

The Pharisees (Part 1)

Their Origin and Traits

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There is one group in the New Testament that receives almost universal condemnation. In fact, I believe there is only one or two times where anything good is said about them. Usually, those are just specific individuals and not the group as a whole.

In fact, only upon one group in the New Testament does Jesus pronounce a "Woe!" And in this case, He pronounces eight of them at one time!

True, He does pronounce woes generally to groups like the towns of Chorazin and Bethsaida for not receiving Him and not repenting after seeing His miracles. He pronounces a general woe on those who cause offense and He also pronounces a woe on those who are pregnant during the tribulation.

But, in this particular case, He zeroes in on one group specifically and takes a quite unsparing and caustic approach with them. I am sure that you already know who I am talking about. This group is the Pharisees. In this sermon, and the next, we are going to find out who the Pharisees are.

Why do they come under such withering condemnation from Jesus? And, most importantly, what can we learn to avoid their unrighteous example? What can we learn from them so that we will not act and live and behave as they did?

I would like to begin by going over the history of the Pharisees and their origins in Nehemiah 8. Many historians believe that this little situation here in Nehemiah is the ultimate beginning of the sect of the Pharisees.

Nehemiah 8:1-8 Now all the people gathered together as one man in the open square that was in front of the Water Gate; and they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded Israel. So Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly of men and women and all who could hear with understanding on the first day of the seventh month. [The day of Trumpets.] Then he read from it in the open square that was in front of the Water Gate from morning until midday, before the men and women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law. So Ezra the scribe stood on a platform of wood which they had made for the purpose; and

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beside him, at his right hand, stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Urijah, Hilkiah, and Maaseiah; and at his left hand Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hashbadana, Zechariah, and Meshullam. And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up. And Ezra blessed the LOORD, the great God. Then all the people answered, "Amen, Amen!" while lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads and worshiped the LOORD with their faces to the ground. Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodijah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, and the Levites, helped the people to understand the Law; and the people stood in their place. So they read distinctly from the book, in the Law of God; and they gave the sense, and helped them to understand the reading.

So, this is the beginning of a people during the time of Ezra, after the return from Babylon, who were eager to learn about what God said in the law and to have people explain it to them—interpret it for them.

And so, from this descended the scribes, which Ezra was. They were teachers of the law—interpreters of the Law—helping the people to get the understanding of what the law was trying to say. Also the people themselves that were part of this group and wanted this to take place, were the Hasidim. That name has come on down to today in the Hasidic Jews. They are the more orthodox and pious of the Jews, because that is what the name Hasidim means—the pious ones.

This started innocently and sincerely enough. These people were very zealous for the Law and really wanted to learn. You can see that they were very respectful of the law. When Ezra got up to read it they stood up. And they stood up the whole time that it was being read.

They learned a great deal that they had not known or had forgotten through the time that they had been in Babylon. So, it started out in a very godly manner, especially under Ezra. Ezra was the one whom God used for this very purpose, to get the people back to understanding the right way to live.

The people decide after a short while that they are going to make a covenant to bind themselves to this very thing.

Nehemiah 10:28-39 Now the rest of the people—the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, the Nethinim, and all those who had separated

