

The Pharisees (Part 2)

Confrontations and Pitfalls

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Last time we spoke about the Pharisees. We spoke mostly about their origins, and some of their characteristics. We saw that they were one of the main groups that stood in opposition to Jesus throughout His ministry. In just about every case their leading questions exposed their inability to understand some concept that we may consider very simple, especially matters regarding the spirit of the law. They just could not see. This forced Jesus to reprimand them or correct them harshly. Sometimes He just let the hammer down on them, and exposed their ignorance and their distance from God.

If you will notice in John 3:10, where Nicodemus came to see Jesus, he said something to Him.

John 3:1-2 There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. [So Nicodemus, whom we consider a good guy, was a Pharisee.] This man came to Jesus by night...

Which is interesting. He came surreptitiously, maybe not wanting others to know that he came to ask Jesus questions.

Then, after this discussion regarding "born again":

John 3:10 Jesus answered and said to him, "Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things?"

It was almost as if Jesus was incredulous that someone with this much "spiritual education," who supposedly had his nose in God's Word, had still not picked up anything about being born again from the Old Testament! There needed to be a regeneration!

Instead, Nicodemus, like the other Pharisees, was ignorant of this. He asked Him some really silly questions! "*You mean I have to go back into my mother's womb?*"

Come on!

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He took it all very physically. Jesus was speaking on a much higher level, and so He had to call Nicodemus down for a statement like this. "*Come on, Nicodemus! You are smarter than this! You should know this!*"

And, of course, evidently Nicodemus did learn and ends up being one of the good guys—one of the Pharisees who was converted and became a fine Christian man from what we know.

But, somehow, somewhere in the intervening several hundred years from the time that the Pharisees started—we will review Nehemiah 10 just to rehearse this a bit—they had gotten off track and began to miss everything to the right and the left.

So, here we are in Nehemiah 10 where they make a covenant. It was a truly righteous covenant (at the time)—to do what is right and follow God's way:

Nehemiah 10:28-29 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 LORD our Lord, and His ordinances and His statutes:

Like I said, they start out well enough. This was a good thing that they made a vow, a covenant, that they would do this—that they would dedicate themselves to keeping God's law, His statutes and His ordinances as well as they knew them.

And under Ezra, I am sure that they did well. Ezra was a righteous man. He is never, in the Bible, in any way castigated for being overzealous for the law or being self-righteous. Evidently, he had the right balance on all of these things.

But, over time somehow they began to lose their focus on what was actually right. They began to lose their balance.

They began to interpret the law so minutely and so rigidly, that it became absolutely impossible to keep. And as Jesus said, they placed unbearable burdens upon the people. This is said in several places. The most well known place is probably Matthew 23 where they placed great burdens on the people, but they would not lift a finger to

help decrease their load.

So, all in all, if you want to kind of put them in a box as far as their characteristics, they were dedicated legalists. And though they were quite zealous and earnest about their religion—please note: It was their religion, not God's religion. Even though founded in God's law, it ceased to be godly once it got past a certain point where they were doing all these things. We will find out later that it actually ended up in wickedness.

But, they were zealous and earnest about their religion, but they were hypocritically and self-righteously traditional and close-minded.

What I mean by "traditional" is that they (as we saw in Matthew 15) held the traditions of men to be of higher importance than the commandments of God. They were traditional and close-minded, if you want to pigeonhole them. But of course, I will not stop there. I want to back that up with several examples.

And that is what we are going to do today, go through several examples of the Pharisees and their confrontations with Jesus. But we are going to start with one that was a confrontation with John the Baptist in Matthew 3.

And it looks like I will not be able to get to Matthew 23 today. I had so much material left over from the last sermon that I was able to add one or two more examples and fill out today's sermon. We will take the time of another sermon, probably at the end of April, to go over Matthew 23 because there is plenty of ammunition there to last a whole sermon.

Matthew 3—this is John the Baptist in the wilderness as he is baptizing:

Matthew 3:5-12 Then Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the region around the Jordan went out to him and were baptized by him in the Jordan, confessing their sins. But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, "Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? "Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, "and do not think to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as *our* father.' For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones. "And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. "I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. "His winnowing fan *is* in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather His wheat into the barn;

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but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

Now what we see here is that the whole area of Judea, maybe all of Palestine, certainly all of the area around Jerusalem were caught up in the ministry of John the Baptist. And, many of them were coming out to be baptized of him.

Baptism was not a new thing. But, normally, baptism was done only by proselytes to cleanse them of their gentile-ness one might say, as part of the initiation process into the covenant.

Now for John the Baptist to baptize Jews was a radical thing. Jews were already circumcised. They did not need an initiation into the covenant. And so what he explains is that his baptism was unto repentance. His baptism was one of purification beyond the washings that the Pharisees and the rest of them did. This was something that was done one time as an outward sign of repentance from those dead works as we see in Hebrews 6:1.

Jesus obviously thought that this was a good thing. He came to this very same man to be baptized Himself as a way to fulfill all righteousness as it says there in verse 15.

