

## Beware of Being a Pharisee

Matthew 23:1-39

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Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, 2 "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat, 3 so practice and observe whatever they tell you— but not what they do. For they preach, but do not practice. 4 They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger. 5 They do all their deeds to be seen by others. For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long, 6 and they love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues 7 and greetings in the marketplaces and being 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 call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven. 10 Neither be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Christ. 11 The greatest among you shall be your servant. 12 Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.

13 "But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. For you neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in. 15 Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel across sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves.

16 "Woe to you, blind guides, who say, 'If anyone swears by the temple, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath.' 17 You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that has made the gold sacred? 18 And you say, 'If anyone swears by the altar, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gift that is on the altar, he is bound by his oath.' 19 You blind men! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred? 20 So whoever swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. 21 And whoever swears by the temple swears by it and by him who dwells in it. 22 And whoever swears by heaven swears by the throne of God and by him who sits upon it.

23 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. 24 You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel!

25 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. 26 You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean.

27 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness. 28 So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

29 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and decorate the monuments of the righteous, 30 saying, 'If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we

would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.' 31 Thus you witness against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. 32 Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers. 33 You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell? 34 Therefore I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and persecute from town to town, 35 so that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of innocent Abel to the blood of Zechariah the son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar. 36 Truly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation.

37 "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not! 38 See, your house is left to you desolate. 39 For I tell you, you will not see me again, until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'"

It has always fascinated me when a product becomes so much a part of the culture that it is used interchangeably or synonymously for all products. In business it is incredibly desirable to dominate the market such that your brand is the premier label. A few examples:

- If you were raised in the South you probably called all carbonated beverages a "Coke"
- For years making a photocopy was instead called a Xerox
- Taking a picture used be called taking a polaroid
- Even now to search the internet is often referred as "Google it"

In Matthew 23 we find another kind of brand – the spiritual sort. It is so directly connected to hypocrisy and religious fraudulence that it is used as a synonym for them. Of course you know what word or title I'm talking about: A Pharisee. If someone gets in your face and say, "You are such a Pharisee" you know exactly what they are saying.

There is no series of verses with a stronger warning or a more robust description of the problem of religious hypocrisy than our text today. It is a long and blistering series of statements as to what it looks like to be Pharisee which includes seven famous "Woes." I wanted to take all thirty-nine verses at once so that you get a big-picture sense of what Jesus is saying here.

### **Traits of a Pharisee**

Taken together they give us some important characteristics of what it a Pharisee looks like. I've summarized the content here with 12 traits, and I would encourage all of us (including myself) to look for these signs. See them as early warning signs:

#### **1. They do not practice what they preach (v 3)**

Jesus begins Matthew 23 with a summary statement that over-arches the entire chapter. He says that the scribes and Pharisees sit on Moses's seat, which was a position of spiritual authority, and he seems to acknowledge the value of their role as interpreters of the Law. It may be that since they are talking about and handling sacred Scripture, even the Pharisees have some value.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, Jesus says that while they may be able to learn something from the teaching of the Pharisees, they should not model their lives after the Pharisees. Jesus says, "Do not do what they do. For they preach, but do not practice." (v 3)

The inconsistency between what is said or taught and what is practiced is **the** most defining, tragic, and troubling characteristic of the Pharisees. They tell people to do certain things, but they do not in fact practice them. This is hypocrisy at another level. It is one thing to pretend to be something that you are not. But it is another to teach people, to tell them what to do, to preach to them while at the same time failing to do the very thing that you are talking about. There are few things that make people angrier than this, and it is a sober warning to all of us who teach people anything but especially the Scriptures. That is why James 3:1 says "not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness," and why Paul said in 1 Timothy 4:16 "keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching."

You might wonder how does this happen? Surely they know better, and they do. The answer lies in the second trait.

## **2. They give themselves exceptions (v 4)**

The second characteristic is found in verse four where it says that they "tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders but they are themselves are not willing to move them with their finger." The image is really clear. They are constantly putting heavy loads on people's backs even when it seems that the loads are very hard to bear. But when it comes to them bearing the weight themselves they are unwilling to even touch them with their finger. Do you see this in your mind? It would be like preparing to go on a long hike, and your friend has loaded all the gear in your sack. But he is carrying nothing. However, that isn't the full image. Imagine that a flashlight falls out of your pack, and while you have a heavy load on your back you ask your friend to pick it up and hand it to you. However, he refuses citing some lame excuse as to why he can't help.

The problem is that the Pharisees give themselves exceptions. Even though it is incredibly unfair and inconsistent, they feel justified in what they are doing. In order for that to happen something else has to trump what is obvious. Somehow they convince themselves that they are the exception or their circumstances are unique or they have justification in what they are doing. Whatever it is, they balance the scales with something. They think that they been so

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<sup>1</sup> Others take this to be an element of sarcasm (Carson), but given the very direct tone and the absence of sarcasm in Matthew 23, it seems best to take it at face value.

good, sacrificed so much, endured so much, or been at this so long that they are justified in their inconsistency. At the root of this is their performance mentality. They believe that something about them or what they do gives them the right to not be like everyone else. They believe that they are special, different, and exceptional.