themselves from the peoples of the lands to the Law of God, their wives, their sons, and their daughters, everyone who had knowledge and understanding—these joined with their brethren, their nobles, and entered into a curse and an oath to walk in God's Law, which was given by Moses the servant of God, and to observe and do all the commandments of the LOORD our Lord, and His ordinances and His statutes: We would not give our daughters as wives to the peoples of the land, nor take their daughters for our sons; if the peoples of the land brought wares or any grain to sell on the Sabbath day, we would not buy it from them on the Sabbath, or on a holy day; and we would forego the seventh year's produce and the exacting of every debt. Also we made ordinances for ourselves, to exact from ourselves yearly one-third of a shekel for the service of the house of our God: for the showbread, for the regular grain offering, for the regular burnt offering of the Sabbaths, the New Moons, and the set feasts; for the holy things, for the sin offerings to make atonement for Israel, and all the work of the house of our God. We cast lots among the priests, the Levites, and the people, for bringing the wood offering into the house of our God, according to our fathers' houses, at the appointed times year by year, to burn on the altar of the LOORD our God as it is written in the Law. And we made ordinances to bring the firstfruits of our ground and the firstfruits of all fruit of all trees, year by year, to the house of the LOORD; to bring the firstborn of our sons and our cattle, as it is written in the Law, and the firstborn of our herds and our flocks, to the house of our God, to the priests who minister in the house of our God; to bring the firstfruits of our dough, our offerings, the fruit from all kinds of trees, the new wine and oil, to the priests, to the storerooms of the house of our God; and to bring the tithes of our land to the Levites, for the Levites should receive the tithes in all our farming communities. And the priest, the descendant of Aaron, shall be with the Levites when the Levites receive tithes; and the Levites shall bring up a tenth of the tithes to the house of our God, to the rooms of the storehouse. For the children of Israel and the children of Levi shall bring the offering of the grain, of the new wine and the oil, to the storerooms where the articles of the sanctuary are, where the priests who minister and the gatekeepers and the singers are; and we will not neglect the house of our God.

The most important thing about this whole section is in the very first verse where it said, "that they separated themselves from the peoples of the land to the Law of God."

This is the key to the Pharisees. This is their beginning. This is the actual beginning of

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the Hasidim—the pious ones mentioned before—but the Pharisees use the idea of separated. Not this Hebrew word, but another, Pharishim, I believe. And it is from this Hebrew word that the Greek word, and therefore English word Pharisee comes from.

Pharisee means, "separated ones."

Now there are various ideas of what separated came to mean here, should you read the commentaries. But, it has become apparent that there is really only one meaning to it, and that is that they are separated to the law.

It does not mean that they were separated from other people, although that is how it came to be looked upon later. It started out very well, that they separated themselves as holy to God and the law. This was their goal, that they would be a unique people unto God.

Like I said, it started out all very sincerely, and very innocently. People wanted to do what was right, and they originally called themselves the Hasidim, the pious ones; and over time they took the name (or it was given to them), the Pharisees—the separated ones, because they separated themselves to this noble goal to follow the law of God. Nothing was wrong with that.

So, originally it had a very flattering meaning because it was a mark of devotion to God and the law.

If you would look in Malachi 3:16, some believe that those people that got together in the fear of God to discuss things with one another were these very people who are commended very highly there in verses 16 and 17.

But, over time as the Pharisees began to take on their historical traits, the ones that we know them for, this word "Pharisee" devolved into a critical one that we might also use today, "Separatists" or "Elitists". Not only did they become separated to the law, they separated themselves from the rest of the people. They began to think of themselves very highly as more holy and righteous than anyone else, and it went to their head.

Now, we have seen here in Nehemiah 10 the specific parts of the law that they dedicated themselves to. I will give them to you in four very simple categories.

The first category is found in verses 28-30 in different forms, which is that they separated themselves away from foreigners, heretics, and from the base. It says here that they separated themselves away from the peoples of the lands.

Now remember when Israel was taken in to captivity that the Assyrians brought in people from Babylon and elsewhere to their land. These became the Samaritans over time. They mingled those who were left in the land after the Babylonian captivity. And so "the people of the land" came to mean all these people who were not set apart to God. They were non-Israelites living in the land. Foreigners, of course, were Gentiles straight up.

Heretics they would not touch because they were unclean. They were doing things against the law of God. And the base are those who are seen as beneath them, who worked in unclean activities, like the tanner that Peter went to in Joppa. Tanning was not an activity that a Pharisee would take because he had to deal with dead bodies of animals all the time—tanning skins of animals, making leather. And so, he would be unclean all the time. And so, this person—a tanner—would be avoided by the Pharisee because he would make him unclean.

The second category is taken from verse 31 and is the strict observance of the Sabbath, and everything having to do with it. Of course, they got to the point where they had 1500 or so regulations just having to do with the Sabbath alone. They became very meticulous about keeping the Sabbath. They could only walk a "Sabbath day's journey." They could not carry a needle and thread both at the same time on the Sabbath; or they could only carry so much weight on them equal to only so many grains of barley.

