

Why Was Jesus So Hard on the Pharisees?

Have you ever wondered why Jesus was so down on the Pharisees? Over and over again in the gospels He berated them. That's because He hates the self-righteousness and legalism that characterized them. God the Father hates it as well. It quenches and grieves the Holy Spirit. It hurts the testimony of the church.

And yet, if we are completely honest, we must admit that we can identify. However, we can truly see Pharisaism in ourselves only by the gracious work of the Holy Spirit.

The Pharisees believed they were righteous before God because of their outward good works. But anyone depending on their personal righteousness to save them will cause the person to forfeit salvation in Jesus Christ. Paul, himself a Jew and brought up as a Pharisee, said:

"Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them [Jews generally] is that they may be saved. For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For, being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes" (Rom. 10:1-4, ESV).

I have often asked non-Christians, "If you were to stand before God and He were to ask you, 'Why should I let you into My heaven?'" I invariably receive a reply that reflects self-righteousness. For example, during the last 20 years I was at Westminster Chapel, I spent two hours every Saturday working with a street evangelism team we called the Pilot Lights. We gave out Christian pamphlets in Victoria, around Big Ben and in Buckingham Gate. When a person would say, "But I don't

believe in heaven; I don't believe in God," I would say: "But if there really was a heaven and you did stand before God, and He asked you, 'Why should I let you into My heaven,' what would you say?"

The reply almost invariably was something like this: "I have been good to people. I have been kind. I have lived a good life. I haven't done anything terribly wrong." In other words, all people reveal that they are—at bottom—self-righteous. This is because we are products of the fall; we are born *non posse non peccare*—not able not to sin.

When I declare that I am good enough to get into heaven by my good works, I sin right then. To say that or even to think that is to sin.

We must not forget that many of the Pharisees in Jesus' day were in a sense pious men. Some scholars reckon that a number of Pharisees actually did the things they boasted of—fasting twice a week and giving a tenth of all they earned, not to mention the fact that they would never be guilty of wrongdoing such as robbing someone or physically committing adultery. They were regarded as the truly righteous people of their day. They were without question the backbone of their synagogues and would in some cases be like certain evangelical Christians today who faithfully bring their Bibles to church and would never smoke or drink or watch a movie that was anything but family-friendly. But they tended to look down on those who did not keep their rules and called such people "sinners."

Given the fact that Pharisees were pious, faithful and the stalwarts of the synagogues in ancient Judaism, why was Jesus so hard on them? You would think He would have congratulated them, as if to say, "You are greatly needed here in Jerusalem these days. I can't imagine what things would be like were it not for you." No. He never congratulated them once or gave the slightest hint that they were either needed or appreciated. He was harsh and rugged with them.

Interestingly, Jesus was patient, loving, and gracious to other sinners, such as the woman caught in the sin of adultery—unlike the Pharisees who were indignant that they found this woman in the act of sin (John 8:3-11). But He never appeared to show tender feelings toward the Pharisees. He was not nice to them, despite the fact that they upheld the infallibility of the Bible, believed in resurrected life beyond the grave (unlike the Sadducees), and adhered to a number of practices that Jesus also affirmed.

When I was a young Christian, I used to wonder why so much attention was given in the four Gospels to the Pharisees since they do not exist today. Was this not a waste of space? Why should we have to read about irrelevant people? I have since learned, of course, that Pharisees *do* exist today. And I fear I am one of them—in too many ways! Are you? It is essential that we heed what Jesus said to and about them because, to the degree that we also are Pharisees, we would be the objects of Jesus' firm words.

We are not exempt. His ruthless exposure of the ways of the Pharisees bears our attention. If Jesus was angry with them then, the Father feels the same way about us now. And If Jesus was not nice to the ancient Pharisees, we cannot expect Him to be nice to us if we are like them.

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