

I once was blind...and still may be”

John 9:1-41

This lesson is not about physical blindness but about spiritual blindness--a disease that afflicted many of these Pharisees and afflicts many sincere people even today.

It's easy for Christians to vilify the Pharisees, but we do that at our own peril.

Contrary to popular belief, the Pharisees were the progressive party among Orthodox Jews. Their teachings were closer to many of the teachings of Jesus than the teachings of the Sadducees.

The Pharisees derived their name from the Hebrew word *perushim* which means “separated.” They were brave and patriotic men determined to maintain their distinctiveness as Jews when foreign conquerors attempted to compromise the Jewish faith and wreck it by introducing their own customs and worship. The Pharisees lived in strict accord with the sacred writings and the oral tradition of their faith.

For the most part they were good, solid, respectable people trying to live out their faith in a culture that was continually being corrupted by pagan thought and culture. They sought to counteract this corruption by living according to the law with extraordinary zeal.

Their religion determined how they dressed, washed, ate, fasted, observed the Sabbath, and kept themselves clean from all manner of defilement.

Unfortunately, their all-out commitment to the law produced a kind of spiritual Myopia. They saw only what agreed with their faith. To everything else, they were blind.

I wonder how many Christians today suffer from spiritual myopia. They believe they live according to the will and way of Christ, and yet they're blind in so many ways to authentic discipleship. Let's begin there.

The Pharisees lived by the letter of the law, but were blind to the spirit of the law. The Pharisees had developed a system of 613 laws, 365 negative commands and 248 positive laws, which had, by the time of Christ, produces a heartless, cold, and arrogant brand of righteousness.¹

A good example was their attitude toward the Sabbath. They were so afraid of working on the Sabbath that there was a law stating that if a person fractured a bone, they could not have it attended to on the Sabbath.

Some rabbis in the Pharisaical tradition forbade spitting on the bare ground during the Sabbath lest the action disturb the dirt and thus constitute plowing, which would break the prohibition of work on the Sabbath.²

Another example is the law that stated that a woman could not look into a mirror on the Sabbath because if she did and saw a gray hair she would be tempted to pluck it out, and if she did pluck it out that would be working on the Sabbath. How would you like getting ready Sunday mornings while living under such a law?

Understand that Jesus was not an enemy of the Law. He declared that he had come to fulfill the Law, not destroy it. But in their zeal to honor the Sabbath, the Pharisees had forgotten that the Sabbath was created for man's benefit. The Pharisees had turned it into a crushing burden.

Here's the ancient point I take away from this and apply it to our lives today. Many people in our community see church as a burden--not a benefit. We need to be very

careful within the body of Christ to let people see the joy, the love, and the fellowship that are part of Christian community.

We need to get the message out that we're not looking for persons to share our burdens. We're here to share their burden. The fellowship of the church is a wonderful thing. We have a good time when we're together. Being part of the church should brighten people's lives, not steal their joy. We need to help people see that.

Two men had driven their wives to church for choir practice. The church was situated next to a gentle, flowing river. And, as was their custom on a good night, the men strolled to the river and sat on an old wooden bench at a bend in the river – to pass the time, catch up, solve the world's problems. That sort of thing.

So, on one particular night, the air was cool, the stars were bright, and there were no world problems to solve. The night was still except the sound of the crickets. One of the men said, "Crickets sure do sing." The other answered, "Yep, they sure do."

As he was saying this the church choir began it's rehears. "Sure is beautiful music, isn't it?" said the first guy. And the second guy, still thinking about the crickets, said, "And to think they do it by rubbing their legs together."

Our choir doesn't make beautiful music by rubbing their legs together. But we are grateful for them. As important as their music is, however, the fellowship that they enjoy with one another is also vital.

People who serve Christ together tend to have a great time doing it. We need to let the world know that their burden can be lightened not increased when they become part of this fellowship. The first mistake that the Pharisees made was that they honored the letter of the Law, not the spirit of the law.

Here is the second mistake they made. **They used religion to divide people rather than to draw them together.** I can appreciate their dilemma. It's always difficult to be a minority faith in a culture. I can appreciate the discomfort that parents of Jewish, Hindu and Muslim children feel in our culture at Christmas time. Christmas is hard for anybody to resist, especially a five year old child. It's a problem being a minority faith in any culture.

So I can sympathize with the Pharisees, but again, they went too far. On coming from any public assembly, the law required the Pharisee to wash his whole body before eating. This was not for sanitation. The reason they washed was because they couldn't know what kind of people they might have passed on the street.

Even the shadow of a Gentile could defile them. Their faith bred in them a terrible prejudice against others. No wonder it was so difficult for the Pharisees to accept the idea that Jesus could be a good Jew and actually sit at the same table with sinners and tax-collectors.

Here again, we have to be very careful that we do not make the same mistake. There are many people in our community who have the idea that they're not good enough to come inside the walls of the church.

We dare not have the world see us as an exclusive community reserved only for saints. The very word "religion" means "to bind together." We're outside the will of God when we allow our faith to erect a wall to others. Christian faith does not erect walls, but bridges.

In the early days of Christianity, many Christians were buried in the catacombs of Rome. In the earliest graves the inscriptions are without a single reference to the position in society of those buried there.

The deceased might have been a high government official or a slave, an army officer or a common soldier, a member of the ruling class or a common worker. It made no difference. All that mattered was that they had been a believer in Christ. Christians are blind if our faith separates us from others.

Which brings me to a final mistake of the Pharisees I want to highlight this morning. **They cared more about their principles than they did about people.** That's why it was easy for them to let an innocent man die on a cross.

Again, we have to be very careful at this point. Jesus was not the only victim of excessive religious zeal. Many have been put to death in the name of religion. Are we so blind that we cannot see God's love is for all His children whether they be black or white, Christian or Muslim, first world or third world?

Satan often masquerades as an angel of light and sometimes Christians can act very holy and yet still be agents of Satan. The Christian faith can be prostituted to excuse all kinds of indifference to human need.

But it's true that it's possible to be fanatically devoted to the Christian religion and be totally blind to the will of God as made manifest in Jesus Christ! That's the message for the day. Christ came in the world to save people! Everything else in our religious beliefs is secondary to that one truth.

Christ came into the world that we may see the greatness of God's love--for you, for me, and for every person on this globe. The Pharisees asked, "And we, are we blind, too?" The answer is, yes, absolutely, if we cannot see that the purpose of religion is to connect people with one another and with God.

The Pharisees lived by the letter of the law, but were blind to the spirit of the law. They used religion to divide people rather than to bring them together. They cared more about their principles than they did about people.

The Pharisees were as blind as the beggar beside the road had been before Jesus healed him. How about us? Are we among the vision impaired when it comes to God's love for all people? If so, it's time to allow Christ to heal our eyes - today.

¹ <https://bible.org/illustration/pharisaic-laws>

² <http://www.toddsplace.net/downloads/ToddsTrinityDocs/Pharisees.pdf>