

Part 1

Attitude Toward God's Law

One of the major stereotypes of the Pharisees is that they strictly kept the law of God. This was certainly their reputation. After all, Paul called the Pharisees "*the strictest sect*" of the Jews (Acts 26:5). However, even though there may have been certain individuals like Paul – a former "*Pharisee*" who was "*blameless*" according to the Law (Philippians 3:5-6) – who did strictly keep God's law, the Pharisees in general did not. In fact, they were actually very *liberal* in their application and interpretation of the Law. So let us consider the Pharisees' attitude toward God's law.

The Pharisees Disobeyed God's Law

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others. You blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel” (Matthew 23:23-24).

This passage is often misunderstood and misapplied. The common idea is that Jesus rebuked the Pharisees for focusing *too much* on details when they should have focused on other matters instead. Those who allege this will argue that we must follow the *“weightier provisions”* and that the smaller details are, therefore, unimportant.

However, Jesus did not rebuke the Pharisees for doing something that was *unnecessary* while neglecting what was *necessary*. Instead, He said they should have done *all* that He mentioned – applying the *“weightier*

provisions of the law" while *also* being careful to keep even the smaller details.

Jesus did not tell the Pharisees that they should have ignored the details so they could focus on the weightier matters. He said, "*These are the things you should have done **without neglecting the others***" (Matthew 23:23). Because they failed to carry out part of the law (the provisions of justice, mercy, and faithfulness), they were disobedient to the law of God.

Furthermore, since Jesus said they "*should have done [these things] **without neglecting the others***" (Matthew 23:23), we know that if they failed to tithe as they should, they also would have been guilty of disobedience to the law of God.

When Jesus gave His apostles the Great Commission, He told them, "*Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, **teaching them to observe all that I commanded you***" (Matthew 28:19-20). This means that the Lord expects His disciples to do "*all that [He] commanded*" (Matthew 28:20). We are not at liberty to do as the Pharisees did with regard to the Law of Moses – keep some of the commandments and neglect others. We must strive to follow *all* of the instructions that have been given for Christians to keep in the New Testament. We must remember that Christ has been given "*all*

authority" (Matthew 28:18); therefore, we are obligated to obey His word.

Furthermore, the carefulness of the Pharisees in keeping certain details was not condemned. In fact, *carefulness* is commended to us elsewhere in the New Testament. Paul told Titus, "*This is a trustworthy statement; and concerning these things I want you to speak confidently, so that those who have believed God will be careful to engage in good deeds. These things are good and profitable for men*" (Titus 3:8). The word translated *careful* means "to be thoughtful" (Thayer). In other words, we are not to be careless in following God's word or have a casual attitude about our obedience to Him. We must be deliberate in our efforts to do what is taught in the word of God.

So who are the *real Pharisees* today? They are not the ones who emphasize careful obedience to the word of God. Instead, they are those who fail to do what has been instructed in His word.

The Pharisees Tried to Do the Minimum in Serving God

“For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:20).

Jesus said that our righteousness must *surpass* that of the Pharisees if we wish to enter the kingdom. How could this be if the Pharisees were so careful and meticulous in trying to follow the Law?

The problem with the Pharisees was that they looked to the Law to learn what they thought was the *minimum* they needed to do to serve God. Yet God's law is more than a mere checklist containing the absolute minimum that we have to do to please Him. Instead, the law contains explicit commands, implicit instructions, and principles that we are to follow.

Jesus explained this by citing six commands from the Law of Moses that the Pharisees viewed as a *minimum standard* while ignoring the instructions that

were *implicit* in each one. Let us consider the six examples:

- Murder – “*You have heard that the ancients were told, ‘You shall not commit murder’ [...] But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court*” (Matthew 5:21-22). Murder was condemned under the old law (Exodus 20:13); but killing someone accidentally (Numbers 35:10-12, 22-25), in self-defense (Exodus 22:2), or to carry out capital punishment (Genesis 9:6) was not. What was the difference? Murder is done out of *anger*. Jesus’ point was that anger is *not* acceptable even if it does not lead to murder. When we become angry, we must refrain from acting in anger and not allow it to continue in our heart (Ephesians 4:26). Furthermore, Jesus explained that anger toward a brother can hinder our own service to God (Matthew 5:23-24). It was not enough simply to not murder. Jesus said we must overcome *anger* – the root cause of murder.
- Adultery – “*You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery’; but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart*” (Matthew 5:27-28). Lustful thoughts are the first step on the

path to adultery (or any other type of fornication). James warned that *"lust... gives birth to sin"* (James 1:15). Therefore, we must work at defeating lust. It was not enough simply to refrain from committing adultery. Jesus said we must overcome the *lust* that might eventually lead to adultery.