### **3. They are focused on appearances (v 5)**

The third characteristic is that they are focused on maintaining appearances. Specifically, they desire to maintain an image of spirituality. Since their religious practice such that they do not practice what they preach and is internally inconsistent, they have to work hard at maintaining the appearance of something that they are not. Don't miss this. They spend a lot of energy on giving people the right impression.

Jesus illustrates this by referring to the way that they made their "phylacteries broad and their fringes long." (v 7) The Old Testament (Ex 13:9, Deut 6:8,11,18) commanded the people to bind the words of God a sign upon their hand and to be frontlets between their eyes. They took this so literally that they placed little pieces of Scripture in small boxes that they wore on their arms and on their foreheads during prayer three times a day. What they did here was to make the prayer boxes bigger and to wear them beyond the times of prayer. The Old Testament also commanded that corners of their robes should feature tassels to remind them about God's commandments (see Num 15:39-39). However, they made the tassels longer than everyone else.

Do you see what they are doing here? Therefore they still do good deeds, and it is all under the banner of obedience. But the real god is themselves. Pharisees use something that was supposed to draw attention to God to draw attention to themselves. In subtle ways they add something to religious activity designed to impress you: "In my devotions this morning **at 4:30 AM**, I was reading...", "We can't wait to see how the Lord is going to bless our **15% giving this year...**" or "Last night in our **2 hour family devotions...**" Or they over spiritualize everything, make everything about spiritual warfare, or constantly cite chapter and verse on particular passages even though they only know a few. And the point of all of this is to make you think that they are very spiritual.

### **4. They love to be respected (vv 6-7)**

The focus on appearances quickly takes on a new and official level. The Pharisees loved the place of honor at feasts, the best seats in the synagogue, and being called Rabbi in the marketplaces. These positions and titles are so important to them because they feed the same internal desire that we just mentioned. The Pharisees love honorable positions because it officially says, "We're impressed." And the real problem lurking under the surface is the fact that Pharisees are not able to separate who they are from the positions that they hold. Their

whole sense of identity is wrapped up in their spiritual position. Threatening that is what led Jesus to be killed.

Notice what Jesus says to his disciples after this. They are to keep in mind who they are and to value to the importance of humility as the pathway to true greatness. He warns them about making too much about their spiritual role in the lives of others:

8 But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers. 9 And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven. 10 Neither be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Christ. 11 The greatest among you shall be your servant. 12 Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.

### **5. They hinder people spiritually (v 13)**

The next trait begins the "Seven Woes," and it is one of the most tragic. Jesus says that they actually "shut the kingdom of heaven in people's faces." They are not only deceiving themselves but all those who would follow them. They are a spiritual hindrance.

This often happens in two different ways. First, it happens as a Pharisee begins to influence others to embrace a performance-oriented pursuit of God. In the name of "being religious" the Pharisee leads people away from a grace-based relationship. Secondly, the blatant inconsistency in his or her life becomes a huge turn-off for those who might have become followers themselves.

### **6. They are dangerously persuasive (v 15)**

The error of the Pharisees would be tragic enough, but the other problem is that the Pharisee is often dangerously and even aggressively persuasive. Connected to the appearance and being respected issue is the fact that attracting followers or disciples only adds fuel to spiritual pride that lies underneath. Converting others to their ways emboldens them, almost as if it convinces them that they are right ("I can't be wrong if this many people follow me").

Jesus's take on their actions is so different. He says, "And when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves." The convert is twice as much because often the converted are even more radical than those who do the converting. Therefore, Jesus warns about the need to be somewhat suspicious of religious zeal. In other words, just because a person is passionate doesn't mean that they are right.

### **7. They are spiritually unbalanced (vv 16-22)**

Next we see a rather silly example of how distorted their view of religion really is. Jesus calls them "blind guides and blind fools" in verses 16-17 because they made a distinction between

swearing by the temple verses swearing by the gold of the temple and a distinction between swearing by the altar verses the gift that is on the altar. In other words their exceptionalism and their legalism combined to create strange standards for what true obedience looked like, and in so doing they missed the forest for the trees.

Once again we see that their obedience missed the heart of what God was looking for. They were unbalanced and failed to keep the proper religious perspective.

### **8. They are busy in the wrong things (vv 23-24)**

The unbalanced obedience of the Pharisees caused them to still be very active, very busy. But the problem is that they are busy in the wrong things. Verse 23 says that they were so focused on technical obedience in certain areas, but they neglected other more important areas. They were known for figuring out the exact cost of how much they should give in regards to their spices, but they neglected other things like justice, mercy, and faithfulness. They were content to be very busy figuring out the cost on things that weren't really that costly while they left the really costly things undone, and in so doing Jesus says that they strain out a gnat and swallow a camel (v 24).

