

A Pharisee?

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Matthew 23:1-12

23 Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: 2 "The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. 3 So you must be careful to do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. 4 They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them.

5 "Everything they do is done for people to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long; 6 they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; 7 they love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to be called 'Rabbi' by others.

8 "But you are not to be called 'Rabbi,' for you have one Teacher, and you are all brothers. 9 And do not call anyone on earth 'father,' for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. 10 Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one Instructor, the Messiah. 11 The greatest among you will be your servant. 12 For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

We know that Jesus loved all people he encountered. He treated them kindly and was helpful.

On the surface, it seems that this is not true! In today's Gospel text, which we have just heard, we hear that Jesus did not relate to all the people only with kindness. Jesus also spoke rather harsh words to some people!

Jesus warned about those people who perverted God's good will. Jesus warned others against following them. These were at that time the religious leaders in Israel: that is, the Sadducees and the Pharisees. Many of them were educated and highly trained in their field: they were the scribes and teachers of the law. Many of them thought of doing a good deed, when they taught the teachings of the Old Testament.

The biggest group of these people were the Pharisees, which is mentioned here as well. If we do not know about the Pharisees, who they were and what they thought and taught, we find it hard to understand about half of the text written in the New Testament. It is a large portion of the Bible, but indeed, so many times Jesus either directly speaks of the Pharisees, or he talks directly to them; or Jesus teaches the people in a different way than what they were used to by the teachers of the law. Approximately 50% of the text of the New Testament is linked to the Pharisees in one way or another!

What kind of people, then, were the Pharisees? The Pharisees were a Jewish national-religious party and a revivalist movement. The movement came into being during the Maccabean Revolt about 150 BC. At the time of Jesus, however, many of the Pharisees were critics, often even opponents, of Jesus.

What was the doctrine of the Pharisees? The Pharisees took seriously and thus taught the requirements and instructions which God had revealed in the Old Testament law. Most of the Pharisees were lay people, ordinary people, but among them were scribes as well. They developed a vast network of rules, so-called patriarchal or fathers' traditions, whose purpose was to prevent the violation of God's will.

It was a revivalist movement, because the Pharisees wanted that religion is not just an isolated part of human life: that faith plays a role not only once a week in the temple, but rather in the daily lives of people.

Many of the Pharisees understood the difference between the commandments given in the law: small ones and greater ones. Many understood the difference between words, its meanings and different nuances. Many understood that the same kind of deeds could have quite different motives.

Since Pharisaism was a revivalist movement or a "denomination," many were involved in it only because their parents were of the Pharisees. Or because their good friends were of the Pharisees. Being a Pharisee was part of their own culture for many people.

So Jesus rebuked them about their hypocrisy, [as they were outwardly professing and teaching to abide by the law but inwardly not really believing in it or actually living according to it]. We know that the Pharisees debated among themselves the fact that the human will and the heart should be in accordance with the law. That is why Jesus says, "You must [...] do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach."

We also know that the Pharisees' ethics was not a "reward or punishment" ethics. Most of the Pharisees did obey God not only due to fear of punishment or hope of reward; but they thought that the word of God is the truth that must be followed simply because it is true in itself.

However, Jesus wanted to show that by merely being a Pharisee by name does not help – as it does not help us, if we are Christians only by name! Jesus scolded many of the Pharisees that did many good deeds only "for people to see [or to be seen by people]." For many of the Pharisees to be honoured by men was more valuable than receiving honour from God. Our Lord Jesus teaches that this should not be the case, not among Pharisees, nor among Christians.

Where does Pharisaiism differ from Christianity in terms of doctrine? Pharisaiism had certainly high and respectable ethical ideals and principles. Many of the Pharisees tried to seriously apply its ethics in practice. Their faith in their own cause was firm. In their belief, the word of God is the truth and abiding by it makes people free. We may think along the same lines. But why did Jesus not become a Pharisee? Why are we not supposed to become Pharisees?

The main difference between Pharisaiism and Christianity comes into sight, when we look on a problem that is common to both beliefs, but then we get to see that they provide quite a different solution: The problem common to both the Pharisees and Jesus or Christians is that they wanted to get rid of sin.

