

What is wrong with being a Pharisee?

The Pharisees were a powerful and influential religious and political group that existed in the time that Jesus was on earth. Some of Jesus' harshest words were reserved for the Pharisees, Sadducees and scribes who functioned as the religious leaders of the Jews. Jesus' words against the Pharisees were so strong, that among those who say they are Christians today there are probably not any who claim to be like the Pharisees. However, many people who claim to be Christians, especially among Protestant Evangelicals, see or think they see others being like Pharisees. Like having pride or greed, being like the Pharisees is something that people only seem to see in others and not in themselves.

Have you ever considered whether you may be like the Pharisees in ways that you do not realize? What was it that Jesus found wrong with the Pharisees? Consider some of the points of conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees where you might be much closer to the Pharisees than you are to Jesus.

Jesus taught publicly that for a man to divorce his wife and marry another was adultery. This was in opposition to what Moses had previously allowed. He also taught that his view on this was so serious that a man who put his wife away was actually the cause of his wife committing adultery, unless she already was an adulteress (Matthew 5:31-32). Jesus taught plainly that *everyone* who divorces his wife and marries another is committing adultery and that whoever marries a divorced woman is committing adultery (Luke 16:18). The Pharisees must have been aware of what Jesus taught on this and on at least one occasion challenged Jesus on this topic (Matthew 19:3-12 & Mark 10:2-12). Clearly they were not happy with Jesus' response, presumably because they liked the option of being allowed to divorce their wives and get remarried if they felt it was necessary. Do Jesus' words on this topic offend you? Perhaps you are divorced and remarried or know someone who is and the idea that this is adultery offends you. Perhaps it bothers you that you are prohibited from ever separating what God has joined together. If so, you are more like the Pharisees than you probably realized.

Jesus taught some very radical things about money and wealth. He taught that in his Kingdom, people were not allowed to store up wealth for themselves here on earth (Matthew 6:19-21). He taught his disciples to sell what they had and give to the needy (Luke 12:33-34). He taught that a man who saved up for an early retirement was a fool who would be judged by God (Luke 12:16-21). Jesus also told a story about a rich man who feasted on fine food every day and had nice clothes and after he died was suffering in torment because he took good things for himself and let the poor suffer (Luke 16:19-31). He also taught that it was impossible to serve both wealth and God (Luke 16:13). The Pharisees loved money and disliked what Jesus said. Do Jesus' words on this topic offend you? Does it bother you that spending money on nice clothes and good food rather than on the poor will bring God's eternal punishment? Does it offend you that God calls those who are saving up for an early retirement "fools." If so, you are more like the Pharisees than you probably realized. Like the Pharisees, many people who claim to be Christian today have developed traditions that sound spiritual on the surface but really are just excuses to get around the commands of God. Many people say that all of their possessions are devoted to God and that, if God told them to, they would give them up. However, they continue to use those possessions to buy nice things for themselves and to live in luxury when they could use that money to help the poor (which Jesus already has commanded). This is like the Pharisees who said that their money was devoted to God and therefore they did not give it to their parents who needed it. Their tradition nullified the command to honor your father and mother (Mark 7:6-13). The same types of traditions today that allow people to live a selfish life while still appearing spiritual are evidence of the same heart problem that Jesus rebuked in the Pharisees: "This people honors me with their lips but their heart is far from me."

The Pharisees tried to trap Jesus by bringing a woman to him who had been caught in adultery (John 8:2-11). They probably suspected from what he had been teaching that he would not support the killing of this guilty woman. Since the law of Moses required them to stone such a woman, they would be able to bring a charge against Jesus if he did not go along with that law. Jesus trapped them in their own trap by challenging them to have the person without sin throw the first stone. He did not stone her and everyone else left since nobody else there could claim to be without sin. Today most people who profess to be Christians, especially Protestant Evangelicals, teach that it is acceptable for a Christian to enforce justice and bring evil people to punishment. They teach that Christians can be judges, police officers, jail guards, soldiers, politicians and in other positions that involve the punishment of evil people. If you think this is

acceptable, even though you are not without sin, then you are more like the Pharisees than you may have realized.

