecting somebody

we assume to be more wicked than ourselves, we totally avoid the very things Jesus wants us to do—namely, to see what we are like before God and not in the eyes of people.

We have no sense of sin by our thoughts, only our deeds. The Pharisees were offended by the teaching that what makes a person unclean is “what comes out of their mouth” rather than what goes in (Matt. 15:11-12). A good rule of thumb in assessing whether we are Pharisees is how we get a sense of sin. If it is only in what we do, then we can get off the hook quite a bit. The Pharisees could conceive of sin only in terms of outward acts—as in most of the Ten Commandments. They never dwell on the 10th commandment, which has to do with the heart—namely, coveting, which is what convinced the righteous Saul of Tarsus that he really was a sinner after all (Rom. 7:7-9). Sin is in our thoughts as well as our deeds. Therefore if we claim to be without sin merely because we haven’t done anything, such as being sexually immoral, we are first self-deceived and second devoid of the truth.

We major on minors. We do this in a thousand ways of course, but the example Jesus gave when He said that Pharisees “strain out a gnat but swallow a camel” had to do with tithing (Matt. 23:23-24). A Pharisee is one who avoids personal obligation to the whole Law by keeping some of it—namely, rules that give them a good feeling that they are OK. Tithing does this nicely. If individuals tithe, they tell themselves they are OK because “most people don’t.” Moreover, they make sure they tithe by doing it across the board—tithing spices such as mint, dill and cumin. Nothing is left out. Never mind that there are weightier matters of the Law—like justice (caring for the poor), mercy (showing kindness to strangers) and faithfulness. I found it was sometimes easier to get Christians to tithe at Westminster Chapel than it was to get them out on the streets witnessing on a Saturday morning—or to totally forgive their enemies.

We are experts in finding loopholes in the Law to excuse

certain areas of disobedience. We can do that today in many ways. For example, "My church doesn't need the money; I need to pay my bills, which God would want me to do." Or we excuse ourselves from forgiving others because they have not apologized and need to repent first. We create our own loopholes. But our model is to be Jesus, not the Pharisees. Nobody repented at the sight of the crucifixion, and yet He said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34).

We are more concerned to uphold our theology than to help people. We saw how the Pharisees could not bring themselves to rejoice that a blind man was healed because the healing took place on the Sabbath. It is good when we hold sound theology high in our priorities. I am a theologian, and I love theology. But when God uses a person whose theology I could pick to pieces, which is more important—to scold him for his error or rejoice that God uses such a person to see people blessed, healed and delivered?

We love to score theological points with our enemies. I am reminded of two churches in Alabama: one Methodist (which believed you could lose your salvation if you sinned), the other Baptist (who believed once saved, always saved). The two churches ran missions concurrently, but the Baptists were heard to say later, "We didn't have much of a revival, but thank God the Methodists didn't either." Vintage Pharisaism.

We claim God's approval of us rather than our rivals because we know our theology, not theirs, is sound. The party spirit that emerged from the rivalry between Sadducees and Pharisees kept them apart and fueled their motivation to score points. But at bottom the Pharisees knew that God must be with them rather than their opponents because of such teachings as the resurrected life beyond the grave and belief in angels. The Sadducees did not believe in these, and the Pharisees knew these truths were solidly based in their Law and traditions; therefore, God would decidedly be on their side. This gave

them a superior feeling. They did not merely think—they knew they were on the side of the angels. It did not seem to bother them at all that right before their eyes was God's very Son whom they did not recognize. It is so easy for us to take ourselves so seriously because we know God would be on the side of the party who is sounder. Really? He may well feel toward us as Jesus did the Pharisees.

We easily dismiss people we don't want to like because we are able to find something truly wrong with them. When we hope we don't have to accept someone, we look for something we know is absolutely wrong in him or her; therefore, we have the excuse we need not to affirm the person.

We say, "We are more in tune with God than you are." This works several ways, but let me mention two of them. First, take people known as being charismatic. I fear that many of them honestly think they are more spiritual than others. "If you don't speak in tongues, you are not as spiritual as I am." Or, "If you haven't experienced the gifts of the Spirit, you are not really in touch with God." Such people make some evangelical Christians feel second-class, and this pharisaical attitude helps erect a wall that divides Christians from Christians. But second, take the Calvinists. I fear that many of them honestly think they are more on God's wavelength than other Christians. "If you don't believe in the sovereignty of God as we do, you are not a faithful believer." Or, "If you don't believe in predestination and the eternal security of the believer, you don't really know the God of the Bible." Such a pharisaical spirit alienates many other Christians and makes some of them feel they are theologically illiterate. As you can see, there is more than one kind of Pharisee!

We call another person a Pharisee. When I say, "The trouble with you is that you are always judging people," I just judged you. What does one do? Answer: We must learn to control the tongue (Prov. 10:19, Eccl. 5:2).

The truth is, the Pharisee lurks in all of us. This means we would be among those Jesus condemned the most. This fact alone ought to catapult us out of our comfort zone and make us see not only our self-righteousness but also how grateful we should be that God saved us. We don't deserve to be saved. God was simply kind, good and merciful. He saved Saul of Tarsus, a Pharisee of the Pharisees indeed. And Saul, called Paul, never got over it. He thanked God as best he could as long as he lived.

If God could save Paul, He could save anybody. If God could save you or me, He could save anybody. Why did He do it? I don't know, and probably never will. I can only spend the rest of my life doing my best to thank Him and show Him how thankful I am.

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