They got down to the most minute details about keeping the Sabbath day. They followed this very strictly. But, only the most pious of them were ever able to do most of them. They had gotten it down to such detail that even they could not keep their own regulations.

The third category, which begins in verse 32, is the support of the Temple and its services and rituals. This included anything which had to do with anything clean and unclean, not just meats, but vessels and other things; all the washings that they did to make sure that they were always ceremonially clean; and any other ritual of the Old Testament. This includes the phylacteries, tassels on the edges of the garments, and other such things.

The fourth category, which is the remainder of the chapter, is the strict observance of the tithing laws. They were very strict with these laws to the point that Jesus said that they tithed of mint, anise, and cumin—their kitchen herbs and vegetables—which is fine if they wanted to do it, but do not forget the weightier matters of the law.

To recap, we have separation from foreigners, heretics, and base peoples; strict

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observance of the Sabbath; support of the Temple and its services and rituals including the clean and unclean laws; and lastly the strict observance of the tithing laws. These were the four mainstays of their teaching and their observance.

Now later, all these were blown out of proportion even though they started out well. What developed from their interpretation of these laws and these other things was a huge compendium of laws—minutiae. This turned out, when it was all finished, to be more than 50 volumes of laws that had to do with regulations that tried to cover every situation so that a person could not break God's law even ignorantly. Everything was supposedly taken care of.

We call this today the oral law. Supposedly this law was handed down from Moses to the prophets and eventually down to the Great Synagogue. Most of it, as Jesus confirmed, though, was simply the traditions of men. We will get to that a little later. It was not the law of God or Moses, but their own interpretations. Jesus and the Pharisees clashed over this quite a bit.

Still regarding their history, the Pharisees as a party became distinct from the Hasidim during the revolt against Antiochus Epiphanes after about 165 BC. I believe the revolt ended in 164 BC when they were given their independence. They began to become more important as a political party after this time.

Now we think of the Pharisees as being a big group; that they must have been the majority of the people. But this is not true. Josephus says that at most, at any one time, there were only 6000 Pharisees in all the land of Israel.

Think about this. It becomes clear that he was right. How many people do you think—if we took the population of Charlotte to represent the people of Palestine—would separate themselves to follow God's law to this extent—to its minutiae—for the rest of their lives? How many people would have what it takes to devote themselves that much to something that was so picky and so fine, in terms of particular?

Now, I think that in an area like this where there is a couple million people that probably you would get maybe 10,000. But, probably not even that many who would devote themselves to this task. The Jews were no different than any group of people. There were only a few among them that would actually do this.

But, this 6000 people began very quickly after about 165 to rise to prominence and great power within the nation. This was because, just like in the United States with a different group (the liberals), the Pharisees were the teachers of the land, especially the

religious teachers. The scribes were foremost among them.

I have to mention here that the scribes and Pharisees were not the same. The scribes were the teachers and interpreters of the law. Some of the scribes were Pharisees. But, not all.

But normally the scribes and Pharisees ended up doing things together. They agreed a great deal. It was from the scribes' interpretations of the law that the Pharisees got the fodder for what they did.

So, the Pharisees were in the main very devout and pious laymen. It was the scribes that had an ordination of some sort. But, they worked together. They were allied in most cases. And that is why throughout the Gospels you find Jesus addressing scribes and Pharisees together because their views were very similar if not the same.

Because they were the teachers in the land and the influential people of the land as these devout laymen, they had the support of most of the population of Judea. Rulers, then, were forced by threat of popular uprising to consider what the Pharisees wanted them to do. The Pharisees held this serious threat of popular revolt over every ruler's head. "If you don't comply with what we do, we'll go out into the marketplace and into the synagogue and we'll tell them that you're not treating them fairly, and we'll riot, or revolt."

