

Who Were the Pharisees?

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No group in Israel was more dedicated to their religion than the Pharisee. The historian Josephus reports that there were over 6,000 members of the party of the Pharisees, but that number doesn't include many of their followers. The common Jew looked at the Pharisees with the greatest admiration because *no one* appeared to be more dedicated to God than this bunch.

The Pharisee



When a boy in a Pharisee family turned two years old, they would take the scroll of the Law, the Torah, put honey on it, and have him lick it so that his earliest memory would be, "How sweet are Your Words to my taste. Yes, sweeter than honey to my mouth" (Psalm 119:103). At four years old he would start memorizing the book of Leviticus. By twelve years old, he had memorized Genesis through Deuteronomy. As a teenager, he memorized the Prophets and the Psalms.

If you chose to become a Pharisee, you had to publicly promise to "take the yoke of the Torah" upon you. They vowed to yoke themselves to the Law of God. They kept the hours of prayer wherever they were, whether in the Temple, the marketplace, or the street corner. They would fast twice a week. They didn't just tithe their money, but tithed on everything they had, even down to their herbs and spices. How can you fault a man for trying so hard to please God?

Because of their dedication to God's Law, you would think the Pharisees would embrace the promised Messiah when He appeared in the flesh. Instead, they were aggressively at war with Jesus. They fiercely opposed everything Jesus taught and every person who associated with Him.

Even though the Pharisees held high positions in the religious world, Jesus informed them they didn't know God and were headed for hell. These people were immersed in Scripture, prayer, tithing, fasting, and evangelism, and yet everything He said and did enraged them. When God in the flesh stood before them and performed a miracle, rather than falling on their knees in worship, they counseled together about how to kill Him!

If you removed all the references to the Pharisees and Jesus, you would remove most of the gospels. We're talking all-out war between the Pharisees and Jesus. He singled them out as the greatest enemies of truth and described them as most offensive to God. Although Jesus referred to sinners as "lost sheep," He called the Pharisees "snakes and vipers."

Seven Kinds of Pharisees

According to the Talmud, there were seven kinds of Pharisees:

- 1) *The Shechemite Pharisee*, who kept the Law for what he could profit from it
 - 2) *The Tumbling Pharisee*, who appeared humble by hanging his head down
 - 3) *The Bleeding Pharisee*, who walked with his eyes closed in order to not see a woman, and thus received wounds by bumping into walls
 - 4) *The Mortar Pharisee*, who wore a mortar-shaped cap to cover his eyes so he wouldn't see impurities
 - 5) *The What-am-I-yet-to-do Pharisee*, who as soon as he had done one commandment would ask, "What is my duty now and I will do it." (See Matthew 19:16-22)
 - 6) *The Pharisee from fear*, who kept the Law because he was afraid of future judgment
 - 7) *The Pharisee from love*, who obeyed the Lord because he loved Him with all his heart.
- Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea would be in this group.

It's important for all Christians to read about the Pharisees because we can fall into the same religious trap, which nullifies the purposes that God intended. The Pharisees developed systems for people to follow. If you followed their rituals, you would be welcomed as their disciple.

The Leaven of the Pharisees

Jesus warned His disciples to “watch out and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees,” which was their false teaching (Matt. 16:6,12). To a Jew, leaven was a bad word. It meant the silent working of evil. At Passover they had to clean the leaven out of their houses. Leaven infects what it touches and turns it into something entirely different. It works silently and slowly, almost unnoticed.

What was wrong with the teaching of the Pharisees? Their leaven turned the gospel into a dreary, burdensome religion devoid of joy. If left alone, it would corrupt and spread until it took over everything. And that is what happened. The teaching of the Pharisees corrupted every holy commandment of God and turned it into something it wasn't.

Hypocrites

The image of the Pharisee in Jewish thought was not one of self-righteous hypocrisy, but one of piety and holiness. If a common Jew were asked to describe a person that was most like God, they would point to a Pharisee. Imagine how confused the people must have been when Jesus pulled off their masks! These were the leaders who had taught them and they had looked up to all their lives. Imagine the shock of the audience when He said, “For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5:20).



The average person thought God was exactly like a Pharisee, so Jesus had to **deprogram them from the religion they had learned**. He called the Pharisees “sons of hell” (Matt. 23:15) and a “brood of vipers” (Matt. 23:33). He told them that their father was the devil (John 8:44). You can envision how stunned the multitudes must have been when they heard Him say this. They had been following the teachings of the Pharisees, who were their religious leaders in the synagogues. Yet, Jesus was performing miracles before their eyes and was calling them out as hypocrites.