But, it was a shock to see these Pharisees and Sadducees coming down to the river seemingly to be baptized, because the Pharisees and the Sadducees would normally think that this is an unnecessary practice. They did not need it because they were already initiated into the covenant through circumcision. He does not even let them say yes or no about baptism. He launches into them as soon as he sees them!

"Brood of vipers! You hypocrites! What are you doing down here? Who told you to flee the great judgment that is coming?"

That is an interesting word picture, "Who has warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" One commentary that I saw said it might be, because John the Baptist was very familiar with desert life. This could be a word picture of desert animals like snakes and rats fleeing before a wildfire. Fire, of course, is a symbol of judgment. During a fire the animals affected by it just run. They might be among their prey, or predators, but they do not care. They are more afraid of the fire than they are of their predators.

And so, what he is saying here is that he is calling them a bunch of snakes that are fleeing in fear that they might not be saved.

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Now that is kind of interesting that these Pharisees, at least the way that John the Baptist looks at them, are motivated by fear. It may be that this was not their motivation; this may not be the word picture that he was actually thinking of, but he certainly backs it up talking about judgment later on.

Maybe he thought that they were just trying to cover themselves just in case John's baptism would be the thing that might allow them to sneak through. That makes sense. That is what he was castigating them about.

And the very next thing that he says is, "*Look, I do not care what you are motivated by, I want to see fruits worthy of repentance. My baptism is a baptism of repentance and I only baptize only those who confess their sins.*" It is as much as we in the church of God do now. We want to see some evidence of fruit that a person has changed his behavior, not just accepted Jesus Christ, but has actually changed so that he is becoming more like Christ all the time.

So, John the Baptist stops them short; basically that is what he does. "*What are you guys doing out here? I have not seen anything from you that would make you worthy of this baptism. Show me,*" he says, "*a little fruit. That is all I ask, that you are changing.*"

And then he goes on to verse 9. This is actually the heart of their problem in this particular vignette, "and do not think to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as *our* father.'"

Now, why would this be something that he would call them on? The reason is they felt secure and confident of salvation because they were descendants of Abraham.

Now, I want to read something to you from Matthew Barclay. This is in his first volume of Matthew, page 47. I want you to see by this how much they esteemed Abraham, and what they thought that Abraham's righteousness did for them.

Barclay writes:

"He warns them that it will avail them nothing to plead that Abraham is their father. To the orthodox Jew that was an incredible statement! To the Jew Abraham was unique. So unique was he in his goodness and in his favor with God that his merit sufficed not only for himself, but for all his descendants also. He had built up a treasury of merit which not all the claims and needs of his descendants could exhaust. So, the Jews believed that a Jew, simply because he was a Jew and not for any merits of his own, was

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safe in the life to come."

They said, "All Israelites have a portion in the world to come."

They talked about "the delivering merits of the fathers."

They said that Abraham sat at the gates of Gehenna to turn back any Israelite who might by chance have been consigned to its terrors.

They said that it was the merits of Abraham which enabled the ships to sail safely on the seas; that it was because of the merits of Abraham that the rain descended on the earth; that it was the merits of Abraham which enabled Moses to enter into heaven and to receive the Law; that it was because of the merits of Abraham that David was heard.

Even for the wicked these merits sufficed.

"If thy children," they said of Abraham, "were mere dead bodies, without blood vessels or bones, thy merits would avail for them!"

It is that spirit which John is rebuking."

This is how they considered Abraham! And this is why John's statement, "Do not tell me that Abraham is your father," hit them right between the eyes. John the Baptist basically said, "everything that you have been hanging on is worthless."

I mean, if you look at them from their perspective? If they felt that they were already safe—that Abraham's merits would get them into God's Kingdom—why did they have to do anything? If even the evil Israelites were going to end up in paradise because of the merits of Abraham, why should they be good? That was just extra work! It would be a whole lot easier just to have a "wonderfully" evil life and still end up with all the good in the end.

They felt that they could be swept right into the Kingdom of God on the patriarch's coattails. It takes just a few seconds for John the Baptist to disabuse them of this notion because he says, "Look, if God needs them He can raise up children from these stones."

It is kind of interesting. It is a word play. The words "children" and "stones" sound very

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similar in the Hebrew. So, in a way he was saying, "you may be this, but He can just as well take that and make use of it."

Commentators also think that he may be referring back to the verse that says to look to Abraham your father, the rock from whom you were hewn. I know that I did not say that properly. It is in Isaiah somewhere. I cannot think of the exact quote right now.

This was a particular problem of the Jews.

How do I know that?

Please go back to Jeremiah 7. It really is a human problem. It is not just the Jews problem. It is a lot easier to rely on something than to try and do it yourself.

God makes an example of the Jews, both here in Matthew 3, and then also here in Jeremiah 7.