And so, this reached as high as the Sadducees, the priests, and the high priest. They had to toe the line with the Pharisees because they held so much power. That is why you see the Sadducees working together with the Pharisees at times. There was a political element involved so that the Pharisees and the Sadducees had to unite on certain issues so that the people would not revolt against them. So, that gives you a little idea of what was going on there; why they held so much power.

Now, as often happens, as a group's political power rises, their righteousness wanes! You might say that it became tainted, because now they had a vested interest in all sorts of matters. They wanted to keep their power. They were fearful of losing their power and influence over the people and over the whole country.

They were important men. They had to keep up appearances. They had to dress the dress, walk the walk, and talk the talk. They could not be seen as anything else but the image that they had built up.

And as so often occurs, the corruption of power began to take place. By the time Jesus

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appears on the scene, 150 years or so later, they had, in many ways, already become the caricature that we see in the New Testament.

William Barclay summarizes the Pharisees in this way: First of all, they were dedicated legalists. If you want to say anything about the Pharisees, this would have to be the first thing to say; they were dedicated legalists.

And then he goes on from there. Secondly, though zealous, and desperately earnest about their religion, they became one of two things: they became either, what he calls a desiccated (dried up—emotionless and without intellectual vigor), or arrogant legalist; or on the other hand they were sincerely devout believer—still a legalist, though.

The Talmud basically agrees with this assessment. But, they split it out into seven types of Pharisee. Most Pharisees fell into one of these seven categories of people.

I do not want you to think of this just in terms of Pharisees, think about this in terms of Christians as well, because they can mirror these same types of people.

The first is the Shoulder Pharisee.

This type of Pharisee wore his good deeds on his shoulder like a medal. He was the kind of person mentioned in Matthew 6:2 who trumpeted out his alms-giving in the street. "Look how good I am! I just gave this guy \$50 and he only asked for 25 cents. What a wonderful person I am!"

The second is the Wait-a-Little-Bit Pharisee. This kind of Pharisee always had a good excuse to put off a good deed. "Let's wait a minute. Let's see what happens first." He agrees in principle with what Pharisees taught, and believed, but his practice always fell a little bit short because he was never quite sure that he would be able to do anything; never quite sure if he wanted to. He had intellectual agreement, but there was very little practice.

The third is the Bruised and Bleeding Pharisee. This Pharisee suffered constant injury because of his meticulous avoidance of bumping into or speaking to a woman on the street. Women, in Pharisaic doctrine were bad, because they might be having their menstrual period. Though it was a natural thing, if you touched a bleeding woman, you would be unclean. And besides, were not they second class citizens anyway? This attitude worked out in many cases of divorces without a cause because women were nothing; they were pretty much chattel to them.

So, to avoid looking at, bumping into, or speaking to a woman, they would close their eyes, and trip, hit the wall, hit the floor, and end up being bruised and bleeding because they did not want to come in contact with these awful people.

If you look in John 4:27 you will find the same thing, that the disciples were surprised that Jesus was talking to a woman at the well. He was very amicable. He might have even touched her! Who knows! They were shocked! "Jesus is talking to a woman and she's a Samaritan, too! And you know what, the man she's living with isn't her husband. She's a prostitute—an adulterous woman!"

The fourth type of Pharisee is the Humped-back Pharisee. In public, he was always bowed over in feigned humility, which in reality was just self-advertising ostentation. So, he walked around with his head bowed. Like the Shoulder Pharisee, he wanted to be seen of men as humble. He probably got a few bumps and bruises himself also by always having his eyes looking down to the ground.

The fifth one is the Ever-Reckoning Pharisee. This was the "accountant" among the sect. He kept a balance sheet of his good deeds. "One for me, one for me, one for me, one for me—God why haven't You blessed me? Where is the one for You?" You see, according to his balance sheet with all his good deeds on it, God was in his debt. He had done so much for these people, he had done so much to keep His law, he had done some much to fulfill everything that God wanted him to do, God had to give him the things that he wanted. He was the "God, You-Owe-Me-One Pharisee." Every time he did something good, God sunk further and further into his debt.

