

POWER

"... the gospel ... is the power of God unto salvation ..." (Romans 1:16)

PHARISEEISM: THE RESULT OF A DISJOINTED HEART

by Wade L. Webster

The Pharisees, like other Jews, wore phylacteries around their hands and foreheads to remind them to love God with all their hearts (Deut. 6:4-6). Yet, in spite of this reminder, their hearts became separated from God. To the prophet Ezekiel, God declared:

And they come unto thee as the people cometh, and they sit before thee as my people, and they hear thy words, but they will not do them: for with their mouth they show much love, but their heart goeth after covetousness. And, lo, thou art unto them as a very lovely song of one that hath a pleasant voice, and can play well on an instrument: for they hear thy words, but they do not do them (Ezek. 33:31-32).

As the people left the assembly each time, they told Ezekiel what a fine lesson he had. However, the lesson made no difference in how they lived their lives. Evidently, things had changed little from the time of Ezekiel to the time of Jesus. Jesus declared, "Ye hypocrites, well did Esaias prophesy of you, saying, This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoreth me with their lips; but their heart is far from me. But in vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men" (Mat. 15:7-9). The Pharisees honored God with their lips, but not with their lives (Mat. 23:3; Luke 6:46). Although they gathered in the temple for worship, their hearts were miles away.

By the time of Christ, two main sects existed among the Jews the Sadducees and the Pharisees. Although the sects were different in some key ways, they were alike in one way. They both were the result of a disjointed heart. The Jews who let their hearts wander from God ended up either in the liberalism of Sadduceism or in the legalism of Phariseism. Our focus in this study will be on those who ended up in the ditch of Phariseism (Luke 6:39). As we trace the term *Pharisee* through the gospel accounts, I believe that it will become clear how their hearts became disjointed from God.

They Valued Man's Applause More Than God's Approval

John records, "Nevertheless among the

chief rulers also many believed on him; but because of the Pharisees they did not confess him, lest they should be put out of the synagogue: For they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God" (John 12:42-43). Although these Jewish leaders knew that Jesus was the Son of God, they would not confess Him. They loved their positions in Jewish society too much to give them up. Unlike the disciples, they were not willing to forsake all and to follow Jesus (Mat. 19:27). They loved the praise or applause of men more than the praise or approval of God. Earlier in John's record, Jesus asked, "How can ye believe, which receive honour one of another, and seek not the honour that cometh from God only?" (John 5:44). Again, please note that they sought earthly applause over heavenly approval.

Some of the strongest language that Jesus ever used was directed at the Pharisees because of their desire for human praise. In the twenty-third chapter of Matthew, He declared, "But all their works they do for to be seen of men: they make broad their phylacteries, and enlarge the borders of their garments, And love the uppermost rooms at feasts, and the chief seats in the synagogues, And greetings in the markets, and to be called of men, Rabbi, Rabbi" (Mat. 23:5-7). Please note that they wanted men to see them and to praise them. Even the phylacteries which were worn to remind them to love God with all their hearts became a means by which they might receive the praise of men. Woe after woe fell from our Lord's lips upon them because of their hypocrisy and desire for human applause. Listen to His words: "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye devour widows' houses, and for a pretence make long prayer: therefore ye shall receive the greater damnation" (Mat. 23:14). Please note that the Pharisees were hypocrites or pretenders. For pretence, and I might add for the praise of men, they were making long prayers. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus declared, "And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their

reward" (Mat. 6:5). Within the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus detailed how that their desire to be seen of men stretched beyond their prayer lives. It also included their giving and their fasting. They sounded a trumpet when they gave and they disfigured their faces when they fasted to draw attention to themselves (Mat. 6:2, 16).

Returning to the twenty-third chapter of Matthew, consider some of the other words of rebuke that Jesus had for the phony Pharisees:

Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone. Ye blind guides, which strain at a gnat, and swallow a camel (Mat. 23:23-24).