Jeremiah 7:1-2 The word that came to Jeremiah from the LOORD, saying, "Stand in the gate of the LOORD'S house, and proclaim there this word, and say, 'Hear the word of the LOORD, all *you of Judah* [listen to this next phrase] who enter in at these gates to worship the LOORD!'"

He is speaking to a very specific group of Jews. They are the ones who are very religious, who took the time to come to the Temple, and worship. He is speaking to what most would consider the cream of Judean society, the true believers.

Jeremiah 7:3 Thus says the LOORD of hosts, the God of Israel: "Amend your ways and your doings..."

Do you know what that is in one word? Repent!

Jeremiah 7:3 ...and I will cause you to dwell in this place.

Their ability to stay in the land was dependent upon whether they would repent or not. This is what they trusted in:

Jeremiah 7:4-7 "Do not trust in these lying words, saying, 'The temple of the

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LOORD, the temple of the LOORD, the temple of the LOORD *are* these.' "For if you thoroughly amend your ways and your doings, if you thoroughly execute judgment between a man and his neighbor, [notice the word "thoroughly" in this passage] "if you do not oppress the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place, or walk after other gods to your hurt, "then I will cause you to dwell in this place, in the land that I gave to your fathers forever and ever.

Now what they trusted in, as we saw there in verse 4, was that the Temple was there. God had chosen David and allowed him to make the plan for the Temple. And then, God had chosen Solomon to build the Temple. And if we would go back and look, He had come and caused His Name to be placed there and He dwelled there in the Holy Place.

So, what the Jews were doing at this time was saying, "God is here in the Temple! God is not going to allow anything to happen to this Temple, or this city, or to the people that are in this city, because we are called by His Name. So, we are safe! It does not matter what we do. All we have to do is snuggle up to the Temple and we will be safe."

Now let us go down to verse 12. God says:

Jeremiah 7:12 "But go now to My place which was in Shiloh, where I set My name at the first, and see what I did to it because of the wickedness of My people Israel.

Did it help those people?

Jeremiah 7:13-15 "And now, because you have done all these works," says the LOORD, "and I spoke to you, rising up early and speaking, but you did not hear, and I called you, but you did not answer, "therefore I will do to the house [His Temple] which is called by My name, in which you trust, and to this place which I gave to you and your fathers, as I have done to Shiloh. "And I will cast you out of My sight, as I have cast out all your brethren—the whole posterity of Ephraim.

Here were the Jews about 600 years before the time of Christ having the same problem as the Pharisees were having at the time of John and Jesus. They were trusting in

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something that did not save them—could not save them. One trusted in the Temple and God's presence and the other ones trusted in their descent from Abraham. And neither one was going to save them, because as we know, by grace are you saved through faith—not of works, not of descent, not of proximity.

Something else would have to save you. And John is giving the Pharisees an education here in this.

Now, verses 10, and 12, back in Matthew 3, are John's threats—his warnings. Remember I told you to keep in mind the word "thorough"? God tells them back in Jeremiah 7 that they need to thoroughly amend their ways.

Matthew 3:10 "And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

Matthew 3:12 "His winnowing fan *is* in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather His wheat into the barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

Now just as He wants us to thoroughly mend our ways, He is going to thoroughly judge. No one is going to slip past His gaze. Everyone is going to have to pass muster. There are no exceptions to this. Each one of us has to come personally before the judgment seat and we have to be able to account for our deeds—the way we have lived. And that goes in spades for us. I Peter 4:17 says that judgment is now upon the house of God, which we are. The same rules apply, and the same Judge is seated and is at work.

Remember how in the last sermon I asked a few questions after each scenario?

These are the questions that we now need to answer for ourselves after having seen this in Matthew 3:

1. Are we depending upon God's calling and His longsuffering grace to save us?
2. Do we think that we have it made because we are presently holding some office or some seemingly important position in the church?
3. Do we think that because we have been in the church so long that we

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have an automatic pass into the kingdom?

4. Though we may say that the Protestant doctrine of Eternal Security (which is "Once saved, always saved") is not biblical, does our way of life belie it? Are we putting too much confidence in thinking that God will save you no matter what you do?

5. Are you showing fruits worthy of repentance?

In Matthew 12, we are going to read verses 1 through 14. It is important here that we do not get too tied down on the Sabbath or healing doctrines any more than we need to.

I want to put both of these scenarios together because they have one main point. And I want to take them as a whole. Let us go ahead and read these.

Matthew 12:1-14 At that time Jesus went through the grain fields on the Sabbath. And His disciples were hungry, and began to pluck heads of grain and to eat. And when the Pharisees saw *it*, they said to Him, "Look, Your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath!" But He said to them, "Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, he and those who were with him: 'how he entered the house of God and ate the showbread which was not lawful for him to eat, nor for those who were with him, but only for the priests? 'Or have you not read in the law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath, and are blameless? "Yet I say to you that in this place there is *One* greater than the temple. "But if you had known what *this* means, 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the guiltless. "For the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath." Now when He had departed from there, He went into their synagogue. (It was very soon thereafter.) And behold, there was a man who had a withered hand. And they asked Him, saying, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?"—that they might accuse Him. Then He said to them, "What man is there among you who has one sheep, and if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not lay hold of it and lift *it* out? "Of how much more value then is a man than a sheep? Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath." Then He said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." And he stretched *it* out, and it was restored as whole as the other. Then the Pharisees went out and plotted against Him, how they might destroy Him.