The sixth Pharisees is the Timid Pharisee. This one you could feel a bit of pity for. This Pharisee lived in absolute dread of divine punishment. He was always searching the skies for lightning bolts. He thought that every miss-step that he did, every time he did not keep the law perfectly, something bad was going to happen. I think that this is probably where the "Jewish Angst" came from. "Oh no! Something's going to happen! We didn't light the Sabbath candle! I can't believe it! How could we do something so stupid? And now God is going to curse us for this!"

This kind of person believed religion was essentially judgment. They were synonymous. And so life, which God wants to be abundant life, becomes just an attempt to evade certain condemnation in any way that he could. Life was just a dodge to him, trying somehow to not be the target of that lightning bolt. He was quite meticulous, maybe the most meticulous of all the Pharisees because he was afraid that the other shoe would drop, always looking over his shoulder for the death angel.

And lastly, the seventh type of Pharisee, the best one of all, is the God-Fearing Pharisee. This was a truly righteous person. Probably a lot like Nicodemus in John 3 who sincerely loved God, and delighted in obedience; had a humble way about him; always seeking to know what God's will was, and trying his very best to follow it.

Now, is it not interesting that this is the Jew's own reckoning of the Pharisees. And, what is so ironic is that Rabbinic Judaism that is practiced today is Pharisaic. It is the descendant of the Pharisaic Judaism with changes due to the Diaspora. But, it is basically the same thing. They get their laws and restrictions from the same source. And even they consider the Pharisees to have been six times more likely to be frauds and hypocrites than truly righteous people. That is their own assessment, six to one.

Now Jesus had many confrontations with the Pharisees. The Pharisees considered Him a flaming liberal in His teaching and his practice, because He opened up all kinds of things to normal use and practice that they condemned. Just look into Matthew 12 where the disciples went out into the fields on the Sabbath and took a few heads of grain and winnowed them and popped them into their mouth. This broke all kinds of laws according to the Pharisees! They should not have even been near those fields. They had been walking too far on the Sabbath. They were not allowed to reap. They were not allowed to winnow. They were not allowed to eat of them.

And Jesus said, "You have got to be kidding! If you really knew the law, you would know that God said that He wants mercy and not sacrifice! If you had understood what this meant, you would be joining Me! You would have real understanding."

These confrontations happened all throughout the Gospels. And it is very interesting what they questioned Him about. They questioned Him about the Sabbath, just mentioned; they questioned Him about paying tithes, and taxes; "Should we pay taxes to Caesar?" Money was on their minds almost all the time. They questioned Him about failing to wash properly before eating. They questioned Him about consorting with Samaritans, prostitutes, tax-collectors, and various other low-class sinful types.

Think about this: Sabbath, tithes and taxes, failing to wash, and consorting with sinners. What are these four things? The exact same four things we saw listed in Nehemiah 10. They dedicated themselves to separation from other people who were not law keepers, the Sabbath, the Temple and its rituals, and to keeping the tithes.

Now, they questioned Him about other things, but these were the four main areas that they really homed in on. Healing for instance. They did not have a problem with Him healing, but they did have a problem with Him healing on the Sabbath.

So, these were the things that they really watched Him for. They wanted to catch Him break things in the law so that they could condemn Him. And they even said there in John that He breaks the Sabbath, which just shows that they did not understand it. He said in Mark 2:27-28 that He was the Lord of the Sabbath. He was not going to break it. As the Lord of the Sabbath, He could do whatever He pleased because He set the rules. It was His work going on, and He could do it. Of course, they did not believe who He was either. We will see that in a moment.

But, these are the things that they tried to catch Him on.

Matthew 12:38-42 Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered, saying, "Teacher, we want to see a sign from You." But He answered and said to them, "An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. "For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and indeed a greater than Jonah is here. The queen of the South will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and indeed a greater than Solomon is here.

Matthew 16:1-4 Then the Pharisees and Sadducees came, and testing Him asked that He would show them a sign from heaven. He answered and said to them, "When it is evening you say, 'It will be fair weather, for the sky is red'; "and in the morning, 'It will be foul weather today, for the sky is red and threatening.' Hypocrites! You know how to discern the face of the sky, but you cannot discern the signs of the times. "A wicked and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign shall be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah." And He left them and departed.

