

R.T. Kendall: Why We Were All Born Pharisees

You may remember from your reading of the New Testament that Pharisees are portrayed almost entirely as bad guys. Jesus used negative words such as “hypocrites” and “fools” to describe them—for good reason.

But it may surprise you to learn that He was referring to modern-day people, also. To find out why, let’s take a deeper look at what Pharisaism is.

Pharisaism is the belief and practice of an ancient Jewish sect called Pharisees. They apparently emerged in the second century BC and thrived during the time of Jesus. They were a strict sect made up mostly of ordinary Jews, unlike the Sadducees, who were members of the families of priests. The Pharisees were far more numerous than the Sadducees but not as prestigious.

The Pharisees kept closely to the Mosaic Law. But they often embellished the Law with countless rules that were difficult to keep. For example, they considered such things as walking more than a kilometer from one’s town, carrying any kind of load, or lighting a fire in their home on the Sabbath to be work—and it was against the law to work on this holy day of rest. Their rules made people strive to keep the law in every detail.

The Aramaic word for Pharisee means one who is separated. The Pharisees were known for their adherence to tradition, especially strictness of religious observance. They saw themselves as a cut above everybody else and looked down on those who did not follow the same rules. The popular perception of Pharisaism as the essence of self-righteousness seems fair and just based on Jesus’ descriptions of those who

were members of the sect.

The Free Dictionary defines Pharisaism as “(1) the doctrines and practices of Pharisees and (2) hypocritical observance of the letter of religious or moral law without regard for the spirit; sanctimoniousness.” It goes on to say that Pharisaism is “the behavior of a sanctimonious and self-righteous person.” One definition of sanctimonious is making a show of being morally superior to other people. It can also refer to making your face indicate (sometimes with a frown or even tears showing grave concern) how moral, godly, or holy you think you are—or what you want others to think you are. Pharisees were experts at this. The universal perception of them as a self-righteous lot is understandable.

But here’s the kicker: We are *all* born Pharisees! We are all—without exception—born with a deadly predisposition to self-righteousness. It is the essence of original sin. Another way of putting it is that self-righteousness is essentially defensiveness. That is what you see in the original sin of Adam and Eve: defensiveness. After Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden, their self-righteousness and defensiveness surfaced quickly. Neither blamed themselves. Neither said, “I have sinned; I am so sorry.” The opposite was true.

Adam blamed Eve. “The woman whom you gave to be with me—she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate” (Gen. 3:12, ESV). One might even infer that Adam was blaming God; he was essentially saying, “The woman You gave to be with me made me do it—it is Your fault because You gave her to me.”

Eve then blamed the serpent who had tempted her. “The serpent deceived me, and I ate” (v. 13). We don’t need to be taught Pharisaism; it is as natural as eating apple pie. This is the way we are all born—as Adam was after the fall. No person since Adam’s fall in Eden has been born as Adam was originally created—without sin. The Bible tells us: “Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive

me" (Ps. 51:5). We all "go astray from birth, speaking lies" (Ps. 58:3). This is why it is written,

None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands, no one seeks for God. All have turned aside, together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one. Their throat is an open grave, they use their tongues to deceive. The venom of asps is under their lips. Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood; in their paths are ruin and misery, and the way of peace they have not known. There is no fear of God before their eyes. (Rom. 3:10-18).

In a word: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). We are not sinners merely because we sin; we sin because we are born sinners. The essence of sin is self-righteousness.

The issue, therefore, is not how to *become* a Pharisee but how to *be rid* of Pharisaism! Is it possible to be completely rid of it? Paul said that "where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (2 Cor. 3:17). The more we are filled with the Spirit, the less defensive and self-righteous we are. We must continually seek to be more and more so because self-righteousness is a serious matter to God. {eoa}

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