

HOW CAN WE BE THE PEOPLE OF GOD: THE PHARISEES

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Text: Luke 18: 9-14; Matt. 23: 13-16, 23-28

Introduction: First of a multi-part series of sermons on “How Can We Be the People of God.”

A. **A relevant question** for every generation, especially ours in the early 21st century.

1. ***We live in a rapidly changing world:*** technology (I-phones, I-pods, digital and HD tv; satellite communications; Mars rovers (built to last three months, now in their third year – who said the government can’t do anything?)
2. Social structures have changed dramatically – family, neighborhoods
3. Ethics and values
4. Role of religion and politics – sometimes it’s hard to distinguish between the two

B. **Jesus actually had to answer this question of "How can we be the people of God?"** – He did it in at least two ways:

1. He responded to the answers proposed by the major sects of Judaism – the first century Jewish historian Josephus discussed them – Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, “fourth philosophy” (Zealots) – each provides a model for answering the question, not only for the 1st century, A.D., but also for our generation as well.
2. He also answered the question in terms of his teaching and the challenges that he faced – three prime examples: the temptations, the Sermon on the Mount, and the Garden of Gethsemane

C. **Today, I want us to look at the teachings and practices of the Pharisees, the response of Jesus, 21st century parallels, and what this means to us as we try to be the people of God in the 21st century.**

I. **The Pharisees: Who were the Pharisees?**

A. ***Origin: Hasidim? “The Pious Ones.”*** – The Maccabean period (ca. 162-142- 63 B.C.) Only time of independence for the Jewish people from the Babylonian Exile until 1948.

B. ***The name “Pharisee”*** – name probably means “the separate ones,” or “ones who are separate.”

C. ***Number*** – Josephus says that there were about 6,000 in Palestine in the first century (A.D.) out of around 500,000 to 600,000 Jews in Palestine.

D. ***Beliefs:***

1. Divine providence/individual freedom of choice – hence, responsibility
2. Resurrection of the dead, rewards and punishment in the afterlife (Paul split Sanhedrin on question of the resurrection).
3. Supreme authority of the Scriptures (Law, Prophets, Writings), plus oral tradition or interpretations of the law (canon not officially set).
4. Attitude toward Rome – pacifists – Rome was a yoke for the sins of the Jewish people religion/state theory was ***theocratic***, the rule of God – through His Law (reminds me of Jerry Falwell who said that 911 was a result of God punishing the US for tolerating sin as he understood it (abortion, gays, etc); Pat Robertson threatening the town in Pennsylvania after it elected a new school board that removed a requirement of the teaching of creation science and after the courts ruled that the practice was a violation of the First Amendment to the Constitution. Restorationists (Salmon Rushdooney) support making the OT Law the constitution of the U.S.

E. ***Pharisee answer to the question of “How can you be the people of God?”*** – by the meticulous observance of the Law of the Hebrew Bible and the scrupulous adherence to ceremonial rituals.

1. The Hebrews had willingly accepted the Law at Mt. Sinai during the time of Moses and after the exodus from Egypt as a part of their covenant or agreement with God. They accepted the Law out of gratitude and thankfulness for what God had done, for their deliverance out of Egyptian bondage. In fact, there are several law codes found in the Torah or the Law (Christians refer to the first five books as the Pentateuch - the Five Books); The Ten Words, or the Ten Commandments; the Covenant Code (an elaboration of the Ten Words; the Holiness Code or the Levitical Code found in Leviticus, which emphasized the laws related to worship, the priesthood, and the religious holidays; and the Deuteronomic Code, found in Deuteronomy, which was an people expansion of the Covenant Code and was used to interpret the history of the from the taking of Canaan to the eventual loss of the land.
2. By the time of the New Testament period a legalistic attitude toward the law and its many interpretations was being followed by the Pharisees. The Pharisees not only followed the rules to the very letter of the law, they often exceeded the teaching of the law.
3. And, they were able to maneuver their way around the requirements of the law. For example, the law prohibited working on the Sabbath. In one instance, you could not travel beyond a certain distance from your home. To get around this, the Jew would travel the allowed distance, then set up a tent, call it home, and then travel the same distance and do the same thing until he arrived at his destination.

II. The Response of Jesus to the Pharisees

- A. Jesus was very, very critical of the Pharisees.
 1. He accused them of missing the weightier matters of religion by the meticulous observance of the law. He charged them with wanting simply to win converts rather than actually helping the people.
 2. He accused them of leading the people astray, of being hypocrites, of being murderers of the prophets. He called them blind guides. He described them as being like white sepulchers, tombs that were white on the outside but contained the bones of dead men on the inside.
 3. The Pharisees looked down upon the common people, those who were at the heart of Jesus' compassion (although the common people saw the Pharisees as the most religious Jews of their day).
- C. Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount did not denigrate the law - I came to fulfill the law, not destroy it. But he assumed an authority that was greater than the law - "You have heard that it was said . . . but I say unto you."
 1. Jesus taught us that there is a better way:
 - a. The way of faith
 - b. The way of love
 - c. The way of forgiveness
 2. By following his teachings one could go farther than the law could ever take him. In following his way, one could not only do what was right, but could do it with the right attitude and the right motive.

CONCLUSIONS

- A. The lesson to be learned is that we are the people of God not through the keeping of the law, not through rules and regulations, but through faith that leads to love and compassion, forgiveness and acceptance, and through service and ministry.
- B. So many Christians start with faith, then they somehow regress back to the law. We put our trust in the forgiveness and grace of Jesus, then turn around and insist that the Ten Commandments be posted in schools and government buildings. We accept Jesus' teaching about his kingdom being not of this world, then support a theocracy for our society.

C/ Jesus rejected narrow legalism, a religion of rules and regulations. They could only take one so far. Faith could take you much farther and could break down barriers, minister to others, fulfill a quest for a deeper religion.

D. An outstanding example of what can happen to a legalist turned believer is the Apostle Paul. This legalist of all legalist responded to Jesus through faith and changed so much of the Roman world. Through courage and conviction he not only rejected the law as a way of salvation but also as an ethic. Only a freeing faith in Jesus could fulfill the responsibilities of a believer.