Now we know that the Pharisees were famous for asking for signs. Paul even mentions this in I Corinthians 1:22, "the Jews seek after a sign...." The Jews were primarily of the Pharisaic persuasion, if they were not Pharisees themselves. And they asked for this sign in order to prove Messianic claims.

In this case Jesus nails them. He does not even give them a chance to respond. Here especially in chapter 12, "An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign," He just hits them right between the eyes.

Now, evil and adulterous gives us a kind of sexual idea. But, a better word here than adulterous is unfaithful; "An evil and unfaithful generation seeks after a sign." He is calling them apostates. They were unfaithful to the very law that they said that they were trying to uphold.

Now, why do I say this? Well, for starters, the very law that they knew so well, specifically Deuteronomy 13, says very clearly that a person who does a sign is not necessarily from God. A sign means very little. Demons can do signs. They can make things seem miraculous.

What did God say through Moses was the way we are supposed to prove or determine whether a prophet is true or false? By what he taught! And, the fruits of his teaching. Remember in Deuteronomy 13 it mentions that if he tells people to go worship another god, whether he does a sign or not, it does not matter, kill the guy.

So the Pharisees asking for a sign were showing zero faith. That is why He calls them an evil and adulterous generation. They were showing no faithfulness to God's law. God's law said that the way that you check out a prophet is to listen to his teachings, and if they are what God teaches in the Old Testament, then this is a person you should listen to. Whether he does a sign or not does not matter.

John the Baptist did no miracles. But, he was certainly a great prophet by the things that he preached. He preached repentance. And he pointed people toward the Christ.

So, Jesus sent them back to their scriptures for their sign. He said, "If you don't get this, if you don't understand what I mean by "an evil and adulterous generation seeking after a sign," I'm going to give you one! And that sign was given 800 years ago in the book of Jonah. If you won't believe Jonah, you have condemned yourself."

That was the only sign that He ever gave them—out of the Old Testament.

He did give His disciples a sign later at the Mount of the Transfiguration. And they saw! But, it is very interesting that He did this after they showed Him that they were faithful to God's way of life, and God's Word. We will get to that in a little bit.

So, He basically says here, and in chapter 16 that the Pharisees were unfaithful to the very thing that they claimed devotion to—God's law. Their wickedness, then, exposed itself to their inability to recognize Him as the Prophet of Deuteronomy 18. Because they were looking for this miracle, they could not see that Jesus' teaching was exactly what

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God had given to Moses and the Prophets. They were blind to it. And, of course, it came out in their constant attempt to derail Him and trip Him up.

As we go through some of these confrontations—actually all of them that we get to—I am going to ask you a question to apply this personally. Here they are for this section.

Question: Are we looking for signs and miracles from God? Or, do we really believe His Word? You might say, "Do we need a miracle to make us believe? Or is God's Word enough?" It was ***not enough*** for the Pharisee. But for us, it should be.

Just a couple of pages over here, Matthew 15, we will read the first nine verses. I could spend an entire sermon on this one chapter, the first 20 verses; but we will read just the first nine:

Matthew 15:1 Then the scribes and Pharisees who were from Jerusalem came to Jesus, saying,

Now this is interesting that they sent a delegation all the way from Jerusalem to try to trip Him up here.

Matthew 15:2 "Why do Your disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread."

"(Gasp!) These people are unclean! Who knows what they got out there in the marketplace!"

Now listen to Him nail them against the wall, again:

Matthew 15:3-9 He answered and said to them, "Why do you also transgress the commandment of God because of your tradition? "For God commanded, saying, 'Honor your father and your mother'; and, 'He who curses father or mother, let him be put to death.' "But you say, 'Whoever says to his father or mother, "Whatever profit you might have received from me [has been dedicated to the Temple] is a gift to God"—then he need not honor his father or mother.' Thus you have made the commandment of God of no effect by your tradition. Hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy about you, saying: 'These people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. And in vain they worship Me,

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teaching as doctrines the commandments of men."

