

The Real Pharisaism

Luke 14:1-6 *And it came to pass, as He went into the house of one of the chief Pharisees to eat bread on the sabbath day, that they watched Him. And, behold, there was a certain man before him which had the dropsy. And Jesus answering spake unto the lawyers and Pharisees, saying, Is it lawful to heal on the sabbath day? And they held their peace. And He took him, and healed him, and let him go; And answered them, saying, Which of you shall have an ass or an ox fallen into a pit, and will not straightway pull him out on the sabbath day? And they could not answer him again to these things.*

In Christianity today there are two extremes.

At the one extreme are libertarians. Libertarians, as the name suggests, are all about liberty – Christian liberty. But the liberty they talk about is not true Christian liberty. It is simply lawlessness - doing what we want to do, under the guise of having Christian liberty. Libertarianism is rampant in the modern church. Things which the church has shunned and separated from are now tolerated, indulged in, and even encouraged from the pulpit. We now have Christians who are like pagans in their speech, work habits, personal integrity, finances, entertainment choices, the places they frequent, the things they take into their bodies, the way they dress their bodies, the way they approach courtship and marriage, the things they listen to and watch. Living life under our own authority and claiming that Christ has set us free to live how we want. As Peter said, ‘*They promise them freedom, but they themselves are slaves of corruption*’ (2Pe 2:19).

On the other extreme are people who talk about holiness and sanctification and obedience, but they become quite Pharisaical in their approach to the Christian life. They want to be strict and exacting; they talk a lot about standards and separation from the world and sin, but they fall into the trap of pride which the Pharisees fell into. They end up being a lot like the Pharisees, but the issues they go after are not the Sabbath or the washing of hands before meals. Such people place others under a heavy burden of legalism. Churches under that kind of burden die a lingering, slow death.

Libertarians see anyone living with more restraint than they do as legalists and Pharisees; and Pharisaical types see anyone to the left of them as lawless libertarians.

God obviously cares about His people avoiding both traps because He has had much to say about both. The Lord included so much about the Pharisees to help us to avoid Pharisaism. I want us to understand both what it is, and what it isn’t. When you live for God, some people are going to accuse you of being a legalist and a Pharisee. And others may spy out your freedom in Christ and call you a loose-living lawless type. So you need to know what true Pharisaism is, and how to avoid it.

The scene: It is the Sabbath day, and Jesus is invited to the house of one of the rulers of the Pharisees. That might seem strange, but it shows there was still something of an openness towards him. On the other hand, the chances are, they were trying to trap him. That explains the presence of this man with dropsy. It says that they watched him carefully. More than likely they made sure Jesus was seated so that this man in dire need of help was right in front of Him. It is amazing to see the depth of their unbelief - to think that these men knew that Jesus would heal. Imagine that – knowing for sure that here was a man to do a miracle without fail. They knew it, but instead of believing Him, they sought to get Him to use His divine power on the Sabbath.

Sabbath day feasts were often open to all, and wealthy Pharisees could afford to cater for many people. But as Christ's later parables show, the Pharisees did not usually invite all kinds of people. They invited their friends, and chose the best seats for themselves. So the presence of this man with dropsy was more than likely another set-up, to see what Jesus would do on the Sabbath.

Dropsy is a disease which causes the tissue of the body to fill up with fluid. Did Jesus know the man would be there? Certainly He did. Did He know that they were deliberately trying to set him up? Yes He did. Jesus didn't care much for their little traps – here was an opportunity to heal and, furthermore, to teach.

Jesus looked at them and answered their scrutiny. He asked, 'Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?' Think about that. Jesus is asking if the law will permit good to be done. The Law was meant to reveal and prevent evil, and to foster and encourage good. Healing is certainly good. Why would the Law prevent something good being done?

To this they were silent. If they said, 'No', people would consider them cruel. If they said, 'Yes', their fellow Pharisees would have considered them heretics. The Lord showed them the dilemma produced by their own unbelief.

He takes hold of the man, heals him, and sends him away. It would probably have been dangerous for the man to stay there, as he was living evidence for Christ and against the Pharisees. Then Jesus turns and asks them, 'If you had a son or an animal, and one of them should fall into a ditch on the Sabbath – would you not *immediately* help them? Or would you leave them there till the Sabbath was over?' 'You would, as a reflex action, pull them out – because it is the right thing to do, and you would not be in violation of the Sabbath.' The standard they had for other people, they would break for their own animals. They would act instinctively compassionately for their own, but brought about a cruel system on others.

They were not able to answer Him concerning these things. Their system could not interpret the spirit of God's Law.

Now when you read the Gospels, it becomes clear that Jesus did not 'accidentally' do these things on the Sabbath. On seven other occasions, Jesus did something which provoked the Pharisees:

- [He cast out a demon (**Luke 4:31-37**),
- [healed a fever (**Luke 4:38-39**),
- [let his disciples pluck grain (**Luke 6:1-5**),
- [healed a lame man (**John 5:1-9**),
- [healed a man with a withered hand (**Luke 6:6-10**),
- [delivered a woman bent over with disease (**Luke 10:13-17**),
- [healed a man born blind (**John 9**).

