

A Positive Look At Pharisees

'On that day some Pharisees came to Jesus saying, "Get out of here and go away for Herod wants to kill you"' (Luke 13:31).

'There was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to Him, "Rabbi, we know You are a Teacher come from God for no one can do the signs You do unless God is with Him"' (John 3:1 & 2). 'Nicodemus, who came to Jesus by night said to them, "Does our law judge a man unless it first hears from Him personally and knows what He does?"' (John 7:50 & 51).

'When evening had come, a wealthy man from Arimathaea named Joseph, who was a disciple of Jesus went to Pilate and asked for Jesus' body ... Joseph took the body of Jesus and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had cut out of the rock then he rolled a great stone over the door of the tomb and departed' (Matthew 27:57 to 60). 'Joseph of Arimathaea ... and Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds (over 50 kilograms). They took Jesus' body and wrapped it tightly in linen cloths with the spices, as was the custom of the Jews to bury. In the place where Jesus was crucified there was a garden. In the garden was Joseph's new tomb in which no man had ever yet been laid. The tomb was nearby ... and they laid Jesus there' (John 19:38 to 42).

'A Pharisee named Gamaliel stood up in the council, a teacher of the law honoured by all the people and he commanded the apostles be put outside for a little while. He (wisely) said, "You men of Israel ... I tell you, withdraw from these men and leave them alone. If this work is of men it will be overthrown but if it is of God you will not be able to overthrow it and you would be fighting against God"' (Acts 5:34, 38 & 39). 'When they heard Paul speaking to them in the Hebrew language they were even more quiet. He said, "I am a Jew born in Tarsus but brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, instructed according to the strict manner of the Law of our forefathers, being zealous for God as all of you are this day"' (Acts 22:2 & 3).

When people speak about Pharisees, the first thing they may think of is the way Jesus rebuked them for their hypocrisy and legalism. There is a lot more to the Pharisees and although they were not called Pharisees in the Old Testament, their culture originated during the days of Moses when the Jewish people were given the Law. Pharisee means 'Faithful One'. It was their disciplined study of the Bible that brought the knowledge of God to the world. Their doctrine was shared by all Jewish people and gave us the Shema ... "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One and you will love your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your might" (Deuteronomy 6:4 & 5), meaning there is only one true God, not many false gods like the pagan religions believe. Jesus embraced that same doctrine and said, "The greatest commandment is, 'Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One. You will love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength.' This is the first commandment"' (Mark 12:29 & 30).

The problem with the Pharisees during Jesus' time was they had become almost cultish with their legalism. Their legalism grew to become a religion without God as their Head and that led to hypocrisy. They were more concerned with looking religious than actually following Judaism as God had given it. As we can read in the opening verses, not all of the Pharisees were in error. Some were holy and righteous like Simeon. 'There was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon. This man was righteous and devout, looking for the consolation of Israel (Jesus) and the Holy Spirit was on him' (Luke 2:25). There were many other righteous Pharisees whose names are written in the Bible. Everyone knew Apostle Paul was a Pharisee. There was a problem with the label of Pharisee not with their study of the Old Testament.

Pharisees were around before the War of the Maccabees and were possibly the group once known as the Hasideans. They protected the Jewish culture from the pagan Greek culture when Greeks ruled before the Romans. The Hasideans opposed the Jewish leaders who violated Jewish laws. They had a deep passion for Levitical purity and eventually broke away and formed their own group. They had a powerful influence for one hundred years but never sought political power. When Jesus came, the Pharisees were a major influence in Jewish culture, law and Judaism. They were very influential amongst the population, taking Levitical purity to the extreme. The Pharisees formed a league called Haburah, accepting only those who took an oath to pledge themselves to the strict observance to Levitical purity and tithing. It was this extreme adherence that brought the Pharisees into conflict with Jesus, the apostles and later the Gentiles who accepted Jesus. Their scribes were well trained in Scriptural instruction. They believed in divine intervention in their lives and within the community. They observed the Scriptures because it is the highest revelation of God and they believed in showing God's love to the community and to strangers as per the Lord's instructions to Moses (Leviticus 19:33 & 34). It was the Pharisees who held Judaism together after the destruction of the second Temple and Jerusalem. The Jewish people were unsure how to achieve atonement without the Temple and sacrifices, how to hold onto their traditions and connect with their families

while under the rule of the pagan Romans. It was the Pharisees who created Rabbinic Judaism, small groups all reading the same portions of the Torah (the first five books of the Bible) every Sabbath wherever they were in the world and they still do that today all over the world. That is a remarkable achievement of the Pharisees. Not all Pharisees were in error. Ezra the Scribe, a descendant of Aaron the Levite priest and brother of Moses, was a very faithful and devout man who would have been known as a Pharisee if he had been alive around 6 BC. He had an enormous influence on Judaism that carries through to today.