Now, this is a rather similar confrontation to the one that we just read. They criticized Him and His disciples for failing to keep the oral law, which they called the traditions of the elders, which included very strict guidelines on various washings of both the self and various vessels.

I would like to read a little bit from William Barclay about some of these guidelines, just a short paragraph, just to give you some of the flavor of the strictness of these guidelines. Reading here from page 295 of the *Matthew Volume*, William Barclay's *Daily Study Bible Series* he writes:

An earthen vessel, which is hollow, becomes unclean only on the inside and not on the outside. And, it can be cleansed only by being broken. . .

Then it is useless.

The following cannot become unclean at all: A flat plate without a rim; an open coal shovel; a gridiron with holes in for parching grains of wheat. On the other hand a plate with a rim, or an earthen spice box, or a writing case can become unclean. A flat vessel made of leather, bone, wood, or glass do not become unclean. Deep ones do. If they are broken, they become clean. Any metal vessel which at once is smooth and hollow can become unclean, but a door, a bolt, a lock, a hinge, or a knocker cannot become unclean. If a thing is made of wood, and metal, then the wood can become unclean, but the metal cannot.

That is just a little bit of these regulations that they had dedicated themselves—separated themselves—to follow. They had to keep this all in their head so that at any time that they came into contact with anything, they had to make a determination whether touching it would make them unclean or not.

There was a problem if one did not know the history of such an object because if touching it whether clean or not might make the person unclean because he did not know! And so they had to keep all these things straight in their minds.

Now, this idea of clean and unclean has almost nothing to do with hygiene. There was

certainly a little bit in there. I mean, it is a good idea to wash your hands after you have touched the dog and been outside before you eat your dinner. That is just common sense.

But, this ritual of clean and unclean washings, and whatnot, had really very little to do with their own cleanliness. It had everything to do with ritual cleanliness and purity—whether they were holy enough to use this certain thing, or whether they were holy enough after using it—to worship God, because if they were ceremonially unclean, then they could not do their prayers properly. They could not go into the Temple.

So, then they had to go through all the washings in order to become clean again, but it did not take effect until the evening.

There were a lot of these little things that they had to know.

Now, if you would read Haggai 2:10-14, it asks a question about something touching a clean thing and something touching an unclean thing. What comes out of that small section is this: Uncleaness could be transferred from vessel to person or garment to person, etc., but holiness could not.

So, a thing that was unclean had to be broken, or somehow made clean, including one's person. Then, if you touched any of these unclean things, you would be unclean, and it would keep you from worshipping God.

Now, if you think about it in the land at that time it would be almost impossible not to become defiled, especially when they thought that even the dust that was touched by a Gentile foot rendered the dust unclean!

And so, if you were walking through the streets of a Judean town, and a Gentile just happened to be going through, and you were on the same street with him, and he was ahead of you, and your poor little toes were peeking out of your sandals, and they just happened to touch the dust of the ground, you were now ceremonially unclean!

So, what did they do? Well, the ritual washings came into effect.

Let me read a bit more from Barclay about that. This is from the same commentary, page 114, where he talks about these ritual washings which were vitally important—they were life and death—to these superstitious Pharisees.

To combat uncleaness an elaborate system of washings was worked out. .

Notice. This is not in the Bible. This was worked out.

These washings became ever more elaborate. At first there was a hand washing upon rising in the morning. [You just never know where your hands were during the night!] Then, there grew up an elaborate system of hand washing whose use was at first confined to the priests in the Temple before they ate that part of the sacrifice which was their perquisite. Later, these complicated washings came to be demanded by the strictest of the Orthodox Jews for themselves, and for all who claimed to be truly righteous.