The Pharisees wanted men to see them paying tithes of even the smallest herbs and spices. Again, their motive was to be praised of men. Please note that Jesus was not condemning them for giving a tenth of their increase. He was rather condemning their hypocrisy and desire to be praised of men. Had they really wanted to please God, they would not have omitted those things that are weighty matters to God - mercy, judgment, and faith (Mic. 6:8). Their desire was not to receive the praise of God, but rather to receive the praise of men. The expression "strain at a gnat, and swallow a camel" is also very interesting. To avoid eating that which was unclean, they often strained liquids to keep from accidentally swallowing a gnat. Again, their motive was to be praised of men for their strict adherence to the law. However, they really didn't care about the law. Had they cared about the law, they would not have omitted the weightier matters of the law like mercy, judgment, and faith.

Continuing in the twenty-third chapter of Matthew, we read:

Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye make clean the outside of the cup and of the platter, but within they are full of extortion and excess. Thou blind Pharisee, cleanse first that

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which is within the cup and platter, that the outside of them may be clean also (Mat. 23:25-26).

Please notice that the Pharisees were more concerned with the outside than they were with the inside. They were concerned with what men could see far more than they were concerned with what God could see (1 Sam. 16:7). As noted before, they were concerned with what men could see because they loved the praise of men. They shined and shined the outside, but did nothing to the inside.

The Lord's rebuke of the Pharisees continued with these words:

Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness. Even so ye also outwardly appear righteous unto men, but within ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity (Mat. 23:27-28).

On the outside, the Pharisees appeared beautiful and righteous. However, on the inside, they were as ugly and as wicked as could be. Because they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God, the Pharisees put all of their emphasis on the outside. They seemed to be religious, but they were not (Jam. 1:26). They seemed to be alive, but they were dead (Rev. 3:1).

Perhaps, the strongest rebuke of all came at the end of the twenty-third chapter of Matthew. Jesus declared:

Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! because ye build the tombs of the prophets, and garnish the sepulchres of the righteous, And say, If we had been in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets. Wherefore ye be witnesses unto yourselves, that ye are the children of them which killed the prophets. Fill ye up then the measure of your fathers. Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell? (Mat. 23:29-33).

Outwardly, the Pharisees built elaborate tombs for the prophets and decorated the graves of the righteous. Inwardly, they were plotting to kill Jesus, the prophet like unto Moses (Deut. 18:15-19). Furthermore, they were going to persecute and kill the apostles following His death (Mat. 23:34). That which had been God's house was now their house. That which had been filled with glory, would now be desolate (Mat. 23:36-39).

It should be noted that there were some among the Pharisees who returned to God and

sought His approval over the applause of men. In the twenty-third chapter of Acts we read of a sincere Pharisee named Saul of Tarsus (Acts 23:1, 6; 26:5; Phil. 3:5). When Saul learned that he was persecuting God, he changed his life to please God (Acts 9:1-6; Gal. 1:13-24). Although he was excelling in the Jews' religion as a Pharisee, he was willing to suffer "the loss of all things" that he might win Christ (Gal. 1:14; Phil. 3:5-9). Unlike his peers, he loved the praise of God more than the praise of men. To the saints at Galatia, he wrote, "For do I now persuade men, or God? or do I seek to please men? for if I yet pleased men, I should not be the servant of Christ" (Gal. 1:10). Paul did not have itching ears (2 Tim. 4:3; cf. Isa. 30:10; Jer. 5:30-31; 23:16-17; 27:9; Mic. 2:11). He preached the word in season and out of season because he wanted to please God (2 Tim. 4:2; 2 Cor. 5:9). More than anything else, he wanted to hear the Lord say, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant" (Mat. 25:21; 2 Tim. 4:6-8). May the same be true of us today!