“Fence Laws”

The Pharisees counted all the commandments in the Law of Moses and came up with 613 laws. If those 613 Old Testament commands weren't cumbersome enough, they invented 1,500 additional man-made restrictions called “fence laws” to keep people from sinning. They assumed that the best way to keep people from breaking God's Law was to build a fence or a protective barrier around that Law, even though the Lord never told them to do this. Because there were hundreds of these rules, the people were burdened down and miserable trying to keep them all.

Jesus told the Pharisees, “You weigh men down with burdens hard to bear, while you yourselves will not even touch the burdens with one of your fingers.”(Luke 11:46). The Pharisees taught you couldn't carry “a burden” on the Sabbath, and they defined a burden as whatever you could carry on your little finger. Jesus made a play on words by saying, “You will not even touch the burdens with one of your fingers.”

Exodus 20:8-10 says, “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of the Lord your God; you shall not do any work.” But what does “work” mean? To keep people from laboring on the Sabbath, the Pharisees felt it necessary to

define work. And so they defined **39 types of prohibited work** so that no one would break the fourth commandment. Here are some of their fence laws:

- You could not spit on the Sabbath because it would disturb the dust on the ground and you would become guilty of plowing.
- You could not swat a fly on the Sabbath because you would become guilty of hunting.
- A woman could not look at her reflection because she might see a gray hair and pluck it out, which would be doing work.

They created loopholes to get around some laws.

- If your house was burning down on a Sabbath, you could not carry clothes out of it. However, you were permitted to put on several layers of clothes as the house was burning, and you could leave without breaking their law because you were wearing them instead of carrying them!
- On the Sabbath day, you could not travel more than 3/5 mile from your house. However, you could leave food 3/5 mile from your home on the night before, which would make it permissible to travel twice the distance without breaking the law.

Keeping these man-made fence laws actually became more important to them than keeping God's Word. Jesus rebuked the Pharisees saying, "Why do you yourselves transgress the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?" (Matt. 15:3) Jesus deliberately broke their fence laws to demonstrate that these commands did not come from God. It was as if Jesus was trying to create a gigantic chasm between them so that people could see the difference between truth and error.

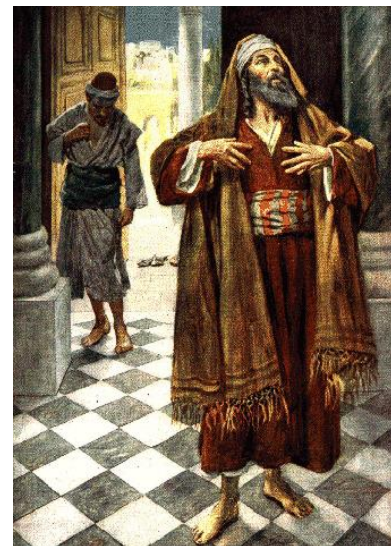
Jesus told them, "You blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!" (Matt. 23:24). The Pharisees were extremely careful to not eat anything unclean, so they would strain their wine through a piece of cloth, just to make sure that a gnat didn't get in it. They shuddered at the thought of swallowing a gnat. Jesus said that they strained out a gnat, the smallest unclean animal, but didn't seem to notice when they gulped down a camel, which was the largest unclean animal. Clearly their man-made traditions and fence laws were the gnats they had been straining, while not noticing God's Law that they were breaking.

Prayers of the Pharisees

No one prayed as often as the Pharisee. Every morning the Pharisee got out of bed, his first prayer was, "I thank you that I'm not as other men." When Jesus told the parable in Luke 18:10-14, He was quoting the Pharisees' prayer. They daily repeated the *Shemoneh 'esreh*, which means *The Eighteen*. This was a **list of 18 prayers that were repeated three times every day**, once in the morning, once in the afternoon, and once in the evening. The repetition of these prayers became nothing more than superstitious incantation of a spell.

There was hardly an event in life that did not have its own stated formula of prayer. They had a prayer for eating a meal, in connection with the light, fire, lightning, seeing a new moon, comets, rain, at the sight of the sea, lakes, rivers, receiving new furniture, and entering or leaving a city. *Everything* had its prayer. The whole religious system led to formalism and repetition, saying the right prayer at the right time.

The Pharisees prayed for 3 hours every day at 9 am, midday, and 3 pm. Wherever they were at that time, they would stop and pray. Some would purposely go to the Temple or the synagogue to pray, thinking that God was confined to those holy places. Others would **purposely find themselves on busy street corners or in a crowded city square, so that all would observe their devotion to God**. Jesus renounced this practice by saying, "When you pray, you are not to be as the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and street corners, in order to be seen by men" (Matt. 6:5).



They offered long prayers, thinking that lengthy prayers were more pleasing to God. They formed a habit of hypnotizing themselves by the endless repetition of a phrase or word so that they could pray longer. Jesus corrected this false idea by saying, “And when you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen do. For they think that they will be heard for their many words” (Matt. 6:7). He compared their prayers to the ways that pagans prayed, repeating phrases and formulas over and over.

