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Tower of Strength

**“The name of the Lord is a strong tower
The righteous runs into it and is safe.”**

—Proverbs 18:10

Beware the Leaven Of the Pharisees

In the gospels, we often hear mention of the Pharisees. They were a sect of the Jews that began about 200BC to resist the military incursions of the Greeks and Egyptians, and then resisted the cultural and moral interventions of Hellenistic society. The term “Pharisee” probably comes from a root meaning separate or detached.

They were respected in the synagogues as excellent students of the Law. They believed in angels, heaven, and even the resurrection (Acts 23:8). Paul was a Pharisee (Phil. 3:5). Nicodemus was a Pharisee (John 3:1). Their writings building hedges around the Law of Moses were collected into a document called the Mishnah, and it became as important to the Pharisees as the Bible.

Thus, it was surprising that Jesus did not applaud them, but rather scolded them harshly! Jesus warned in Matt. 16:11–12 “beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees.” He said in Matt. 5:20, “unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.” And in Matt. 21:31, the “tax

gatherers and prostitutes will get into the kingdom of God before you.”
What a shocking rebukes! Where did the Pharisees go wrong?

Jesus does not criticize them for being holy or studious. They had eliminated sexual immorality, drunkenness, and idolatry from their lives, and they worshipped God frequently and fervently. That was great. Jesus never criticizes their holiness; He criticizes their dealings with other people!

There is a lesson here. The Pharisees represent a frightening reality, that as we conquer immorality and drunkenness and other such obvious sins, we do not then fall prey to the more-respectable but less-obvious sins of know-it-all pride, meanness, and mercilessness. Now, not everyone who admonishes another is a “Pharisee”—and we must be careful not to fling that accusation around as a kneejerk reaction. Thank God for our brothers and sisters who are wise and brave enough to admonish us when we fall short (Rom. 15:14)! But the Pharisees’ descent into nit-picky crankiness earned them words of “Woe!” from our Lord, which we would do well to understand and avoid.

The best place to discover the qualities of a real Pharisee is to read Matthew 23, Jesus’ longest address to them.

Turning the Bible into a Burden for Others (23:1–4, 16–22)

The Pharisees made up a lot of rules, which soon became tests of fellowship. But as R.T. France says in his commentary on Matthew (p. 324), “just because one multiplies the number of ways that one may offend God, doesn’t mean one succeeds in finding ways to please God.” We already know that people who take away from the Bible dishonor God. But, ironically, people who add rules to the Bible dishonor God too, because the rules distract people from the real truth, and cause them to serve a man-made checklist rather than a heavenly Father.

Worse, the Pharisees were experts at weaseling out of their own rules. For example, they decided a promise was a promise if it was made in the name of the gold in the temple, but not if it was made in the name of the altar in the temple. They became very watchful over such silly nuances, which reminds me of kids on the playground debating whether

Johnny's fingers were crossed when he agreed to a double-dog dare, and whether or not he swore on his mother's grave. As a result of such distractions, the Pharisees forgot all about the basic point of the Law, which could be stated, "tell the truth and keep your promises!"

Their silly rules detached the Sabbath from its original intention to provide mankind a rest, and made it into an ungodly burden (Matt. 12:1–2). They created complex rules for hand-washing (Mark 7:1–8) but were perfectly happy to ingest all kinds of moral filth. In fact, in cases where the man-made rules began to conflict with God's word, they preferred the rules to the Law (Mark 7:9–13). I find it interesting that while Jesus made sure to obey Roman laws so as to give no offence (Matt. 17:24–27, *cf.* 1 Cor. 10:32, 2 Cor. 6:3, etc.), He *intentionally* violated the Pharisees' rules to bring this issue to a head!

Exhibiting Self-Righteous, Sinful Pride (23:6–15)

This concern for appearances bled over into sinful pride. The Pharisees sure loved attention. It's always nice for someone to say, "Nice job!" but the Pharisees' righteousness had become showiness, and their teaching was designed to draw attention to themselves rather than to focus attention on God. They were more concerned to make disciples of themselves than disciples of God (Phil. 2:12).

Service and humility remain essential virtues of Christians. Pride is not only distasteful, it blinds us to our own spiritual inadequacies. We think that we are indispensable to God (Matt. 3:7–10) and miss the warning signs of our own failures. We become so comfortable with ourselves, so sure of our own position, that we become numb to the need for change (Luke 18:10–14).

Pride starts as an "I" problem, but quickly becomes a "Them" problem too. A prideful heart thinks everyone else a scoundrel who deserves his fate. A prideful tongue poisons his dealings with a harsh, overbearing judgmentalism (Matt. 9:10–13). We must judge with righteous judgment based on God's standards—not worrying about what other people think nearly as much as we worry about what God

thinks (Luke 19:35–40). In fact, Jesus reminds us that the distance between saint and sinner is not very wide at all, and to labor as much as possible to bring the lost into the fold of salvation.

The Pharisees thought they had a monopoly on the truth (John 7:47–49). Let us keep in mind that *the Bible* has a monopoly on truth, and that as we endeavor to read it and obey it and communicate it to others, we must remain open to the possibility of change ourselves.

Being Concerned About Appearances Only (23:5, 23–28)

This focus on minutia, this majoring in minors, this sinful pride, combined to give the Pharisees a morbid concern with appearances.

Now, let's be careful once again. Appearances are important in the life of a Christian! Plus, one's obedience to God will be obvious in his everyday life. But the Pharisees were ostentatious. Practices that God intended to be a reminder of the Jews' special relationship with God—blue tassels and reading the Bible (Deut. 6:8; Numb. 15:38–39)—the Pharisees turned into a competition to show everyone else how special they thought they were. Meanwhile, they were involved in lots of sin.

There is no part of God's law that can be ignored. But totally overlooking the big concepts of mercy and faith and purity, in order to tweeze at something minor, is distracting. It's like treating a broken pinky when the patient has a sucking chest wound. How hypocritical for a man to, for example, disturb a church by arguing a miniscule point of Scripture, all the while sleeping with his secretary (something I once encountered). We must clean the inside, or the outside is meaningless!

Being Self-Deceived (23:29–36)

The biggest shame of all is that the Pharisees thought they were the cream of the spiritual crop, while Jesus said they were headed for “the sentence of Hell.” They were “blind guides of the blind” (Matt. 15:14). Let us beware to avoid their fate.

—*John Guzzetta*

Quote of the Week:

“Slander slays three: the speaker, the spoken of, the spoken to.” —*unk.*