We get the idea that the Lord actually wanted the Sabbath issue to come up. Why? He wanted this because the Sabbath lay at the heart of Pharisaism. If you wanted to see how Pharisaism corrupts the Word of God, and misses the spirit of the Word of God, the Sabbath was the central piece of evidence. Here all the evil of religion gone bad homed in. And the Lord, who came to preach the truth, was not afraid to reveal how warped their system was. Eight times, He deliberately did something on the Sabbath – which was no violation of the spirit of God's command, but which went against their little traditions.

Why did the Lord leave so much of this in the Word of God? Because He wanted to instruct us about the dangers of Pharisaism, so we could tell the difference between it and true obedience. So let's look at this matter of how Jesus approached the Sabbath and how the Pharisees did, and see the differences.

Pharisaism or legalism is when a standard becomes an end in itself.

Can I say something that might surprise you? The Bible is not an end in itself. The Bible is a means to an end. The Bible is a means to know and love and obey Christ. And any command or principle in the Bible is given to us, so that we may reach the end goal of loving God with all our heart, soul and mind. When a rule becomes bigger than the reason for the rule, it has become Pharisaism.

God gave the Sabbath to cause man to remember that God had created the world, and that Israel belonged to God, and was under the Mosaic Covenant. It was also there to refresh man and restore him spiritually.

Were those the reasons the Pharisees kept the Sabbath? No, it had become a badge of keeping up with the group. If you keep the Sabbath according to all their extra laws – then you are 'okay.'

Jesus on the other hand told them, 'Man was not made for the Sabbath, but the Sabbath was made for man.' He said, 'You have lost sight of the fact that this command was given to help man, not trip him up.'

Pharisaism is when you take any standard – and lose sight of why it was given.

I was in a church where attendance at three services a week was the expected standard. But that standard became bigger than what it was intended to produce. Faithfulness to church produces maturity in the Word, opportunity to serve and fellowship. But what happened was that it became an end in itself. If you were not there, you were unspiritual. How many times you were in church became the measure of how much you loved God. I want you to see that the problem was not really the standard; it was that the standard had become an end in itself.

Pharisaism or legalism is when you have outward conformity without inward change.

When people are taught to just get with the programme, without understanding why they should do something – that is Pharisaism. It is relatively easy to get people to agree to a standard which the whole group embraces. And that's not always a bad thing. Children need to embrace certain standards and actions before they can fully understand them. But as children grow up, and as Christians mature, we need to understand why we obey, and what God wants from us in the heart.

But Pharisaism doesn't care if you understand, so long as you get in line. And when this outward conformity is all we want, you know what happens? It becomes man-pleasing. We are no longer cultivating heart knowledge of Jesus Christ; we are trying to fit in with each other and be man-pleasers. A 'cliquishness' can develop.

Is this how the Pharisees taught their Sabbath laws? If they had continually been emphasising the truth behind the Sabbath, it would have made sense. But instead, it had simply become a list of all kinds of things not to be done on the Sabbath. Read **Matthew 23:27-28**.

And were the Pharisees man-pleasers? They certainly were. And more than likely, many Jews did what they did to either gain favour with the Pharisees or avoid their disapproval. The whole thing had lost a sense of trusting and obeying and following God.

On the other hand, Jesus taught the spirit of the Sabbath – a day to ‘do good’, to please God, to serve Him.

I grew up in a church which taught that no Christian should go to the movies. Now, you could actually make a fairly decent Biblical argument to support that conviction. However, that was mostly never done. It was simply required. If you were to serve in Sunday School, or in children’s activities, or attend the Bible college, you had to agree not to go to the movies. Another Bible college I went to insisted that you signed a document promising you wouldn’t go to the movies while studying there.

Outward conformity was required, but no inward change. If you do not teach on what we are supposed to love, and what we should hate, and what kinds of images and music, and themes we should not expose ourselves to – to ban the movies is just Pharisaism. The heart needs to be changed. Any Biblical standard will have Biblical reasons.

Pharisaism is teaching obedience without teaching grace.

The Christian life is a life of good works empowered by grace. If you know only that you must do certain things, but do not learn that Christ will give you the power and strength and ability to obey – you will be crushed under the burden.

People need to know, not only why they should do something, but that they *can* do it, with the Spirit’s power, since it is a matter of obedience.

When the Pharisees told people they could only walk so far on the Sabbath, and not do this and not do that, did they teach them, ‘*Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit,*’ Says the LORD of hosts (Zec 4:6)?

Did they teach them, ‘*Keep My commandments that it might be well with you?*’ I doubt it. It was all about just keeping the standard.

No. Jesus Himself said of them, ‘*For they bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men’s shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers*’ (**Mat 23:4**).

The Pharisees weren’t depending on God to keep the Sabbath, and they weren’t teaching others to either. And so who did they glorify when they kept the Sabbath?