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Both situations involved Sabbath activities that the Pharisees considered sinful, but which Jesus plainly considers both permissible and even necessary! These scenarios together point out a major flaw of the Pharisees and that is their proclivity to be callously judgmental. Even acts of mercy fell under their condemnation if it did not conform to their laws. Not God's laws, but their laws!

Do we—ourselves—understand that God's law is not so rigid as to cause people to suffer unnecessarily? These two examples here are of that happening—the one man with the withered hand and the 12 disciples who were hungry. Do we grasp that though God's law is universal it contains built in exceptions for various situations?

For instance this one that Jesus mentions here in verse 5 is very clear where the priests are able to profane the Sabbath day because of the work which they have to do which God commands.

In modern parlance the ministry has an exception in that they can do the bulk of their work on the Sabbath day, and it is not something that is sin to them. Now this can be taken too far, and that is very true of any of these exceptions, or these freedoms under the law. They can be taken too far.

But, God does give us a bit of leeway to make judgments at critical moments.

Let us say in an emergency there is a dire need for something to be done which would in normal circumstances break the Sabbath, one can do it to help to relieve suffering.

I do not want to get sidetracked on this, but we have the liberty to help the needy or afflicted on the Sabbath as the situation arises. It is the classic "sheep in the pit" scenario. We often talk about the "ox in the ditch" (but it is really a 'pit'). If immediate action is necessary we can go help people who have a need. For example, if someone is on his way to church and gets a flat tire, it is not sin to change that tire so he can get to church.

But, changing a tire on the Sabbath day, just as a matter of rotating them, would not be right.

So, in order to perform worship in a proper way that God has commanded us, if these things (like changing the flat tire) are necessary to be done, we have leeway under the law to do them.

This is a liberty that should not to be abused. You do not throw your sheep or oxen into

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the pit! You do not stick the nail into your tire just to have the thrills of changing one.

If there is a flood, fire, tornado, or some other such emergency or disaster, it is OK to lend a hand. It is an unusual situation.

It is where you make your own emergencies that the problem comes in and you have abused your freedom.

Yet, none the less, we do have this authority and freedom if we use it judiciously. You have to make very precise judgments on these things.

Now, the Pharisees should have known this from the Old Testament. What did Jesus do? They accused Him and His disciples of breaking the Sabbath. And He says, "*Oh! Have you not read—in the Bible—you know, the scriptures that you hang on so dearly to, that David was able to do this, and the Levites were able to do this—you should have known these things?*" It is absolutely allowable to make these exceptions to the Sabbath commandment because of this need.

At the time the disciples were doing **His** work. They were helping Him in His preaching of the gospel. And so because they had gone all day without food Jesus deemed it fine under the law that they could take a bit of food from the field and eat it.

Now, had they been doing something else, and had missed their meals, I am not sure that Jesus would have allowed them to do it. But, because they had been doing His work, then they were blameless. It was also in the same way that the priests were blameless in all their work in the Temple.

This was the same thing. That is why He says that One that is greater than the Temple is here! He had the power and the authority to make these decisions. Of course, the Pharisees did not recognize that.

But, the Pharisees missed this in the Old Testament and this is because they emphasized strict conformity to law over merciful love and relief to their neighbors.

Jesus derives this quotation in verse 7 from both Hosea 6:6 and Micah 6:6-8. I want to go through that last one. I want you to see how it is framed here.

Micah 6:6-8 With what shall I come before the LOORD, *And* bow myself before the High God? Shall I come before Him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LOORD be pleased with thousands of rams, ten thousand

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rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn *for* my transgression, the fruit of my body *for* the sin of my soul? [Obviously these are rhetorical questions. And he answers himself here in verse 8] He has shown you, O man, what *is* good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?

This is what Jesus said that the Pharisees missed. What he means is that God is less interested in rote compliance to a set of rules than he is in thoughtful application of godly principles that give evidence of growth in love and outgoing concern for others.

Let me say that again! God is less interested in rote compliance to a set of rules than he is in thoughtful application of godly principles that give evidence of growth in love and outgoing concern for others.

Obedience is wonderful! I do not want to give anyone the idea that obedience is not necessary, because it is. It is all throughout the New Testament. God is telling us to obey. In fact, all of His commandments are obedience in righteousness.

But, obedience with outgoing concern is better!

Obedying in love, obeying in mercy, obeying in judgment, and justice—learning to use the old noodle in the situations that come up—is far better than just strictly going by the letter of the law.

We usually start at the letter of the law, and then as we gain wisdom, we begin to understand how these things are applied better—more lovingly, more broadly, more godly.

