

Five Signs of Pharisaism

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Introduction.

- A. In today's religious world, denominational folks commonly accuse members of the Lord's church of being Pharisaical. By this, they generally mean that we spend too much time focusing on the details of God's word, that we love the Bible more than we love Jesus.
- B. This is an important, if not necessarily true, accusation. Historically, the Pharisees were a group of Jews who believed in separation from the world. Our word "Pharisee" comes from the Hebrew for "separated ones."
- C. Although the Pharisees' goal was commendable, their pursuit of it was not. On earth, Jesus constantly rebuked and condemned the Pharisees for their ungodly ways and evil hearts. As a result of His criticism, the Pharisees plotted against Jesus with other Jewish sects and helped cause His crucifixion. When someone accuses us of Pharisaism, then, they align us with the enemies of Jesus and accuse us of twisting His will.
- D. Obviously, this is an issue we need to take seriously. God was not pleased with the Pharisees, and He is not pleased with their modern-day imitators. As we look at this idea of Pharisaism, then, there are three questions we need to ask. First, we need to find out what the Pharisees actually believed, so that we can understand Pharisaism as more than just a religious insult. Second, we need to look at what we believe and teach, so that we can make sure that our religious outlook is not fundamentally the same as the Pharisees'. Finally, we need to look at what we actually do, so that we can keep Pharisaism from creeping into our practice even when it does not appear in our doctrine. Let's go through this evening and apply this way of thinking to five major Pharisaical practices, five signs of Pharisaism.

I. Trusting Own Righteousness.

- A. The first Pharisaical attitude we're going to look at is their habit of trusting in their own righteousness rather than relying on the righteousness of God. We see this pattern of thought illustrated by Jesus' parable in Luke 18:9-12. Let's look at what this fictitious Pharisee believed: First, he was supremely self-confident. Second, he thought he was better than everybody else because He thanked God for not being like others. Finally, the Pharisee based his righteousness on his perfect keeping of ritual law, his regularity in fasting and his consistency in tithing. The Pharisee loved himself and trusted in himself.
- B. This attitude, this trusting in the ability of man to make himself good, is not part of the teaching of the Lord's church, even though many people claim that it is. Here's their argument: they say that because we teach that man must be baptized to be saved, that we must think we earn our way to heaven when we're baptized. That's quite simply not true. We aren't baptized because we trust in our own righteousness. We're baptized because we trust in God's righteousness, because God extends His grace to man in the act of baptism.
- C. Just because we don't say that we are righteous of ourselves, though, doesn't mean we can't get to believing it. We have to be careful, lest we start glorifying ourselves and the good things we do rather than glorifying God and the good things He has done for us. We're surrounded by people who, to our prideful imagination, look worse than we are, and it's so easy for us to say in our hearts, "Boy, I'm glad I'm not wicked like them."
- D. Friends, we can't afford to think that way. When we start exalting our own righteousness before God, it's like one ant telling us how much taller it is than this other ant. Sure, the first ant might be big for an ant, but it's nothing in comparison to the height of a human being. In the same way, we might be comparatively more righteous than some sinner, but our righteousness is nothing in comparison to the righteousness of God or the righteousness of the standard He holds us to. On our own, we're condemned as surely as the worst sinner, and we can be counted righteous only through the blood of Christ.

II. Loving the Praise of Men.

- A. A second symptom of the Pharisaical disease was loving the praise of men. Jesus condemns this attitude in Matthew 23:5-7. Here's the problem: these Pharisees were so in love with themselves, so impressed with their own righteousness, that they thought everyone should know how righteous they were too. They dressed in a show of outward godliness, they sought seats of honor during festivals, and they loved to be hailed with respectful greetings that emphasized their special role as teachers of God's word. They lived for praise.
- B. The church does not teach that we should delight in the praise of men. Indeed, the Bible emphasizes just how poor human praise is. Most people will not accept the truth, so if everybody is pleased with us, it probably means that we aren't teaching the truth. The Bible tells us that obeying the commandments of God as contained in His word is far more important than courting the favor of the worldly majority.
- C. However, none of this precludes the possibility that we can learn to delight in the praise of men, particularly in the praise of our brethren. Now, there's nothing wrong with complimenting a spiritually minded brother, and there's nothing wrong with being glad to receive a compliment. I appreciate all the encouragement I receive

as a preacher. However, if I get to the point where I preach mainly to receive that praise, and if I'm only satisfied when I hear it, regardless of whether the gospel was preached or not, I need to find a new line of work. The same is true for any Christian. We need to ask ourselves, "Why do I serve God?" Is it to glorify Him, or is to use our spirituality as a way of attracting attention from others and glorifying ourselves? We need to keep a watch over our hearts and make sure that we are never motivated by the praise of men.