Three famous Pharisees (well known to Jewish people) were Shammai, Hillel and his grandson Gamaliel (Apostle Paul's teacher). Hillel and Shammai were colleagues and were powerful influences among Pharisees circa 20 BC. Shammai was known to be impatient, bad tempered and becoming angry at questions he felt were foolish. He had his own strict interpretation of the Scriptures and insisted there be a complete separation between Jews and Gentiles. One potential Greek convert wanted to be taught by Shammai who snubbed him, because the Greek man insisted Shammai teach him the entire Jewish law while standing on one foot. After being snubbed the Greek man went to Hillel with the same request. Hillel replied, "What is hateful to you do not do to your neighbour. This is the entire law and all the rest is commentary now go and learn it." Hillel was known for his great humility, extreme patience, kind temperament and pursuit of peace. He was a descendent of King David. Gamaliel's great wisdom and insight had an enormous impact on Judaism and Christianity in the 1st century AD. His influence on Saul/Paul made Paul the great apostle he became. Sadly, the early church gave up their Hebraic roots and the church cut itself off from its true lifeblood, Judaism. It was the Greek influence from Sadducees that gave us the weak, watered down, Hellenistic churches we have today. The church needs to get back to the Hebraic roots and once again embrace the powerful Gospel of the Kingdom, which is the Gospel Jesus taught. He did not teach a weak Gospel. He taught a Gospel full of power and miracles. Many Christians want Christianity to be apart from any vestige of Judaism but their attitude is wrong. All Christians need to realise we spring from the origins of Judaism, which was the foundation, basis and forerunner of Christianity. True Christianity honours the life and teachings of our Jewish Messiah Jesus Who came and bled to death on the cross for all humanity. Jesus laid the spiritual foundation for Christianity on the first Sunday evening after He was resurrected (John 20:19 to 22).

Some of the teaching spoken by Jesus and the apostles is from the teaching of the Pharisees. Pharisees taught the home should be as sacred as the Temple and people should behave at home as they did in the Temple. It is wrong when people behave nicely in public and quite sinfully at home. Most of the people Jesus rebuked were the religious leaders who happened to be Pharisees, Sadducees or their writers known as scribes. There were the religious leaders from the Essenes (called Children of Light) who were never once rebuked by Jesus. Jesus never rebuked the group called the Zealots (Zealous for God). These groups were active during the time Jesus was there. Just before Jesus began His ministry, John the Baptist formed a group of followers known for the 'Baptism of Repentance' (Acts 18:25; 19:4).

The Essenes were the group from where Jesus and His cousin John the Baptist came. They lived a strict disciplined lifestyle as they expected God would soon intervene in regards to the Romans. The Essenes believed all life was predestined and they believed the high priest of the Temple was elected under false pretences so they completely rejected everything to do with the Temple in Jerusalem. They were a secretive group who shunned most of society. The Essenes were a breakaway group that formed soon after the War of the Maccabees in 167 BC and they seemed to have come to an end about 200 AD. They remained a small group of around 4,000 and were mostly men. They meticulously observed the laws of Moses. They had to swear piety to God, a love of truth, hatred of falsehood, faithful observance of their beliefs and justice towards all mankind so they shunned slavery. They were the group who hid the Dead Sea Scrolls in Qumran. The single men lived like monks but for the Essenes to grow and continue, some of the men married and brought their wives into the Essenes.

The group known as the Zealots were a nationalist group who fought Israel's enemies vehemently. They formed a group that fought against the Romans. Hundreds of Zealots died in the siege of Masada in 73 AD when the Romans surrounded the mountain where they were hiding out. The Zealots knew, if they were taken by the Romans they would horribly tortured before dying a terrible death. They knew the women and girls would be raped. The poor Jews must have felt death was their only option so they systematically killed all of their children, the women then the men until the last man suicided. Two teenage girls hid behind the water tower and survived to tell the world about the shocking siege from the Jewish point of view.