The Pharisees' solution to this problem was to stay away from sinners: For example, they separated themselves from all sinners, such as prostitutes. They condemned wrongdoers and traitors to the fatherland such as tax collectors. They shunned the sick and weak in their lives, and remained far from the orphans and the disabled. They thought that all that is the result of sin. And because they wanted to get rid of sin, they stayed as far away from sinners and did not have a relationship with such people.

But what did Jesus do? He had the same aim as the Pharisees, he also wanted to get rid of sin! Yet Jesus did the opposite of what the Pharisees did! Jesus did not go away, but he drew close to people! Jesus went to the sinners and the sick and the outcasts, and he bore their sins, forgave, healed and helped them in their lives. He also instructed sinners – as we know. For example, Jesus said to the man at the pool of Bethesda, who had been sick for 38 years and whom Jesus had healed, “Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you.” (John 5:14).

Jesus did not look the other way when he came across sin. Jesus did not accept sin. But he accepted the sinner and went to the sinner. He showed acceptance of sinners and the sick. And the one who felt this acceptance was led to repentance. This is reflected in Apostle Paul’s saying “God’s kindness is intended to lead to repentance” (Romans 2:4).

The Pharisees, instead preached with a loud voice about sin. They demanded people to repent from their sin. But what went wrong? They did not live in love. They did not want to carry the burden of others by themselves. They were not willing to come close to sinners and to comfort the sick, or to support orphans or widows; or to assist distressed refugees, because these often represented a different religion, such as the Samaritans.

The Pharisees made every effort to concentrate their thoughts and deeds to being children of God and to abide by his will as mentioned in the Bible, and they wanted others to do the same. But precisely because of that Jesus rebuked them. Yet the Pharisees could not grasp what was wrong with their thinking and doing, for after all it was the most important thing to do the will of God, to keep his commandments and covenants. By no means they would understand or accept the criticism, which Jesus targeted at them. Therefore, they said that Jesus has “a demon” (John 8:48), “He is pretty crazy.” They could not come up with a reasonable explanation for Jesus’ rebuke.

*The greatest wrong of the Pharisees was that **they** had taken as their mission to become good. As they wanted to be children of God with their own will and strength, they had become children of the devil. Their wrong kind of over-enthusiasm to follow carefully God's commandments prevented them, after all, to hear what God actually wanted to say to people. The false kind of religiousness can lead astray! They did not want to give up their self-made religion!*

Many of the Pharisees, therefore, thought to be children of God and enjoy heaven because of their own excellence; their own religiousness; their own piety; or simply based on the fact that they belonged to Abraham's family. They placed higher value to themselves, religion, Abraham, Israel; and not to God, not to Jesus!

Jesus said at the end of the Gospel, "those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted". The Pharisees were lacking this humbleness. They wanted to get saved by themselves. They wanted to determine by themselves, what is the will of God. They would not humble themselves and submit to God's will.

We cannot acquire humility by ourselves, it will be given to us through difficulties. Thanks be to the good God, who takes us into trouble, because there we learn true humility. God does not want that we experience evil or difficulties. But through difficulties we learn to live as a Christian in the right way: when we actually realise that we are sinners ourselves, we can not go far from sinners, when we are sick, we get to understand the necessity to help others who are sick. This is the Christian way: Rather staying close with the sinner than getting far away from sin. Rather meeting the patients than fleeing the disease. Rather remaining closeby to someone who has failed than scolding him for his failure.

Let's pray: Lord Jesus Christ, thank you that you came to us as a light; a light that enlightens our blinded minds. Thank you that you came to reveal and guide us to the right kind of doing God's good will. Thank you for showing us the way of love that we may walk. And even if we fall short on this path, thank you, that you went that way until the end – you showed us your love until your death; and through it redeemed us from our sins and insufficiency and sicknesses. Thank you that we cannot get saved by our own achievements, but solely thanks to your holiness and reconciling death and resurrection. We thank you and praise you; we wish to walk in your footsteps! May you help us. This we pray in your sacred name. Amen.