Jesus saw some people who could not see their own unrighteousness but could see the unrighteousness of others. He told them a story about a Pharisee and a tax collector who both went to the temple to pray (Luke 18:9-14). The Pharisee thanked God that he was not like other men and was not an extortioner, unjust man or adulterer. The tax collector was humble and admitted his sins to God. From the conflicts between Jesus and the Pharisees mentioned above it seems likely that many of the Pharisees were extortioners, unjust and adulterers. They were extortioners because their love of money caused them to take what they should have given to the poor and their parents for themselves. They were adulterers because they were divorcing their wives and marrying again. They were unjust because they wanted to be able to receive God's mercy for their own sins but punish the sins of others. It is not surprising that Jesus taught that unless we were more righteous than the scribes and Pharisees we could never enter the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:20). If you think that you or people in your church group are not sinning by living in remarriage, by living in luxury on the backs of the world's poor (who make all kinds of unnecessary things for you to buy and for wages you would never accept for yourself), or by being involved in punishing guilty people, then you are like the proud Pharisee that Jesus told about. That Pharisee was able to spot the sins of others but not his own. Sadly this reality describes most of what professes to be Christianity in our society.

Jesus rebuked the Pharisees and scribes very strongly. What would Jesus say today if he were talking to those today who profess to love God and to follow Jesus but make up their own traditions to nullify the harder, weightier matters of his law? Until Jesus returns, we will not know for sure what Jesus will say to those who have tried to be righteous apart from the law of Christ. The next few paragraphs are based on the rebuke of the scribes and Pharisees that is recorded in Matthew 23. It presents a possible rebuke that Jesus could justifiably give to Protestant Evangelicals today given the widespread twisting and ignoring of what he said:

Woe to You Theologians and Evangelical Teachers¹

“The theologians and the Evangelical teachers teach you from my words and the rest of the New Testament, so practice and observe whatever they truthfully tell you from there – but not what they do. For they preach, but do not practice. They lie to people and say that my commands are heavy burdens and impossible to bear². They teach people to cast off the yoke of my commands and they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to obey them. They do all their deeds to be seen by others. For they make their prayers long in public and short in private. If they ever fast, they make sure others know about it. They make sure their donations get the proper credit before men on radio stations and placards or at least with a tax receipt. They love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the church meetings, not to mention the theater and sports arena. They love greetings in the marketplaces and being called pastor, reverend and doctor by others. But you are not to be called pastor, for you have one shepherd, and you are all brothers. And call no man your reverend on earth, for you have one to revere, who is in heaven. Neither be called doctor or professor, for you have one instructor, the Christ³. The greatest among you shall be your servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.

1 This is written to Protestant Evangelicals, however much of this could just as well apply to other groups who claim to be Christian such as Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, Hebrew Roots/Messianic groups, Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, etc.

Like what Jesus said in his original rebuke to the scribes and Pharisees, this is written in broad generalities that obviously will not apply equally to every person who might consider himself a Protestant Evangelical. However it is written with the conviction that this well characterizes the general pattern of the Protestant Evangelical movement.

2 Many people teach that Jesus' commands are so hard that they are impossible to keep, even with God's help. The same people often teach that the reason that Jesus gave these commands was just to show us how we could not really hope to ever do what pleased God and to encourage us to just give up trying and “trust in Jesus' finished work on the cross.”

3 Protestant Evangelicals often rightly criticize Roman Catholics for referring to their priests by the title “Father.” However, at the same time they use titles like Pastor, Reverend and Doctor to elevate their leaders above others.

“But woe to you, theologians and Evangelical teachers, hypocrites! For you shut the kingdom of heaven in people’s faces. For you neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in. Woe to you, theologians and Evangelical teachers, hypocrites! For you travel across sea and land to make a single convert, and when he becomes a convert, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves. You tell people that they need to have a relationship with me but then you so misrepresent me and my teachings that it is very hard for your converts to really know sufficiently who I am to have the kind of relationship with me that I require.

“Woe to you, blind guides, who say, ‘If anyone swears by a false God, it is foolish and not binding, but if anyone swears by the Bible, it is honorable and he is bound by his oath.’ You blind fools! Do you not remember my words recorded in the Bible when I said, ‘Do not take an oath at all’ and ‘Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything more than this comes from evil’? And you say, ‘If anyone swears an oath of allegiance to a criminal gang, it is nothing and he is not bound by his oath, but if anyone swears an oath to serve in the military or police force, he is bound by his oath.’ You blind men! Do you not remember where I commanded my disciples not to resist an evil person and to love their enemies? So whoever swears to do something that I have forbidden is doubly condemned. You also say, ‘Whoever divorces his wife and marries another is bound by his second commitment and should not leave his second wife.’ At the same time you say he is not bound to his first marriage commitment because he divorced his wife. You wicked men! Do you not remember that I said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery’? Do you think I am the kind of master who would bind people to sin? How can someone be bound to sin and set free from sin at the same time?

“Woe to you, theologians and Evangelical teachers, hypocrites! For you collect your pennies and nickels to send to help poor children, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness⁴. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel!