Jesus did a lot of things in the Gospels that the Pharisees felt were sin. He is blameless. That is because He used His wisdom to make righteous decisions. They conformed to God's will on these matters. It was not just a matter in these situations that He saw a human need and filled it, but He thought it through. He understood where His help could manifest glory to God. He kept everything in its proper proportion and always placed God first. But, if there was a need, and He saw it, and it was right to do, He was quick to fill it, whether the Pharisees thought it was a breaking of the law, or not—especially the Sabbath law. It seemed like that was the one that got them upset the most.

So, the question here is, are we such sticklers for exact law-keeping that we quickly condemn another's practice rather than extending mercy? Or, maybe at the very least

giving him the benefit of the doubt?

We have talked before about situations where we see people doing something that we consider to be wrong, but we find out later that they were doing something that was perfectly right.

Martin talked a few months ago about the man stumbling out of a bar, and hitting his head and getting knocked out. It was actually a minister who had been in the bar counseling somebody for baptism and a light hit him on the way out, caused him to be disoriented and he fell down, hitting his head. He was not drunk at all. He was not visiting the bar for reasons of liquor in the least. He was not there carousing, but doing his job.

Any person who might have seen this and did not understand what he was seeing—if they made a snap judgment, then they are guilty of condemning someone who is blameless.

So, it is good that we learn to take in the whole situation rather than to be quick to condemn another's practice.

Another part of this question is, do we tend to use God's law as a club to beat others down? Do we use the law in a way that makes us appear more exalted, and therefore everybody else who does not keep it our way is not as great? Do we use God's law as an excuse to avoid showing compassion? This means thinking "I had better keep the Sabbath rather than help that person who needs help".

These are questions that one needs to think about. They are decisions that one needs to make using what we understand at the time. And, we will grow in these things.

But, the Pharisees just totally missed it.

Matthew 16 is the section of the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees.

One thing that we need to understand is that at the end of chapter 15, Christ fed the 4000. That is the backdrop for this. And in the very next section the Pharisees seek a sign whether He is the Messiah.

Matthew 16:5-12 Now when His disciples had come to the other side, they had forgotten to take bread. Then Jesus said to them, "Take heed and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees." And they

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reasoned among themselves, saying, "*It is* because we have taken no bread." But Jesus, being aware of *it*, said to them, "O you of little faith, why do you reason among yourselves because you have brought no bread? "Do you not yet understand, or remember the five loaves of the five thousand and how many baskets you took up? "Nor the seven loaves of the four thousand and how many large baskets you took up? "How is it you do not understand that I did not speak to you concerning bread?—*but* to beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees." Then they understood that He did not tell *them* to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the doctrine of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

We understand this well enough to know that the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees is their teaching. It is very easy to see here. He is saying that the teaching of both the Pharisees and the Sadducees corrupts and spreads just like leaven will spread in the bread dough. That is how leaven works. It begins to grow, and then spreads throughout the entire loaf. It rises. The gasses given off by the yeast's fermentation causes the bread to rise. It symbolizes being puffed up and proud.

Now, throughout the Bible leaven is a symbol of corruption—the result of sin. Leaven is ***never*** a positive symbol in the Bible. It is always negative. It is always the symbol of corruption.

As we rehearse each year the holy days, we are to strive to become unleavened in our way of life. We will go to that scripture in I Corinthians 5 since we are approaching the Days of Unleavened Bread—a bit of a tie-in to the season. Verse 6, he tells the Corinthian church:

I Corinthians 5:6 Your glorying *is* not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?

We should understand this. It does not take much leaven thrown into a bit of batter to make the whole loaf rise.

Yeast will use up as much of that batter [it uses the starches after the sugars] as it can as food for itself in its fermentation processes.

So, you only need a little bit of leavening to make bread. It is a very small proportion of the whole.

I Corinthians 5:7-8 Therefore purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, since you truly are unleavened. For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us. Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened *bread* of sincerity and truth.

Sincerity and truth here are the opposites of leavening. They seem to represent the opposites of leavening. Back in Matthew 16 we find that Jesus tells them to beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees. What is the main problem? What is the main part of the leavening that is so bad?

I think that the key is verse 8, and the phrase, "Oh you of little faith..." Then, He tells them, "*You saw the bread, you saw the miracles that I did, why are you so worried about eating? Why are you, every time I say something, thinking about something physical?*"

He says, "beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, and the Sadducees," and immediately the 12 of them say, "we have not eaten in a long time! We have taken no bread!"

They immediately thought of their stomachs. They went immediately to a physical level. And Jesus said, "You have no faith at all. You have no spiritual insight, or very little. Can you not see that I was speaking metaphorically?"

They were not on the same plane as He was. He was speaking of a matter of faith and they were thinking about a physical matter of food.

Now, the leaven of the Pharisees—if you want one word to define it—I believe it would be ***faithlessness***.