Justice, mercy, and faithfulness are very costly ideas when you really live them out. And I hope that you realize that it is way too easy to balance the guilty-ridden scales with being busy in other things, especially spiritual things. Oh, it is so easy! We can take good things that we do and use them as the justification for neglecting other more important areas. We can get to be so busy serving, giving, and worshipping that we neglect the very heart of what Jesus is looking for while at the same time feeling very justified because of all that we do. "I gave at the office" is not our excuse; it is "I've already served enough."

### **9. They are not focused on the heart (vv 25-28)**

The ninth characteristic that Jesus addresses is the issue of the heart. He says that the Pharisees are busy cleaning the outside of the cup and that they are like whitewashed tombs. In both cases there is an external perception of cleanliness but the inside is very revealing and disturbing. In verse 25, Jesus indicates that their clean cups have the disgusting contents of greed and self-indulgence. In verse 27, Jesus says that they are like beautiful tombs that are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness. He is focusing on the problem of externals at a whole new level here.

Jesus knows that the Pharisees refuse to deal with the fact that they have huge problems in their hearts. Their lives seem neat, orderly, well-kept, and righteous, but if the curtain of their lives was pulled back, people would see the ugly picture of what is really going on. The Pharisees neglect the heart. This is one of the most telling differences between Jesus and the

Pharisees. He is relentlessly aiming for the heart, trying to take the established religious system and get to the core.

If you were looking for one area to identify as a preventative against becoming like the Pharisees, I would tell this: focus on your heart. Never be content with external obedience, actions, or service alone. Be honest about your heart. Know and be scared about where your heart could go and has gone. Realize that the only real hope that you'll not be guilty of the rank hypocrisy of the Pharisees is to throw yourself at the mercy of Jesus because he's the only one who can actually deal with and change heart problems.

### **10. They are over-confident (vv 29-32)**

We're getting close the end of the list, but Jesus takes an even tougher tone. He rebukes the Pharisees for their spiritual over-confidence. In verse 29 Jesus says that they pay honor to the past, but they don't learn from history. Instead they look at those who have gone before them through a judgmental lens. They actually think that they are better everyone, including those in history. They say, "If we had lived in the days of our fathers we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets." (v 30) In other words, they think that they would have been different and better than those that they read about. They look at the spiritual disasters in their history, and they believe that they would not have joined the crowd. They believe that they would have listened.

They are grossly over-confident. They certainly would not have been any different as anyone else because they are not listening now! This is the common path of a Pharisee – to view the past through a critical lens while at the same time not listening to what God is saying now. It is far too easy to play "Monday-morning quarterback." What on earth makes them think that they would listen back then when they don't listen now? Their over-confidence has blinded them to both who they are and lessons from the past. Thus Jesus says, "Fill up, then, the measure of your Fathers." (v 32) They are no different despite what they think.

This leads us to an important question: what do you feel and hear when we talk about the Pharisees? Do you think, "How could they be like that?" Or do you think, "In what ways am I like that?" Do you think, "How could they be so over-confident?" Or do you ask yourself, "Am I like that?" Do you think, "Why didn't they listen?" Or do you ask yourself, "Do I listen?"

### **11. They are under judgment (vv 33-36)**

This characteristic is really scary! Jesus tells them that they are presently under judgment with more to come. His statement here is predictive of what will come:

33 You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell? 34 Therefore I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will

flog in your synagogues and persecute from town to town, 35 so that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of innocent Abel to the blood of Zechariah the son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar. 36 Truly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation.

They are guilty of rejecting God's prophets, and they will bear the consequences. Their sin will be named among the dark history of Israel ("from Abel to Zechariah") since they will reject their own Savior! And what led to this? It was religious hypocrisy that led to the greatest crime in the universe.

## **12. They grieve the heart of Jesus (vv 37-38)**

Finally, we see the heart of Jesus come through so clearly! Jesus pulls back his rebuke from the Pharisees specifically and addresses the sacred city of God that was filled with religious hypocrisy.

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!

Notice the heart and compassion of our Savior here. He wants to lovingly and gently gather the people to his heart, but their hardened, proud, self-justifying, and non-listening hearts would have nothing to do with him. Therefore, the only thing left is judgment: "38 See, your house is left to you desolate. 39 For I tell you, you will not see me again, until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'" They won't listen; all that is left is judgment – sadly so.

This concludes a blistering list of twelve characteristics of the Pharisees specifically and religious hypocrisy generally. I only have one question for you: Where are you on this list?

I'm not asking **if** you are on this list. I'm asking **which** of these twelve apply to you? I'm asking you to look at your heart today. I'm asking you to ask yourself to what extent do you resemble the very kind of people that you'd never want to be – the Pharisees! I'm asking you to ask yourself if you have truly run to Christ for the forgiveness of your sins?

And if you have, be careful – be very, very careful – that you not fall into the trap of religious hypocrisy. Be watchful – be very, very watchful – of your heart because the murder of the Son of God came at the hands of religious people who had convinced themselves that they were doing God's will. Beware lest you be another Pharisee.

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