The Sadducees took their name from the high priest Zadok who helped bring the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem for King David (2 Samuel 15:24). The Sadducees were mainly from the Hellenists (Greeks) who had ruled Israel before the Romans. They promoted stable, family oriented communal life. They did not believe in angels, life after death or the resurrection (Acts 23:8). The Sadducees had a strong influence in the Sanhedrin, which was Israel's Supreme Court and legislative body but they were regarded as a sect

(Acts 5:17). The Hellenistic attitude of the Sadducees continues throughout some branches of the Christian church today, which is in some places very Hellenistic, legalistic, hypocritical, cultish, controlling and emotionally cruel and they teach a powerless Gospel. Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormonism, Westboro Baptist Church in the US, the Closed Brethren, David Koresh and his group who slaughtered almost one thousand of its followers are just a few of these misguided cults.

The Scribes were a group of people who did the writing for people who were illiterate or were too busy to take notes for themselves. Most of the ancient prophets and some of the apostles had scribes. The phrase, 'Scribes and Pharisees' was written 23 times in the Gospels and each time they were being rebuked by Jesus or were causing trouble in some way so it seems the scribes who wrote for the Pharisees were indoctrinated by them. Paul used a scribe named Tertius only once (Romans 16:22), but all his other epistles were written in his own hand in Hebrew (1 Corinthians 16:21; 2 Corinthians 13:10; Galatians 6:11; Colossians 4:18; 2 Thessalonians 3:17; Philemon 1:19). Paul could not speak Greek (Acts 21:37 to 39) so he could not have written anything in Greek plus, he only preached in Hebrew (Acts 21:40; 22:2). All of the New Testament was written in Hebrew by Hebrew-speaking Jewish men who were writing to Jewish people within the new church called 'The Way' (Acts 9:2) or 'The Assemblies of the Gentiles' (Romans 16:4). The only exception was Luke who wrote to Theophilus (Luke 1:3; Acts 1:1) who may have been a Gentile. Theophilus could have been a Hebrew who had a Greek name like many Jewish people living then but we will never know for sure. The New Testament was translated into various languages including Greek as the Gospel spread to different non-Hebrew speaking areas.

Pharisees were not wicked but some were in error and sometimes misguided. They were regarded as a sect (Acts 15:5). They were shocked when Jesus told them they would have to change and become righteous before they could enter the Kingdom of God because they believed they were on the correct path to eternity. "I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds the scribes and Pharisees, there is no way you will enter into the Kingdom of Heaven" (Matthew 5:20) ... "You have made the commandments of God void because of your own traditions" (Matthew 15:6) ... Jesus told the multitudes, the Pharisees said one thing but did another and not to do the same (Matthew 23:3). The teachings of Jesus caused the Pharisees to become angry because they thought Jesus was teaching the wrong doctrine, they were offended (Matthew 15:12), they were jealous (Mark 15:10) and they conspired against Him. 'The Pharisees conspired against Jesus, how they might destroy Him' (Matthew 12:14). The words Jesus spoke and taught were not original. Most of what Jesus taught was quoted straight out of the Old Testament and also out of the Book of Enoch and Noah and they were directly from the Holy Spirit. Nothing Jesus spoke was of Himself. "I spoke not from Myself but from the Father who sent Me. He gave Me a commandment, what I should say and what I should speak. I know His commandment is eternal life. The things I speak are as the Father has said to Me, so I speak" (John 12:49 & 50).

We need to do more than just teach the Word of God, we need to live it and be shining lights for God to continue the work Jesus started, the apostles continued and many missionaries travelled to take the Gospel around the world. Jesus did not do away with Judaic laws, He came to fulfil them. Jesus said, "You are the salt of the earth but if the salt has lost its flavour, with what will it be salted? It is good for nothing but to be thrown out. You are the light of the world. A city located on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do you light a lamp and put it under a table but on a stand and it shines to all who are in the house. Let your light shine before men so they may see your good works and glorify your Father Who is in heaven. Do not think I came to destroy the law or the prophets but I came to fulfil. Truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not even one smallest letter (yod, equivalent of the English apostrophe) or one tiny pen stroke (little thorn of a yod, equivalent to the English dot above the 'i') will in any way pass away from the law until all things are accomplished. Whoever breaks one of these least commandments and teach others to do so will be called least in the Kingdom of Heaven but whoever will do and teach them will be called great in the Kingdom of Heaven" (Matthew 5:13 to 19). Jesus was indirectly saying, "No matter how much some people ignore the Laws of God, God's commandments and His Laws can never be cancelled." If you want to be considered great in the Kingdom of God then you must teach the Gospel of power as you serve God on earth. 'Our Gospel came to you, not in word only but also in power and in the Holy Spirit' (1 Thessalonians 1:5).

Amen and God bless you.

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