I believe we should try to be in God’s house as often as possible. But you can be here three times a week, and be trusting in yourself and be proud of yourself. You see, any time you think that you can live this Christian life in your own strength, you are close to Pharisaism.

You try to be in church, read your Bible, act and speak a certain way, avoid certain things – but if you don’t rely on the Holy Spirit to empower you, you will sense the great burden. Or you will sense your pride saying, ‘I must really be pleasing to God now, because I have done all these things.’

What makes us pleasing to God? The righteousness of Jesus Christ makes us pleasing to God.

Rom 10:3 *For they, being ignorant of God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God.*

Jesus not only taught us what to do, He taught us how to do it – to depend on Him.

Pharisaism is when the minors become majors and the majors become minors.

In other words, Pharisaism is when issues and teachings which are relatively minor take up the bulk of your preaching time, the bulk of the attention of the church.

In the grand scheme of things, the Sabbath was fairly important. But it was a command which was less important than the command to love God and the command to love your neighbour. When seen as part of those commands, it could serve a purpose. But the Pharisees would exert themselves on the smallest little command and yet somehow miss the big picture.

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

Jesus, in contrast, would teach that God wanted loving kindness, more than rituals. He was able to tell the lawyer what the greatest command of the Scripture was.

We could spend all our time preaching on dress, appearance, TV, where not to go, smoking, drinking and so forth – and there is a time to address those things - but if we were to spend most of our time doing that, and not speak about God's goodness, God's grace, His holiness, the centrality of Christ, the work of the Holy Spirit, the power of the Word, the necessary disciplines of the Christian life, we would be malnourished, imbalanced Christians.

That is not to say we can never speak about smaller issues. After all, smaller issues can, over time, ruin godliness (**Song of Songs 2:15**). It means our focus is not on smaller outward issues, but on knowing Christ and making Him known.

The Pharisaism which we should avoid is focusing on externals without teaching on the spirit of the command, or the grace to obey it. It is majoring on minors, and making the rules ends in themselves.

But let me finish by telling you what Pharisaism is not.

Pharisaism/legalism is not when a family or a church insists upon certain standards in the Christian life.

It could be regarding dress, dating, music, personal entertainment or any area of life. You have not heard me say that setting standards is Pharisaism – it isn't. Paul set standards of dress, for order of worship, and for relationships between the sexes (**1 Corinthians 14, 1 Timothy 2:9, 1 Corinthians 7**). If you have a Biblical basis for setting a certain standard, and you are leaning on the Holy Spirit to empower you, and doing it for God's glory – that is not Pharisaism, that is Biblical obedience – that is Christian living.

So don't be fooled if someone hears about the standards you hold in your family, and the standards you hold as a church family, and people say, 'That's very legalistic. We must give

people liberty to make up their own minds.’ Sure – I believe that. They must make up their minds as to whether they are going to obey the Word of God or not.

There is nothing wrong with getting practical and dealing with particulars of the Christian life. There is nothing virtuous in remaining general in all your teaching, and nothing immature in making specific applications.

And by the way, if you and your family, and your church family has a standard on something which most other churches regard as a ‘grey area’ that doesn’t mean it is legalism either. For example, the fact that evangelicalism is lost and drifting when it comes to music does not mean it is legalistic to make definite statements regarding excellent music vs. inferior music.

Pharisaism is not when your church is relatively stricter than others.

Strictness of standard does not determine legalism. It really makes no difference how strict or loose the church or the family down the road from you is. They are not the standard. The Bible is the standard. So, everyone else is doing it, so everyone else says, ‘What’s wrong with it?’ It makes no difference. **2 Cor 10:12** *For we dare not class ourselves, or compare ourselves, with those who commend themselves. But they, measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise.*

So don’t be fooled. When you tell others that this is what the Bible teaches on holy living and they say, ‘Oh, that’s very narrow and legalistic. Our church understands Christian liberty.’ Christian liberty is freedom to please God by the enablement of His Spirit.

Pharisaism is not accountability and church discipline.

When a church loves its people, it does more than tell them how to please God. It supervises one another to see if they are pleasing God. It holds its members to a biblical standard. And, should one of them walk off the standard and reject Biblical counsel, a loving church will admonish, correct, and in the long run, discipline its members. When this happens, it is not legalism or Pharisaism; it is discipleship. This is actually carrying out the commands God gave us.

So don’t be fooled. If, and I trust it would not have to happen, one attending your church was to be church disciplined and then say, ‘That was so unloving, unkind and Pharisaical, so legalistic,’ you can respond by saying, ‘There is nothing legalistic about expecting obedience. God expects it. Parents expect it. And sound churches expect it too.’

I love the church. Many grow up in a very legalistic, and Pharisaical church. So I am sensitive to a church ever going that route. But I am equally concerned that we do not embrace libertarianism and call it Christianity, and call anything that pursues holiness ‘legalism’. It is expected that we set standards and insist upon them. This is not Pharisaism. This is simply practical, biblical Christianity. May we understand the difference between the two; may we joyfully pursue holiness, that we may see more of Christ.