Remember I said as this chapter opened that they were asking for signs. They wanted to see something with their eyes, to experience some miracle. They wanted proofs that they could see, handle, hear or touch. They wanted to use their five senses to see a proof that Jesus was the Messiah. They wanted to see something again like the feeding of the 5000.

But Jesus said that it does not work that way. We walk by faith, not by sight.

II Corinthians 5:7 has an early lesson in this principle:

II Corinthians 5:7 For we walk by faith, not by sight.

The disciples showed Jesus in their response to Him there in verse 7 of Matthew 16 that they were in danger of falling into the same ditch as the Pharisees. They were beginning to think and practice their beliefs only on the physical level. They were being carnal about it.

Jesus wanted to lift their vision a little bit higher onto a spiritual level of faith.

If you go on in the story (verses 13 through the end of the chapter, specifically the early part of that section), Jesus tested them on this very point.

Matthew 16:13, 15-16 ...Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am? ...He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered and said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

And what did Jesus say, "How did you figure that out Peter?"

No, He does not say that. He does not say that Peter figured it out at all.

Matthew 16:17 Jesus answered and said to him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed *this* to you, but My Father who is in heaven.

The problem with the Pharisees is that they would not accept revelation from God. They would not take anything on faith. They had no faith. They wanted to see, touch, hear, smell and taste everything. They would not take His word—Jesus' word—for anything, on anything.

Jesus was looking for belief here.

After they had seen so many proofs of Him—His teaching, His miracles, all the signs—He wanted some little inkling of understanding from them that they were willing to believe God and not have everything nailed down to the crossing of the "t's" or the dotting of the "i's."

That was the Pharisees' problem. They were not willing to accept God's word on

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anything. They had to go and then take great pains to take what God said, and divide it down into these areas so that they could cover every possibility that might come up, and then write it down as one of their laws that could not be transgressed.

It says in the Old Testament that you should not carry a burden on the Sabbath. That was not good enough for them. They did not take God's word at face value to allow other people—each individual—to come to understand what carrying a burden on the Sabbath was.

Do you know what they ended up with? They ended up defining a burden as anything more than the weight of two dried figs. Where in the Bible is that? It is nowhere to be found!

You could not even carry your Bible into church if that were the case. It is stupid. They did not have the spiritual sense to make proper judgments on very straight forward laws. They were faithless. They had to do everything by sight. They had to define everything down to something that they could measure rather than to live under the freedom of God's law.

It was out of fear. They were afraid of breaking it. And their fear caused them to stultify. So, they had miserable lives.

Would you not think it would be miserable to abide by every one of those minute and rigorous laws that they came up with? They did not have an abundant life like God wanted them to have. That is why He had given them those laws.

It says back in Deuteronomy that the people around them would say, "Look at what wonderful laws this nation has!" But, then they took those laws and they tore them to shreds. They were not living by faith, but by sight. They wanted everything to be defined in a law.

So, in summary the leaven of the Pharisees is their carnal instruction that demands overwhelming physical proof before granting even grudging belief in anything.

They were almost immune to the subtle nuances of faith and they were not in any way able to "feel" the prodding of God's Spirit. God's Spirit cannot work with a heart that is that hard.

On the other hand Abraham believed God and it was accounted to him for righteousness. That was in the scriptures in Genesis 15:6. He did not need God to come

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down and write a Talmud for him on everything. If God said it, then he was going to do it.

But, his descendants did nothing of the sort. I have spent some time on this because I fear that this is a huge problem in the church of God today.

I fear that this is true because our culture is so unbelieving. It is the culture out of which we have come. It is a culture that demands proof for everything. Proof is not bad. We should prove things to our own satisfaction, especially of things scientific or historic where physical proof is all you can get.

But when it comes to God, revelation must take first place. One must believe the scriptures.

People today demand checks and balances to everything. They want to see a functioning prototype. They have the "show me" attitude, rather than the very humble, childlike attitude of, "God said it, therefore it is good enough for me."

And then, what one does, once we come across something that God says, and we are not sure of it, the very best way to approach that thing is to do it and then wait for God to show you why. Because then you are showing God that you are like Abraham. He believed God and it was accounted to him for righteousness.

All it took was for God to say something to him and he did it. He is our best human example of righteousness in the Bible. Obviously, I am not counting Jesus in that. But, if there is any purely human person that we could follow, it would be the example of Abraham. The proof will come later. It comes in the fruits. It comes in additional understanding and many other things—blessings that you cannot even measure because God responds to people who respond to Him.

So, the questions at the end of this section are:

1. Are we in danger of not entering God's rest because of unbelief (Hebrews 4)?

That was the Israelites problem. They did not believe God. And their carcasses were strewn throughout the wilderness.

2. Are we hearing God's word but not mixing it with faith? Not really believing

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it?

3. Do we need a huge amount of proof before we put God's way into practice?

4. Are we skeptical, critical or hesitant to practice what God says?

5. How close is our practice of God's way of life to our profession of our belief in it?

How close have we narrowed the gap between what we believe and what we do?