“Woe to you, theologians and Evangelical teachers, hypocrites! For you declare the outside of the cup and the plate clean by trusting in my righteousness, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence⁵. You blind Evangelical teacher! Clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean. Stop giving the excuse that you are waiting for me to do this for you, when you are not making any serious effort yourself.

“Woe to you, theologians and Evangelical teachers, hypocrites! For you are like decorated tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful to the world, but within are full of dead people’s bones and all uncleanness. People like your fancy buildings and padded pews, your coffee after the meetings, your exciting music bands and the jokes in your sermons. At first most people do not realize that your lives are full of greed, gluttony, lust, immodesty, filthy entertainment, violent thoughts and actions against your enemies, divorce and adultery and unjust gain such as charging interest on loans (even to your own brothers). So you also outwardly appear attractive to others in the world, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

“Woe to you, theologians and Evangelical teachers, hypocrites! For you speak highly of your heritage of believers baptism and separation of church and state, saying, ‘If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have taken part in infant baptism and forced state churches.’ However, you venerate men like Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli and John Calvin, whose vile words and direct pressure encouraged the killing of the faithful men in their days who taught against infant baptism and state churches. Thus you witness against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the faithful Christians. Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers. You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell? Therefore I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify,

4 Protestant Evangelicals generally forsake justice for the poor in their greed and gluttony, while many of the worlds poor suffer. They generally forsake mercy by using force and the legal system to oppose anyone who seriously mistreats them, rather than extending mercy to them. They generally forsake faithfulness by abandoning their husbands or wives that they have committed to be faithful to in spite of what happens. Many of those who do not actually forsake their husbands or wives reassure and support those who do such things.

5 Little children, let no one deceive you. Whoever practices righteousness is righteous, as he is righteous. Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. (1 John 3:7-8)

and some you will ridicule in your churches and persecute from town to town, so that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of innocent Abel to the blood of Felix Manz⁶, whom you drowned in the Limmat River for baptizing adults and preaching righteousness. Truly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation.

“O Evangelical church, how you are like your prostitute mother Rome, the city that kills the prophets and burns those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not! See, your house is left to you desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again, until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.’”

Perhaps what has been written here so far offends you. If so, consider how the Pharisees were offended by Jesus and his words. If it is just the words of this article that offend you, that is one thing. However, if it is the words of Jesus and the implications of them then beware of the judgment that is coming. Make sure you are not like the son in the story that Jesus told the chief priests and Pharisees who told his father he would go out and work for him but then did not do the work he was given (Matthew 21:28-32). That son was compared to another son who at first said he would not obey and then changed his mind and did obey. It was the eventual obedience that Jesus was most happy with, not the initial good intentions. If you say you will serve God and then ignore the uncomfortable parts of what Jesus said, you are really just like the Pharisees who heard John preach righteousness but did not believe him. Even after the prostitutes and tax collectors repented, the Pharisees did not change their minds and believe. Now someone even greater than John has come and preached a way of righteousness even greater than what John preached. If those who ignored the preaching of a great man like John received such a strong rebuke and eventual condemnation, how much more will those who ignore the preaching of the Son of God.

Jesus said, “For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind.” Some of the Pharisees near him heard these things, and said to him, “Are we also blind?” Jesus said to them, “If you were blind, you would have no guilt; but now that you say, ‘We see,’ your guilt remains.” (John 9:39-41) If you have read the things that Jesus taught and yet are not taking some of those things seriously, then you are like those Pharisees who had great guilt because they claimed to see while not really wanting to see the truth.

Jesus said, “Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy.” (Luke 12:1) There is no greater hypocrisy than to read the words of Jesus and to say that you want to serve him with all your heart but then ignore the things he says that will really cost you something.

Jesus said, “Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.” (Mark 10:15) Unless you approach Jesus and his kingdom teachings like a child, in simple trust and obedience, you can not be a part of God’s kingdom. If you explain away Jesus words with complicated explanations or obscure them with man-made traditions, rather than just understanding and obeying them with the simplicity of a child, you will be thrown out of God’s kingdom on the day of judgment along with the unrepentant scribes and Pharisees.

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6 Felix Manz was, for a time, a disciple of the famous reformer, Ulrich Zwingli in Zürich, Switzerland. When he and some others could see that Zwingli was not willing to return to everything that Jesus and the New Testament taught, they left and formed a group called the Swiss Brethren. This group returned to a simple obedience to Jesus. Unlike the Protestants around them, they refused to baptize infants but only baptized those who wanted to stop sinning and obey Jesus. They also went around godless Protestant and Roman Catholic areas of Europe, calling people to repentance from their wicked lifestyles. For these things, which threatened to undermine the Protestant church/state structure, Ulrich Zwingli and the Zürich council had Felix drowned in the river in Zürich.