

BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #27: SOME GOOD THINGS ABOUT THE PHARISEES

By John Temples

When you read the gospels, you regularly encounter some inveterate enemies of Jesus called the Pharisees. They were nationalistic Jews who were zealous for the preservation of the law of Moses and the national purity of Israel. The name “Pharisee” comes from a Hebrew word meaning “separated.” They separated themselves from those they considered unclean, which was just about everybody else besides themselves. The Pharisees’ cause was originally a noble one; unfortunately, their zeal led them to become legalistic and self-righteous. They particularly hated Jesus, whom they saw as a threat to their popularity and self-righteousness.

The Pharisees have gotten a lot of bad press, most of which they richly deserved. If they were around today, they would be the religious people you would love to hate. However, the Pharisees were not all bad. Nicodemus, who helped bury Jesus, was a Pharisee, as was the apostle Paul. There were many Pharisees in the early church according to Acts 15:5. Jesus even paid them some compliments on occasion. With all this in mind, it would be profitable for us to think about...

SOME GOOD THINGS ABOUT THE PHARISEES

First, they were serious about being right with God. Religion was central to their lives; righteousness was a consuming goal. They were the epitome of religious zeal in Judaism. Paul could say, “If anyone thinks he may have confidence in the flesh, I more so: circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; *concerning the law, a Pharisee*; concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless” (Philippians 3:4-6).

Jesus gave the Pharisees a backhanded compliment in Matthew 5:20--“Unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.” This saying astonished the people. If anybody made it to heaven, they thought, it would be the Pharisees. But

what was “the righteousness” of the Pharisees? Brother Burton Coffman defines it this way: “The religion of the Pharisees, hence their righteousness, consisted of externals, ceremonials, rituals, liturgies, and formalities of many kinds, with little or no attention paid to the condition of the heart.”

The law said, “You shall not kill.” But the Pharisees’ view of that was, “I might not can kill my neighbor, but I can hate him all day long and hope a building falls on him.” But the point is this: the Pharisees were serious about righteousness--being right with God.

Second, the Pharisees were sticklers for moral purity. In the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, the Pharisee says, “God, I thank you that I am not like other men--extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector” (Luke 18:11). This was evidently a valid claim. Jesus did not dispute it. Paul, a Pharisee, could say that he had lived in all good conscience before God his whole life (Acts 23:1). Their motives for being morally pure were mostly wrong, but they lived pure lives.

One of the greatest hindrances to the gospel today is Christians who will not live right. We will never win our neighbors to Christ if they see us living no different from people of the world.

Third, they were not afraid to let people know who and what they were. Matthew 23:5-7 reads, “But all their works they do to be seen by men. They make their phylacteries broad and enlarge the borders of their garments. They love the best places at feasts, the best seats in the synagogues, greetings in the marketplaces, and to be called by men, Rabbi, Rabbi.” I know you can take that two ways; but at least they had the courage to stand up and stand out.

Jesus said of them, “For they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets.” When was the last time you prayed in a public place? Some Christians won’t even bless their food in a restaurant because they are afraid someone might think they are religious! In our day, many Christians have been *intimidated and bullied into silence* by immoral and evil forces.

On the one hand we should never be pushy, loud, disruptive, or confrontational. On the other hand, we should never be ashamed to let others see that we are Christians. I know practicing your Christianity in public is not popular right now. It might bring ridicule or persecution. If so, so be it! Jesus said, "Blessed are you when they revile you and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for my sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven" (Matthew 5:11,12).

Fourth, the Pharisees were serious about giving. Matthew 23:23--"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithes of mint and anise and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith."

We have read this many times, and we scoff at the Pharisees for including their pantry herbs and spices in their giving to God. They truly majored on minors; they would strain out a gnat from their soup and yet swallow a camel. But maybe we overlook what Jesus said in the last part of verse 23: "These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone." Burton Coffman says of this, "The trouble was that such petty little deeds of scrupulosity were the PRINCIPAL concern of the scribes and Pharisees. They could murder the Son of God but would not think of neglecting to tithe a sprig of dill on the back doorstep."

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Yes, the Pharisees majored on minors. But that does not mean the minors can be dispensed with. Every part of God's law is important. "Don't sweat the small stuff" is NOT a Biblical principle. We can learn something from the Pharisees here.

Fifth, the Pharisees were experts in the Scriptures. "Jesus spoke to the multitudes and to His disciples, saying: The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. Therefore, whatever they tell you to observe, that observe and do; but do not do according to their works, for they say and do not do" (Matthew 23:1-3). When the Lord said they sat in Moses' seat, He meant they taught faithfully what Moses said--they knew the law. Yes, their lives did not line up with their teachings, and they added their own traditions; but THEY KNEW THE BIBLE.

Sixth, the Pharisees were intensely evangelistic. They were serious about converting people to their cause. In fact, Jesus said of them, “You travel land and sea to make one proselyte [convert]” (Matthew 23:15). They evangelized for the wrong motive, and Christ condemned them for it; but He did not condemn their enthusiasm!

They traveled far and wide to make a convert, but some today will not go across the street to speak to a neighbor. We don't mean not to care, but it happens. It is so easy to get caught up in our own activities and associations. How powerful a force we could be if we could combine the genuine love of Christ with the evangelistic zeal of the Pharisees!

So yes, there were some good things about the Pharisees:

- Being right with God was all-important to them.
- They took the moral principles of God seriously and practiced them openly in a sinful world.
- They were not afraid for people to find out they were Pharisees.
- They were serious and meticulous givers.
- They knew and taught the word of God.
- They were intensely evangelistic.

Let us learn from them and be zealous about our Father's business. --John
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