In Matthew 19 we have another confrontation of Jesus and the Pharisees. This is the section on marriage and divorce.

Notice first off, as soon as we launch into this that the Pharisees are testing him.

Matthew 19:3-9 The Pharisees also came to Him, testing Him, and saying to Him, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for *just* any reason?" And He answered and said to them, "Have you not read that He who made *them* at the beginning 'made them male and female,' "and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? "So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate." They said to Him, "Why then did Moses command to give a certificate of divorce, and to put her away?" He said to them, "Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, permitted you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. "And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery."

Again, the subject here is not as important as the Pharisees attitude.

First off, they came testing Him; they were trying to catch Him in a mistake,

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and they were trying to see if He would contradict their law in front of all these people who were gathered to listen to Him. We did not read verses 1 and 2, but it said that there were multitudes there that He had healed.

Knowing this—He perceived their intent from the very beginning—He carefully quotes scripture. And then, He gives His conclusion. Marriage should not end in divorce. What God has joined together, let not man put asunder. It is very simple.

Then, they have to come back at Him with a counter argument. "OK then. Sure, you quote your scriptures, now we are going to quote ours. Moses said that we can divorce if we just give them the certificate of divorce."

I just get a kick out of the way that Jesus argues with these people, because He turns it right back at them. Notice what He says in verse 8 again:

Matthew 19:8 "...Moses, because of the hardness of **your** hearts, permitted you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so..."

He turned it right back onto them and said, "Moses did this under God's command because you were sinful through and through. You would not listen."

It was not because God had not made the pronouncement about what was right in this matter. "God allowed Moses to say this because you would not listen."

So, what is their problem here? What is this hardness of hearts?

Zechariah 7:8-12 Then the word of the LORD came to Zechariah, saying, "Thus says the LORD of hosts: 'Execute true justice, Show mercy and compassion Everyone to his brother. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, The alien or the poor. Let none of you plan evil in his heart Against his brother.' "But they refused to heed, shrugged their shoulders, and stopped their ears so that they could not hear. "Yes, they made their hearts like flint, refusing to hear the law and the words which the LORD of hosts had sent by His Spirit through the former prophets. Thus great

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wrath came from the LORD of hosts.

He is speaking about the fall of Israel and Judah there. What is the hardness of their hearts? Refusing to hear the law and the words which the Lord of Hosts has sent by His Spirit.

Is this not ironic? What are the Pharisees known for? Their so-called adherence to the law! And by referring back to this—telling them it was because of the hardness of their hearts—He is saying, "*Your law-keeping is nothing! It is just a show! In reality, your hearts are as hard as flint.*"

Remember that God said through the prophets that He is going to take away their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh. That is the only way that they will end up being saved. They had shut themselves off from God and His instruction.

And so this comes out in this confrontation with Jesus. They would do what they wanted to do. So they argued their way out of God's intent by finding a scripture that suited their desires.

If they wanted to divorce their wives, they would search the Old Testament till they came up with one that seemed to suit them. Then, they would say that this is the place where they would put the weight of their argument and therefore, not listen to Genesis 1 and 2 and all that God said there for all intents and purposes for a man and his wife.

And so instead of finding out what God expected of them, they just hunted for a verse that would justify their sin. In modern parlance we would say that they shopped for a scripture.

So the questions at the end of this section:

1. Are we eager to know God's will when we search the scripture or are we merely looking for justifications for our actions?
2. Do we argue and debate to get our own way?
3. Do we minister shop to find someone who will agree with us so that we can continue doing what we want to do? That has

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happened before.

4. Are we displaying hardness of heart by refusing to change our ways though we know that what we are doing is contrary to God's intent?

The final section today is a well known one that we should not have to take a great deal of time on. This is the parable of the Pharisees and the tax collector.

Luke 18:9-14 Also He spoke this parable to [notice to whom He was speaking:] some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. "The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, 'God, I thank You that I am not like other men—extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. 'I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.' "And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise *his* eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me a sinner!' "I tell you, this man went down to his house justified *rather* than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

The reasons, as we saw, for giving this parable is to correct those who trusted in themselves—that is their own faith and worship was self-centered and self-righteous. And secondly, they despised others. Meaning that their religion made them exalt themselves, and separate themselves from those they considered inferior or not as righteous as they were.

Now, Jesus' point at the end is that God will not accept this kind of person described in verse 9. But, the humble man—the sinner—the one who beat his breast, and placed himself in God's mercy is the one that went away justified. The other man who thought himself superior and justified himself and looked down his nose at other sinners was the one who was rejected. He will not forgive their sins, and in fact, He says that He is going to bring them down. Those who exalt themselves will end up being humbled and abased by the hand of God.

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In a way, you could say that God will make sure that they become like the ones that they looked down their noses at.

Jesus, here, takes polar opposites to make the contrast easily seen.