They Valued Human Tradition More Than Heavenly Truth

In addition to valuing human applause over heavenly approval, the Pharisees valued human tradition over heavenly truth. Matthew recorded:

Then came to Jesus scribes and Pharisees, which were of Jerusalem, saying, Why do thy disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? for they wash not their hands when they eat bread. But he answered and said unto them, Why do ye also transgress the commandment of God by your tradition? For God commanded, saying, Honour thy father and mother: and, He that curseth father or mother; let him die the death. But ye say, Whosoever shall say to his father or his mother, It is a gift, by whatsoever thou mightest be profited by me; And honour not his father or his mother, he shall be free. Thus have ye made the commandment of God of none effect by your tradition. Ye hypocrites, well did Esaias prophesy of you, saying, This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoureth me with their lips; but their heart is far from me. But in vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men (Mat. 15:1-9).

Clearly, the Pharisees esteemed the tradition of the elders relative to washing hands to be of greater importance than the truth of God concerning honoring one's parents. Their hands were washed, but their

hearts were dirty. Furthermore, their parents were hungry. Perhaps, they brought the matter of unwashed hands to Jesus to get him to rebuke His disciples. If so, they were in for a surprise. They were the ones in for a rebuke. Please note that the Pharisees considered the failure of the disciples to wash their hands to be a great offence. However, they didn't see their own failure to care for their parents as an offence at all (Mat. 7:1-5). Yet, as Jesus pointed out, it was an offence punishable by death under the Old Testament (Mat. 15:4). Perhaps, most amazing of all, they tried to use God to justify the neglect of their parents. They claimed that they couldn't help their parents because they had given what they had to God. Evidently, they had forgotten the message that Samuel delivered to Saul: "Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams" (1 Sam. 15:29). In valuing their traditions more than the truth they had transgressed God's commandment and made it of none effect (Mat. 15:3, 6; cf. Mark 7:8, 9, 13).

Again, it should be noted that there were those among the Pharisees who forsake the traditions of the elders for the truth of God. As you likely recall, Saul of Tarsus had been "exceedingly zealous of the traditions" of his fathers (Gal. 1:14). However, when he learned the truth of God, he left the traditions of his fathers. He asked the Lord, "What wilt thou have me to do?" (Acts 9:6), and he did it (Acts 9:18). Like Peter, Paul knew that the conversation that he had received by tradition from his fathers was vain or empty (1 Pet. 1:18; cf. Mat. 15:9). He knew that the only thing that would profit him was the truth of God (2 Tim. 3:16-17; cf. John 4:24). Paul knew that truth was powerful, but that tradition was powerless. He knew that truth could free (John 8:32), sanctify (John 17:17), and beget him (Jam. 1:18). He knew that tradition could do none of these things.

They Valued Fleshly Lineage More Than Spiritual Heritage

Not only did they value man's applause more than God's approval and human traditions more than heavenly truth, they valued Abrahamic lineage more than Abrahamic faith. John records,

Then said Jesus to those Jews which believed on him, If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed; And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free. They answered him, We be Abraham's seed, and were never in bondage to any man: how sayest thou, Ye

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shall be made free? Jesus answered them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin. And the servant abideth not in the house for ever: but the Son abideth ever. If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed. I know that ye are Abraham's seed; but ye seek to kill me, because my word hath no place in you. I speak that which I have seen with my Father: and ye do that which ye have seen with your father. They answered and said unto him, Abraham is our father. Jesus saith unto them, If ye were Abraham's children, ye would do the works of Abraham. But now ye seek to kill me, a man that hath told you the truth, which I have heard of God: this did not Abraham (John 8:31-40).