Giving Offerings



When the Pharisees wanted to give something to the poor, their custom was to go to a busy street corner and blow a trumpet. Although the purpose was to call the poor and needy together to receive the gifts, the Pharisee turned it into an attention-gathering performance where the public could see their giving. Jesus said, “Therefore when you give alms, do not sound the trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, than they may be honored by men” (Matt. 6:2).

Broadening Phylacteries

Phylacteries were little boxes that the Pharisees wore on their foreheads and left arms. Inside the box were these Scriptures: Deut. 46:4-9, 11:13-22, Ex. 13, 1-16. This strange practice came about because the Pharisees held a literal interpretation of Exodus 13:9,16: “And it shall serve as a sign to you on your hand, and a reminder on your forehead ... so it shall serve as a sign on your hand, and as phylacteries on your forehead, for with a powerful hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt.”



The common Jew would take off the phylactery after prayer time. The Pharisee kept it on all day. Attempting to appear more spiritual, the Pharisees would increase the size of their phylacteries. They had lost the purpose for what God intended—to keep these Scriptures in the minds and hearts. Jesus exposed their religious pride by saying, “They do all their deeds to be noticed by men; for they broaden their phylacteries, and lengthen the tassels of their garments” (Matt. 23:5).

Lengthening Tassels

Numbers 15:38 says, “Speak to the sons of Israel, and tell them that they shall make for themselves tassels on the corners of their garments ... and it shall be a tassel for you to look at and remember all the commandments of the Lord.” Pharisees considered tassels special marks of holiness, so they would lengthen them to the point where they would have to throw them over their shoulders to keep from tripping on them. Again, Jesus exposes their self-righteousness (Matt. 23:5).

Modern-Day Pharisees

Although the Pharisees died off long ago, the spirit of Phariseeism still lives today. It is the spirit of religion, which goes through the motions of doing right, but the heart is disconnected from God. It craves recognition and follows a checklist of activities and duties. It's possible to attend church every week, serve, and give offerings—and still never truly connect your heart with God.

God wants us to love Him and serve Him with joy and enthusiasm in our hearts. Phariseeism and religion cannot do that, so it motivates people a different way—through **guilt** (I'll feel bad if I don't do it), **legalism** (pressure to conform) and keeping **traditions** that are not in Scripture. We can easily become modern-day Pharisees where we perform religious duties on autopilot while our hearts drift further and further away from God.

Who is a Modern-Day Pharisee?

It's possible to adopt the practices of the Pharisees without realizing it. Listed below are 26 questions to ask yourself. Some are the correct ways to please God, while others are the ways of the Pharisees.

- Do you go to church so that the pastor or another staff person will see you in attendance?
- Are you more concerned with pleasing others than with pleasing God?
- Do your prayers, or the prayers said at your church, keep repeating the same meaningless phrases? ("We thank You for the opportunity to be here" and other phrases)
- Do you pray more when you are away from church or when you are in church?
- Do you pray because you want to communicate with God, bring Him your requests, and intercede for others?
- Do you give your offerings without ever thinking about the Lord receiving them?
- Do you give your offerings mainly because you feel pressured by the pastor to tithe?
- Do you give your offerings because you are afraid of what the pastor or treasurer might think about you if they don't see your check?
- Do you give your offerings because you want the pastor or treasurer to admire your large gift? (It's not wrong for someone to know what you give, but it is wrong to seek influence for it)
- Do you give your offerings cheerfully because you love God and believe He will use it to further His kingdom?
- Is the only time that you read your Bible is when you are at church?
- Do you read your Bible because you want others to know you are doing it?
- Do you read your Bible as a duty that you are trying to get through?
- Do you read your Bible because you want to know what God has to say to you?
- Do you serve in your church or elsewhere because you want others to respect you?
- Do you grudgingly serve in your church only because no one else will do the job?
- Do you serve in your church and elsewhere because you want to please God and help others?
- Do you look down on people who don't attend church?
- Do you show God's love to people who don't attend church so they will come to know Him?
- Do you view people who are involved in sexual sins as disgusting, or as lost people whom God loves and wants to save?
- Do you only sing to God when you are in a church building?
- How often do you praise God in private?
- Do you ever tell God that you love Him when you are away from church?
- Are you the same person away from church as you are when you're in church?
- Do you view a church building as "God's house"?
- Do you believe that church is something you go to?

Ask God to show you the correct answers and what needs to change in your life.
Click on this link if you want to read [The Differences Between Pharisees and Sadducees](#).

Making Life Count Ministries
P.O. Box 680174
Prattville, Alabama 36068
www.makinglifecount.net