- Divorce – *"It was said, 'Whoever sends his wife away, let him give her a certificate of divorce'; but I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except for the reason of unchastity, makes her commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery"* (Matthew 5:31-32). Jesus referred to the allowance that was made because of the people's hard hearts (Deuteronomy 24:1-4; Matthew 19:7-9) – a law that was given not to *condone* divorce, but to *limit* it. God intended marriage to be for life (Matthew 19:6). This is implied by Jesus' labeling of post-divorce sexual relations as *adultery*. Rather than finding a "loophole" and using it to our advantage, Jesus emphasized the importance of respecting God's *intention* for marriage as a life-long relationship.
- Making vows – *"Again, you have heard that the ancients were told, 'You shall not make false vows, but shall fulfill your vows to the Lord.' But I say to you, make no oath at all... But let your statement be, 'Yes, yes' or 'No,*

no'; anything beyond these is of evil" (Matthew 5:33-37). These people had missed the point about vow-making. The commandment was not given because honesty was only necessary when they made a vow but was unnecessary at other times. We must be truthful at all times (Ephesians 4:25).

- Taking vengeance – *"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, do not resist an evil person; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. If anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, let him have your coat also. Whoever forces you to go one mile, go with him two"* (Matthew 5:38-41). They had taken instructions about the punishment of crimes and used them as an excuse to get even for everything. Someone may insult, defraud, inconvenience, or become a burden to us, but none of these are reasons to seek revenge. We are to strive for peace in our dealings with others (Romans 12:17-21).
- Loving others – *"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven"* (Matthew 5:43-45). The Law of Moses commanded them to love their

neighbor (Leviticus 19:18), but it did not command them to hate their enemy. This was human opinion that had been read into the law. It was an *unnecessary* inference. Jesus' point was that loving only our neighbors and friends is not enough. We must love *all* people.

Jesus taught that we are to strive for *perfection*: "*Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect*" (Matthew 5:48). This means following the explicit commands, implicit instructions, and also the principles contained in His word.

So who are the *real Pharisees* today? They are not the ones who strive for perfection and try to do all that the Lord has commanded. Instead, they are those who view God's word as a "checklist" of minimum requirements with no regard to the principles and implicit instructions He has given for us.

The Pharisees Desired to See Signs from Heaven

“The Pharisees and Sadducees came up, and testing Jesus, they asked Him to show them a sign from heaven. But He replied to them, ‘When it is evening, you say, “It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.” And in the morning, “There will be a storm today, for the sky is red and threatening.” Do you know how to discern the appearance of the sky, but cannot discern the signs of the times? An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign; and a sign will not be given it, except the sign of Jonah” (Matthew 16:1-4).

The Pharisees – along with the Sadducees – came to Jesus and requested to see *“a sign from heaven.”* They did not ask this out of sincerity; rather, they were *“testing Jesus”* (Matthew 16:1). They did this on many occasions – challenging Him in order to find something that they could use against Him.

Jesus certainly performed signs. In fact, on another occasion, they admitted that He was performing signs. After Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, the chief priests and Pharisees met together and said, *“What are we doing? For this man is performing many signs. If we let Him go on like this, all men will believe in Him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation”* (John 11:47-48). Not only did they recognize that Jesus was performing signs, they realized that they were so convincing that if they did not do something to stop Him, everyone would come to believe in Him. So it was more than just that they wanted Jesus to show them a sign. They were not content even with the signs He would show them and demanded to be shown something that would live up to their expectations.

Paul told the brethren in Corinth, *“For indeed Jews ask for signs”* (1 Corinthians 1:22). The mentality of the Pharisees had been adopted by the Jews as a whole – at least by those who did not accept the gospel. Rather than showing them signs, Paul said, *“But we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block...but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God”* (1 Corinthians 1:23-24).

Just like with Jesus, it was not as though Paul never performed any miracles – he had (2 Corinthians 12:12). But he did not do what the Jews demanded that he do as a condition for them to accept what he said. Paul continued to simply preach Christ crucified. This was a

stumbling block to those who wanted to be shown a sign.