Edersheim, in the "Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah, outlines the most elaborate of these washings: 'Water jars were kept ready to be used before a meal. The minimum amount of water to be used was a quarter of a log which is defined as enough to fill one and one-half eggshells. [6-7 eggs make a cup. This was about 1/4 cup.] The water was first poured on both hands which were held with the fingers pointed upward, and must run up the arm [which is actually downward] toward the elbow at least as far as the wrist. [So you had to keep it so that it would run down the hand only as far as the wrist.] It must drop off from the wrist for the water itself was now unclean having touched the unclean hands, and if it ran back across the fingers again, it would render them unclean again! [So don't let your hands drop! Make sure the water dropped off your wrist!] The process was repeated with the hands held in the opposite direction with the fingers pointing down. Finally each hand was cleansed by being rubbed with the fist of the other. A really strict Jew would do all this not only before a meal, but also between each of the courses!

Could you imagine doing all that?

This was the sort of thing that Jesus was combating. And Jesus replied to them about these ritual washings, "Why do you break God's law to keep your silly man-made regulations?"

That is basically what He said, "Why do you also transgress the commandment of God because of your traditions?" He is saying, "What is the source for those stupid things you tell My disciples they need to do? Where did you get those washings? Why are they

so much more important than My law?"

And then He gives this example of what Mark calls *corban*. Here, Matthew does not use the term. But, what He says is that because of their stupid regulations they had basically allowed the people under this situation to break the fifth commandment with impunity.

In modern language it would be, "Sorry Mom, and Dad. I've got no money for your old age. I've put it in mutual funds. Too bad. This money has been dedicated to the mutual funds and so can be used for you. Sorry. You guys have to go live in the street."

Where is honoring one's father and mother? Jesus said that by doing this, they basically were cursing their parents.

In this case, it was the religious leaders saying that the money that you dedicated to the Temple becomes *corban*—it is cursed or dedicated—it cannot be used for anything else, even helping your own.

So, people could dedicate this money to the Temple and basically give their parents the shaft. And they were guiltless in the Pharisaic system. This is a terrible thing. But, they were allowed to do this.

So, the practice of their traditions have basically made the Word of God ineffectual.

As He said there in verse 9, "their teachings make the worship of God futile, and worthless, because they are not really worshipping Him. That is what He tells them. "In vain do they worship Me" because they are not really worshipping Him. What are they worshipping? They are worshipping themselves, or their ideals; their elders, you might say, a kind of ancestor worship where they put the elders above even God; and their traditions. They are not worshipping God.

Jesus goes on to explain there in verses 10 through 20 that their sin was in their self-righteous externalism which failed to do anything about their internal sinfulness. All they were worried about was the outside—their appearance.

Their little eggshell and a half of water did not clean them. It just looked like they were clean. And, because they had sanctified this little ritual, they felt clean. But, Jesus tells them that they were not clean, because inside them were evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, and blasphemies. Those were the things on the inside that were never touched by the water. But, they had convinced themselves that their little rituals justified them—made them clean, and able to approach God, when

all it did was get their hands wet.

Beyond this, all their teaching of this blather, this drivel to the people was very sinful.

Matthew 5:19-20 "Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.

The things that they were teaching were driving the Jews who listened to them to disaster. And the things that we need to learn, that they should have been teaching, were not being taught. They were teaching all this externalism and never getting to where the defilement really was. It was inside them in their character. But, they just hypocritically ignored this and felt justified because they took such care to wash their bowls, and their hands.

So the question for us is are we wearing our obedience like a medal? Like that shoulder Pharisee? Or considering ourselves pure and holier than others? Are we separating ourselves from those who do not practice religion with the same fervor and devotion that we do, just because we do something that they do not do? Are we looking at external problems in others, like these Pharisees were doing to Jesus and the disciples, rather than concentrating on our own internal sins?

That is the question! Are we separating ourselves in sin?

I got through basically what I normally get through, and I have got another sermon here. My notes do not even go to Matthew 23, so this will definitely be a two part series. There is a great deal that I have not gotten to, but I will get to that the next time I speak, which I believe will be about March 13.

I hope you all have a wonderful Sabbath.

Speaking about the Pharisees, the next message will not be a happier sermon, but hopefully we can learn a great deal from these people's mistakes!