Filled with national pride, these Jews made one of the most outlandish statements recorded in Scripture. They claimed that they had never been in bondage to any man. Yet, their history as a nation was a history of bondage. In recalling Hebrew history, Stephen spoke of how they spent 400 years in Egyptian bondage (Acts 7:6-7; cf. Exo. 1:14; 2:23; 6:5, 6, 9; 13:13-14; 20:2; Deut. 5:6; 6:12; 8:14; 13:5, 10; 26:6; Josh. 24:17; Judg. 6:8; Neh. 9:17). Is it any wonder that they stoned him? They were living in denial. In addition to being in bondage to the Egyptians, they were also in bondage to the Babylonians and Assyrians. Furthermore, at the very moment that these words fell from their lips, they were under the thumb of Rome. Yet, Jesus moved past all of this physical bondage to the far greater bondage of sin. After all, Jesus had not come to set them free from Rome. He came to set them free from sin. Please note also the great pride that they had in being descendants of Abraham. Although they were physical descendants of Abraham, they bore little resemblance to him spiritually. They did not do his works or possess his faith. Abraham rejoiced to see Jesus' day, but they sought to kill him (John 8:56; cf. John 1:11; 8:40). Clearly, they valued Abrahamic lineage far more than Abrahamic faith. Sadly, they would continue to do so even in Paul's day (Rom. 4:1, 11-12, 16; 9:7; Gal. 3:7). Paul spent his life trying to help them see the value of faith over flesh. To the saints at Rome, he declared, "For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: But he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God" (Rom. 2:28-29). If any man had reason to trust in the flesh, Paul did. However, he had no

confidence in the flesh. His confidence was in Jesus Christ (Phil. 3:1-11; cf. Mat. 3:7).

They Valued Temporal Riches More Than Eternal Reward

In addition to valuing the praise of men more than the praise of God, the traditions of men more than the truth of God, and the lineage of flesh more than the heritage of faith, they valued the riches of earth more than the reward of heaven. Luke plainly states that the Pharisees were covetous. In fact, he recorded that they derided Jesus because of His teaching on money (Luke 16:13-14). It is interesting that a little later in this same chapter we read of a rich man who was clothed in purple and who fared sumptuously every day (Luke 16:19). At this rich man's gate was a beggar named Lazarus who desired the crumbs that fell from the rich man's table. Had the rich man been feeding Lazarus, he would not have been waiting for the crumbs that fell from the rich man's table. The rich man had plenty, but he wasn't sharing it with Lazarus. It seems clear that this man was covetous. In fact, he evidently didn't start thinking about his soul until he lifted up his eyes in torment. Although this rich man isn't identified as a Pharisee, I know that he was a Jew. After all, he referred to Abraham as his father (Luke 16:24). Whether this man was a Pharisee or not, Jesus used him to teach them a lesson about valuing earthly riches above heavenly reward. In torment, the rich man would have traded everything for a drop of water.

With the scribes and Pharisees lurking around him to catch something out of his mouth, Jesus told the crowd congregated before him to beware of the leaven or hypocrisy of the Pharisees (Luke 11:53-12:1). When a man, likely from the camp of the Pharisees, asked Jesus to get involved in an inheritance dispute, the Lord refused (Luke 12:13-14). However, He did use the occasion to give the crowd a warning about covetousness (Luke 12:15). It seems clear that there was a connection between the first

warning (Luke 12:1) and this one (Luke 12:15). To illustrate the danger of covetousness, the Lord told the Parable of the Rich Farmer (12:16-21). Although the farmer is not specifically identified as a Pharisee, he certainly shared their love for money. When the farmer's ground brought forth plentifully, he thought about what he should do with his abundance. Instead of helping the poor, he decided to tear down his barns and to build bigger barns. He decided to take his ease and to eat, drink, and be merry. He was covetous, and it cost him his soul. He laid up treasure for himself, and was not rich toward God.

