

THE PHARISEE IN ME

By Rev. Will Nelken

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The Pharisees were a leading sect of the Jewish faith in the days of Jesus and His disciples, whose beliefs were scriptural, and who shared a firm anticipation of the appearance of the Messiah. Yet, they were in frequent conflict with the ministry and teaching of Jesus and became the recipients of His stern warnings.

What happened? Why did they generate such conflict with Jesus when He showed up? Can believers today face similar reproofs from the Lord?

Luke 12:1 (NLT)

Jesus turned to His disciples and warned them, “Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees—beware of their hypocrisy.”

Pentecostal believers stand at the head of the line to become modern-day Pharisees! We hold very similar theologies—the inspired authority of Scripture, prophetic revelation, the Kingdom of God and His Messiah, angels and demons and the Spirit of God, the resurrection of the dead and the world to come. Right doctrinal belief is not enough to prevent hypocritical “Phariseism” from taking hold.

Biblical Pharisees cared about “looking right” in the eyes of their neighbors. Jesus said, “*Everything they do is **for show***” (Matthew 23:5). Consequently, they were legalistic about religious behaviors and routines; quick to judge and reprove others who stepped out of line. The Lord said, “*You are so **careful to clean the outside of the cup and the dish**, but inside you are filthy—full of greed and self-indulgence!*” (Matthew 23:25).

Biblical Pharisees cared about “being right” theologically. Because of their stern adherence to the authority of Scripture, they thought they had an edge on others in this regard. Jesus cautioned them, “*You are careful to tithe even the tiniest income from your herb gardens, but **you ignore the more important aspects of the law—justice, mercy, and faith**. You should tithe, yes, but do not neglect the more important things*” (Matthew 23:23).

Biblical Pharisees were motivated first by desire for God, but that gave way to fear (of divine judgment, and loss of popular prestige) and jealousy (of anyone else whose prestige came by some other way).

Biblical Pharisees, in the words of Jesus, “***dearly loved their money**,*” which led them to shady and dishonest handling of their own money and the funds entrusted to them for the work of God. About this, Jesus commented, “*“If you are faithful in little things, you will be faithful in*

large ones. But if you are **dishonest in little things**, you won't be honest with greater responsibilities. And if you are untrustworthy about **worldly wealth**, who will trust you with the true riches of heaven? (Luke 16:10-11).

The many stories about them and their encounters with Jesus in the Gospels, reveal their many hypocrisies:

- They elevated law, rules, rituals, and traditions (of men) to the height of divine commands
- They did not practice what they taught, resulting in self-deception, and loss of heart
- They tended to see people as tools, numbers, objects, problems
- They condemned others' misbehaviors, as though they themselves were without sin
- They were greedy and dishonest

I am sure that I have lapsed in every one of those ways at various times in my pursuit of God's will for my life. Only God's mercy and grace have erased my shame and enlarged my heart.

Jesus warned His followers, "**Unless your righteousness is better than the righteousness of the teachers of religious law and the Pharisees, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven!**" (Matthew 5:20)

In an effort to reveal the truth and win their hearts, Jesus pointed out their failures in these areas. They knew the Scriptures well—in fact, made them their lifelong study—but used them as tools of religious power and control, instead of windows of divine grace (revealing the heart of the Father). Jesus repeatedly tried to help them see God's generous, loving heart, but they usually preferred to keep the religious reins in their own firm grip.

Wherever there are laws, there are loopholes. Pharisees were diligent about outward conformity to the religious codes they taught. Strong systems of accountability and discipline favored their outward obedience, but often missed their inward anarchy. Again, it was Jesus who pointed out this hypocrisy. He taught that **outward obedience must begin with inward obedience** (what is done in secret); if God doesn't have your heart, He doesn't have you at all. He also taught that **outward obedience is not the means to a right heart**—that takes an act of God's grace.

A most revealing narrative of this very truth appears in John 3, concerning the nighttime encounter of Nicodemus and Jesus.

John 3

¹ *There was a man named **Nicodemus**, a Jewish religious leader who was a Pharisee. ² After dark one evening, he came to speak with Jesus. "Rabbi," he said, "we all know that God has sent you to teach us. Your miraculous signs are evidence that God is with you."*

³ Jesus replied, “I tell you the truth, **unless you are born again**, you cannot see the Kingdom of God.”

⁴ “What do you mean?” exclaimed Nicodemus. “How can an old man go back into his mother’s womb and be born again?”

⁵ Jesus replied, “I assure you, no one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit. ⁶ Humans can reproduce only human life, but the Holy Spirit gives birth to spiritual life. ⁷ So don’t be surprised when I say, ‘You must be born again.’ ⁸ The wind blows wherever it wants. Just as you can hear the wind but can’t tell where it comes from or where it is going, so you can’t explain how people are born of the Spirit.”

Jesus explained to Nicodemus that a person without God *in* his life is incomplete and spiritually lost, and that the Spirit only comes in by one means—a spiritual new birth.

Nicodemus heard Jesus’ words, but they confused him, because he was trying to apply them in material ways.

⁹ “How are these things possible?” Nicodemus asked.

¹⁰ Jesus replied, “You are a respected Jewish teacher, and yet you don’t understand these things? ¹¹ I assure you, we tell you what we know and have seen, and yet you won’t believe our testimony. ¹² But if you don’t believe me when I tell you about earthly things, how can you possibly believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ever gone to heaven and returned. But the Son of Man has come down from heaven. ¹⁴ And as Moses lifted up the bronze snake on a pole in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, ¹⁵ so that everyone who believes in him will have eternal life.

¹⁶ “For **God loved the world so much** that he gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ God sent his Son into the world not to judge the world, but to save the world through him.

Here was a crucial point for Nicodemus—or any modern-day Pharisee—Jesus did not come the first time to act as a judge or punisher, but as a Savior. Through His death and resurrection Jesus suspended divine judgment for all so that they might trust and follow Him, and for those who did and do, He removes judgment for sin altogether.

¹⁸ “There is no judgment against anyone who believes in him. But anyone who does not believe in him has already been judged for not believing in God’s one and only Son. ¹⁹ And the judgment is based on this fact: God’s light came into the world, but people loved the darkness more than the light, for their actions were evil. ²⁰ All who do evil hate the light and refuse to go near it for fear their sins will be exposed. ²¹ But **those who do what is right come to the light so others can see that they are doing what God wants.**”

Hypocrisy is a masquerade. It is a pretense of self-righteousness. Hypocrites dodge the light, preferring the shadows, where their inward sins remain cloaked—except to God.

Repentance removes the cloak, exposing the errors of judgment and behavior to the light of God's mercy, where they can be forgiven, cleansed, and turned to good.

Pharisees can change; hypocrisy is not a terminal condition. Saul of Tarsus was a Pharisee, as were his ancestors. He is now known as the apostle Paul, because an encounter with Jesus Christ changed him forever!

Beware the hypocrisy of the Pharisees and embrace the transforming grace of God through Jesus Christ. You needn't be perfect before you can come to Him or start to follow Him! Be changed by God in your heart through the new birth and the fullness of the Holy Spirit, and the outward obedience will come along.

How can you be changed by God "in your heart"?

- Read His words every day; make your way through the entire Bible at least once every year. (Hebrews 4:12)
- Be transparently honest with God about yourself. (Psalm 32:2)
- Then confess your sins to a trusted Christian friend, and pray for each other. (James 5:16)
- Practice what you say you believe. (James 1:22)
- Let love be your guide. (Ephesians 5:2)