The elitist Pharisees stands alone, haughtily separated from others, saying to himself in a rather farcical tone, *"I am so glad that I am so good and righteous—the cream of the crop. I go above and beyond what the law requires."*

Notice in verses 11 and 12 that the word "I" occurs 5 times in that section in just two little sentences. He is self-centered, self-exulting, self-congratulating. If his arm was long enough, he would pat himself on the back. He was immanently self-righteous.

Now opposite the Pharisee, the publican is standing alone for a far different reason. He is standing afar off because he does not feel worthy to even be there. He does not feel worthy in any way to even have a conversation with God because he feels like he is such a sinner. He is so torn up by his sins that he will not even look up to heaven to beseech God for any forgiveness. He even beats himself up over his sinfulness. He really feels badly about what he has done.

And all he does—his prayer is hardly a prayer, just seven words there—is just pass himself before the Mercy Seat, and asks, "God, give me mercy!"

Now, the Pharisee's problem here is that his religion has made him an elitist. He has become pompously superior in his own mind to other men and women to the point that he will not even associate with them for fear of contamination. Their sinfulness might rub off onto his holiness. He does not want that. He does not want to be associated with such people because they are going to drag him down.

Whereas, Jesus, on the other hand spent a great deal of time with those "terrible" people.

Did you notice that He came out in the end without any taint of their sin on Him!

Hmm. Probably a good indication that it would happen to us as well. Not that

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we are supposed to be putting ourselves in the midst of sinners. Obviously, the ones around Christ were looking for a way out in the main, such sinners as Matthew, the publican; and the prostitute in John 16, and others whom He allowed to come into His presence.

What about the one who anointed His feet? Everybody knew what kind of woman she was. Jesus did not stop her. He did not feel like He was going to be contaminated by her.

You know this Pharisee was so bad, so elitist, so pompous, that the wording of his prayer makes it seem that he considers himself just about on God's level. He speaks to Him just about as an equal. It is like, "*God, thank you!*" as if he was thanking a buddy, "*that I am not like other men.*"

The indication here is not that God had made him this way, but that he had made himself that way—not like other men.

It is just one of the most pompous examples of self-righteousness that I can see in the whole Bible.

Psalm 36 is, in a way, very similar to the Pharisee and the Publican. David writes here:

Psalm 36:1-3 An oracle within my heart concerning the transgression of the wicked: *There is* no fear of God before his eyes [we can see that in the Pharisee]. For he flatters himself in his own eyes, When he finds out his iniquity *and* when he hates. The words of his mouth *are* wickedness and deceit; He has ceased to be wise *and* to do good.

That, to me, is a very interesting way of looking at the Pharisee in that parable. "He flatters himself in his own eyes, When he finds out his iniquity *and* when he hates. The words of his mouth (his prayer) *are* wickedness and deceit; He has ceased to be wise *and* to do good."

David writes here (sounding like the Publican):

Psalm 36:10-12 Oh, continue Your lovingkindness to those who know You, And Your righteousness to the upright in heart. Let not

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the foot of pride come against me, And let not the hand of the wicked drive me away. There the workers of iniquity have fallen; They have been cast down and are not able to rise.

That has, in a way, the attitude of the Publican in that prayer.

So the questions I have here at the end of this section is:

1. Are we guilty of elitism? Or of exclusivity?
2. Do we separate ourselves from people because we fear spiritual contamination?
3. Do we avoid speaking to people because their conversation might defile us?
4. Do we steer clear of those who we feel are not on our level of understanding and faith?
5. Have we judgmentally ranked the brethren according to their respective sinfulness or righteousness? And then pick and choose whom we are going to fellowship with?

I sure hope not. Christ says elsewhere that the publicans, the prostitutes and sinners go into the kingdom before such people.

So, in conclusion, since we are here in Psalms, let us conclude with Psalm 94.

Psalm 94:1-7 O LOORD God, to whom vengeance belongs—O God, to whom vengeance belongs, shine forth! Rise up, O Judge of the earth; Render punishment to the proud. LOORD, how long will the wicked, How long will the wicked triumph? They utter speech, *and* speak insolent things; All the workers of iniquity boast in themselves. They break in pieces Your people, O LOORD, And afflict Your heritage. They slay the widow and the stranger, And murder the fatherless. Yet they say, "The LOORD does not see, Nor does the God of Jacob understand."

Psalm 94:12-15 Blessed *is* the man whom You instruct, O LOORD, And teach out of Your law, That You may give him rest from the days of adversity, Until the pit is dug for the wicked. For the

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LOORD will not cast off His people, Nor will He forsake His inheritance. But judgment will return to righteousness, And all the upright in heart will follow it.

You see, Jesus would have had no problem with the Pharisees if they had truly been keeping God's law. But, they had perverted it to the point of pride, wickedness and abuse of the poor, widow and the fatherless.

Do not get me wrong. God still requires us to follow righteousness. Remember Jesus says that our righteousness must exceed the righteousness of the Pharisees. And if we can do this, we can avoid their pitfalls.