As noted earlier in this lesson, in the twenty-third chapter of Matthew, Jesus pronounced a series of woes upon the scribes and Pharisees. One of the woes pronounced upon them mentions their covetousness. Jesus spoke of them as devouring widows' houses (Mat. 23:14). Instead of taking caring of widows, they took advantage of them (Exo. 22:22; Deut. 14:29; 24:17-21; Jam. 1:27). You really can't sink any lower than to steal the house of a widow. Yet, they were guilty of doing that. Things had evidently changed little from the prophet Amos' day. He wrote of his people:

Thus saith the LORD; For three transgressions of Israel, and for four, I will not turn away the punishment thereof; because they sold the righteous for silver, and the poor for a pair of shoes; That pant after the dust of the earth on the head of the poor; and turn aside the way of the meek: and a man and his father will go in unto the same maid, to profane my holy name: And they lay themselves down upon clothes laid to pledge by every altar, and they drink the wine of the condemned in the house of their god (Amos 2:6-8).

I believe that you will agree that selling the poor for a pair of shoes and robbing

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widows of shelter takes covetousness to a whole new level. Clearly, their hearts were badly disjointed. Their hearts were on earthly riches rather than eternal reward. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus declared:

Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also (Mat. 6:19-21).

The Pharisees had their treasures on earth instead of in heaven. I believe that there are occasions in the gospel records that clearly establish this to be the case. One example that comes to mind is that of the rich young ruler. Although I don't know for sure that the rich young ruler was a Pharisee, I tend to think that he was. I know at least that he strictly adhered to the law as they prided themselves in doing (Mat. 19:16-20). Whether he was a Pharisee or not, I know that he was covetous like them. When Jesus told him to go and sell what he had and give it to the poor, he went away sorrowful because "he had great possessions" (Mat. 19:21-22). He loved his possessions more than his soul (Mat. 16:26). He allowed his love for earthly riches to keep him from entering the kingdom of God and enjoying eternal reward (Mat. 19:23-24).

Another example of valuing earthly riches more than eternal reward is recorded in the fifth chapter of Mark. As you may recall, there was a man living in the country of the Gadarenes that was possessed of an unclean spirit named Legion (Mark 5:1-9). With great power and pity, Jesus commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man and allowed him to enter into a herd of swine feeding nearby. The swine then proceeded to commit suicide by running down a steep place into the sea where they were drowned (Mark 5:10-13). When the people of the city heard of what Jesus did for the man and of what happened to the hogs, they began to pray for Him to leave their coasts (Mark 5:14-17). To me, this context has covetousness written all over it. Swine were unclean animals that no self-respecting Jew would touch or tend (Lev. 11:7; cf. Luke 15:11-16). Yet, they had a whole herd of them. Furthermore, please consider where they had them. They had the swine in a place that men avoided because of the man with the unclean spirit (Mat. 8:28). Their business was booming until Jesus paid a visit. Then, in a moment, it was gone. A suffering man was healed, but what mattered more to them was that a swine herd was killed. Jesus had to go. They loved earthly riches more than eternal reward. Their affections were on things on the earth rather than on things above.

Thankfully, there were those among the Pharisees who loved eternal reward more than earthly riches. A Pharisee named Nicodemus comes to mind. As you recall, when Jesus died, he brought costly spices to prepare the body of Jesus for burial (John 19:39). He seems to have loved the Lord more than he loved earthly riches. Of course, the greatest example of all is that of Paul who gave up everything to win Christ (Phil. 3:1-11). Even though he was often cold, naked, and hungry, he never regretted his decision (2 Cor. 11:27). He knew that there was eternal reward awaiting him (2 Tim. 4:6-8).

Conclusion

Because the Pharisees loved man's applause more than God's approval, human traditions more than heavenly truth, fleshly lineage more than spiritual heritage, and earthly riches more than heavenly reward, their hearts became separated from God. Of course, we must take heed lest we fall (1 Cor. 10:12). Our hearts can also become disjointed or separated from God. I believe that the warning given to saints in the third chapter of Hebrews is a fitting way to draw this study to a close:

Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God. But exhort one another daily, while it is called To day; lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin. For we are made partakers of Christ, if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast unto the end (Heb. 3:12-14).

Let's guard our hearts with all diligence (Prov. 4:23)!

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