Signs were performed in order to confirm the word that was preached. The Hebrew writer said, *“How will we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? After it was at the first spoken through the Lord, it was confirmed to us by those who heard, God also testifying with them, both by signs and wonders and by various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit according to His own will”* (Hebrews 2:3-4). When Jesus sent the apostles out to fulfill the Great Commission, Mark recorded, *“And they went out and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them, and confirmed the word by the signs that followed”* (Mark 16:20).

However, since these signs and miracles were performed in order to confirm the word that was preached, they are no longer necessary because God’s word has been fully revealed. Paul made this point to the Corinthians: *“Love never fails; but if there are gifts of prophecy, they will be done away... For we know in part and we prophesy in part; but when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away”* (1 Corinthians 13:8-10). Miraculous gifts were necessary as long as God’s revelation was incomplete. But since His will has now been completely revealed, we can go to the Scriptures to prove what His will is, making the signs unnecessary. Therefore, rather than seeking for signs today, we need to be content with the word that has been revealed.

So who are the *real Pharisees* today? They are not the ones who are content with what God has chosen to reveal. Instead, they are those who demand to see signs from God to guide or instruct them apart from His word.

The Pharisees Were Closed-Minded

“Therefore many of the Jews who came to Mary, and saw what He had done, believed in Him. But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them the things which Jesus had done. Therefore the chief priests and the Pharisees convened a council, and were saying, ‘What are we doing? For this man is performing many signs. If we let Him go on like this, all men will believe in Him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation’” (John 11:45-48).

There are several examples in the New Testament of the Pharisees having minds that were closed to the truth. They had already decided what they wanted to believe and refused to consider anything that might challenge their preconceived notions. Their response to the raising of Lazarus from the dead may be the clearest of these examples.

Consider some important details from Jesus' miracle of raising Lazarus from the dead and the response of the Pharisees to it:

- Jesus prayed – audibly so that others would hear him – that this would cause people to believe that He had been sent by God (John 11:42).
- Lazarus had already been dead for four days (John 11:39), which means that this could not have been faked.
- The Pharisees received eyewitness accounts of what had happened (John 11:46).
- The chief priests and Pharisees *did not deny* the signs and their impact – *even in a private meeting* (John 11:47-48). Unfortunately, they were more concerned with holding their position of power and influence than they were with following what was right.

It is important to be open-minded to the truth. Closed-mindedness causes one to reject the truth in favor of what he already believes. Of course, we need to avoid the opposite extreme – being “*carried about by every wind of doctrine*” (Ephesians 4:14). This is not *open-mindedness*, but *simple-mindedness*. But one who is closed-minded refuses to consider the possibility that what he does not yet know may be the truth.

How can we have an open mind? First, we must be *humble*. James wrote, “*In humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls*” (James 1:21). We must recognize and be willing to admit that we might misunderstand the truth or be mistaken. If we are not humble enough to consider that possibility, we will not be open-minded to the truth.

Second, we must *look to the Bible* to find the truth. This was what the Bereans did when Paul preached to them: “*Now these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so*” (Acts 17:11). They were not *closed-minded* and refused to listen to Paul. They were also not *simple-minded* and blindly accepted whatever he said. Instead, they were *open-minded* and, after listening, consulted the Scriptures to see if what Paul taught them was the truth.

Third, once we know the truth, we must *practice* it and *teach* it. After emphasizing the need for *humility* in receiving the word, James said, “*But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves*” (James 1:22). Also, when we teach, we have the responsibility to “*speak as the oracles of God*” (1 Peter 4:11, NKJV). Even if we have practiced or taught something different in the past, we must change in order to conform to what is taught in the word of God.

So who are the *real Pharisees* today? They are the ones who refuse to listen to the word of God and examine it to see if they need to change their beliefs or practices to conform to God's will.

Questions for Discussion & Reflection

1. Were the Pharisees wrong to “*tithe mint and dill and cummin*” (Matthew 23:23)? Explain.
2. What is wrong with thinking of God’s law as a “checklist”?
3. How can we “*be perfect*” (Matthew 5:48)?
4. Are miracles like the ones performed by Jesus and others in the Bible necessary today? Explain.
5. What does it mean to be *closed-minded* and how is it different from being *simple-minded*?

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