III. Adding to the Law of God.

- A. The Pharisees' arrogance also appeared in their adding to the law of God. The gospel of Mark describes this practice in Mark 7:3-5. Here's what the Pharisees would do: One of their elders would come up with some tradition, something that wasn't in God's law, but that he thought went along with it, in this case, ceremonial washing. As time passed, this tradition would become binding to the Pharisees. They thought they had to obey it or sin, and they would teach others that those others also had to obey it or sin, which is what caused their interrogation of Jesus here. They elevated the tradition of washing to the level of God's law.
- B. Now, surely, of all the practices of the Pharisees, this is the one that is most unlike the teaching of the church. What separates us from the denominations is that we reject the traditions of men. Every denomination out there is based on some human tradition, whether it be contained in the writings of the church fathers, a statement of principles, or a creed book. They are denominations because they have added to the word of God. We stand opposed to that practice. We rely on God's word, and upon it only.
- C. However, we can still add to the law of God through our traditions if we aren't careful. This church certainly has traditions, things that God permits but does not command. For example, I end every sermon with an invitation, which is allowed by Scripture but not required. However, other churches of Christ, particularly in Europe and Africa, do not end with an invitation, which is also allowed by Scripture. If we try to tell them that they must end sermons with an invitation or sin, we ourselves are sinning by adding to the law of God.

IV. Ignoring the Law of God.

- A. The Pharisees also departed from the truth through ignoring the law of God. They did this in two main ways.
 - 1. Jesus gives an example of the first way in Matthew 23:16-17: using tradition to get around the law. The Law of Moses was absolute about the importance of oaths. If you swore something, you were bound to do it. The Pharisees found this inconvenient sometimes, so they devised a system that made some oaths binding and some oaths not. That way, if they swore the right oath, they could still break their word.
 - 2. Matthew 23:23-24 illustrates a second way to ignore God's law: focusing so much on the law's details and forgetting the reason why. The Pharisees tithed herbs but neglected justice, mercy and faithfulness.
- B. Now, obviously, no true gospel preacher is going to get up and preach that we should use traditions to get around the law of God, and nobody's going to say "Ignore things like love, but pay attention to technicalities." However, both of these things pose a practical danger. The first one illustrates the problem with tradition. Once we start binding tradition, sooner or later, we are going to come up with a tradition that contradicts God's word. It's inevitable, and we can see that it's inevitable because every denomination that relies on tradition has a tradition that invalidates some part of the Bible. That's why binding traditions is disaster.
- C. We also need to be careful not to overlook the forest for the trees. The church is more diligent about obeying every little command in the Bible than any other religious group, but we can't forget why we obey those commands in the first place. Every commandment in the Bible is either an expression of love for God, an expression of love for man, or both. The Bible is not just a checklist we fill out; it's God's instruction book for training us to be like Jesus. Unless we live our Christian lives with those goals in mind, we cannot succeed.

V. Behaving With Hypocrisy.

- A. Finally, Pharisaism was also marked out by the Pharisees' hypocritical behavior. Jesus describes this in Matthew 23:27-28. The Pharisees were so concerned about looking good, about keeping up the public appearance of righteousness, that they neglected the inside: their private practice and their hearts. It was a natural outflow of their self-righteousness, their love of outward law, and their love of the praise of men.
- B. Once again, obviously, no preacher in the church is going to say, "We all ought to be hypocrites," but hypocrisy is always a problem for God's people. It's easy for us to fall into the trap of looking pretty on Sunday morning, of saying and doing all the right things when we're at church, but going home and practicing all sorts of sin. When we turn hypocrite, the basic problem has become that we fear the condemnation of men more than we fear the condemnation of God. God always knows our most secret sin, but when we live hypocritically, we don't care, as long as we can keep the congregation fooled. That's backwards. When we live a sinful life, it's not the congregation that will condemn us to eternal punishment. It's God, and there is no sin so hidden or subtle that it escapes His notice. Hypocrisy is ultimately pointless.

Conclusion. If you're ready to come out from hypocrisy or anything else and start serving God as He desires, He will accept you today.