

'The religious leaders'

The harried housewife sprang to the telephone when it rang and listened with relief to the kindly voice in her ear. "How are you, darling?" it said. "What kind of a day are you having?" "Oh, Mother," said the housewife, breaking into bitter tears, "I've had such a bad day. The baby won't eat, the washing machine broke down, I haven't had a chance to go shopping, and besides, I've just sprained my ankle and I have to hobble around. On top of that, the house is a mess and I'm supposed to have two couples to dinner tonight."

The mother was shocked and was full of sympathy. "Oh, darling," she said, "sit down, relax, and close your eyes. I'll be over in half an hour. I'll do your shopping, clean up the house, and cook your dinner for you. I'll feed the baby, and I'll call a repairman I know who'll be at your house to fix the washing machine promptly. Now stop crying. I'll do everything. In fact, I'll even call George at the office and tell him he ought to come home and help out for once."

"George?" said the housewife. "Who's George?" "Why, George! Your husband! . . . Is this 284-1373?" "No, it's 284-1376." "Oh, I'm sorry. I guess I have the wrong number." There was a short pause. Then the young woman asked, "Does this mean you're not coming over?"

And I guess the point of that story is to remind us that we should always be willing to do good even if it is by default. You see when Jesus was on earth, He was generally kind and loving toward people.

Acts 10:38 "You know about Jesus of Nazareth and how God poured out on him the Holy Spirit and power. He went everywhere, doing good and healing all who were under the power of the Devil, for God was with him".

But there were some people who were not recipients of his kindness, but of his anger. These people pretended to be religious, but they were very unloving and unmerciful to other people. He spoke harsh words to the Jewish religious leaders known as the **Pharisees**.

Many times we are caught in the trap of running to extremes. God's will has been revealed and needs to be understood the way God intended it to be. The Pharisees had this problem. They even had everyday life defined to the point where it was hard for a person to live.

For example on the Sabbath day, they had problems with different concepts such as "**work**." On the Sabbath you were to cease from work, and the Pharisees decided to define what God intended by this.

Let me give you a couple of examples: **1.** If Ethan went to bed, he wouldn't be allowed to turn over in bed more than seven times or that was considered work. **2.** If Kwame wanted to borrow something from Josh, Kwame could not put his hand through the entrance of the door to receive it, nor could Josh do that. This would be considered work. If you both met halfway, it was not considered work.

The Pharisees took the whole law thing way too far. And so Jesus said in **Matthew 15:6**, to the Pharisees, "**You disregard God's command, in order to follow your own teaching.**" For the sake of their definitions which they had made law, their extremes, they made void the Word of God. Now we laugh at the Pharisees and wonder how they could have been so ignorant. But if Jesus were here physically today, **what would He say of us?**

I think He would say, '**hey what's all this arguing amongst yourselves about what version of the Bible you can only use**'. '**What's all this fuss about song books and overhead projectors**'. '**What's all this fighting about one cup or many cups**'.

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You see loved ones, when we focus on things like this we end up making rules which end up being extreme. 'Oh we have to have two Bible readings one from the Old and one from the New'. 'Oh we need to sing at least five hymns and those can't be choruses.'

Let us not run to extremes; let us seek what God intended and do it. The Pharisees took things to the extreme, Jesus says to them in **Matthew 23:23** "How terrible for you, teachers of the Law and Pharisees! You hypocrites! You give to God one tenth even of the seasoning herbs, such as mint, dill, and cumin, but you neglect to obey the really important teachings of the Law, such as justice and mercy and honesty. These you should practice, without neglecting the others".

These men were very careful to tithe, or give one-tenth of all their income as an offering to God, but sometimes they would call attention to themselves so that people could watch them put their money in the collection.

They were very proud of the fact that they were observing the Law of Moses, but they were uncaring. **Have you ever seen the inside of a building which is just filled with cracks?** Maybe you go back a few weeks later and it's all painted white and looks great and you're impressed.

However when you return six months later you start to see the cracks in the walls again **why?** Well simply because all they have done is whitewashed the walls with paint and covered up the cracks.

Jesus again says to them in **Matthew 23:27** "How terrible for you, teachers of the Law and Pharisees! You hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look fine on the outside but are full of bones and decaying corpses on the inside".

Jesus compared them to tombs that had been painted with whitewash and looked very beautiful on the outside, but in reality they were like graves full of dead men's bones, not beautiful at all. The Pharisees were so bad that they would even kill the prophets that God had sent, if they didn't want to hear the message they brought.

Mark 12:1-5 "Then Jesus spoke to them in parables: "Once there was a man who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a hole for the wine press, and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to tenants and left home on a trip. When the time came to gather the grapes, he sent a slave to the tenants to receive from them his share of the harvest. The tenants grabbed the slave, beat him, and sent him back without a thing. Then the owner sent another slave; the tenants beat him over the head and treated him shamefully. The owner sent another slave, and they killed him; and they treated many others the same way, beating some and killing others".

When John the Baptist came preaching and telling them to repent, they did not listen to him and they refused to be baptized. So not everyone was pleased to see or listen to Jesus. **The Scribes** were a part of the Pharisee group.

Jesus says to them in **Matthew 23:5-7** "They do everything so that people will see them. Look at the straps with scripture verses on them which they wear on their foreheads and arms, and notice how large they are! Notice also how long are the tassels on their cloaks! They love the best places at feasts and the reserved seats in the synagogues; they love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to have people call them 'Teacher.'"

Now the scribes copied the law by hand, and they were regarded as important because they interpreted it and told the people the meaning of the Jewish law. **Can you imagine that? Can you imagine how long it would take to write out the Old Testament and make copies to sell to people?**

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But they were very proud of themselves and wore long robes with broad borders, or fringes on them to show their importance. They wanted to get the best seats in the synagogues, the places of worship.

They loved for people to call them "Rabbi", or teacher, and they would pray long prayers out in public just for people to see them. The common people looked up to the Scribes and Pharisees and regarded them as very religious.

Now you need to know that it was not a bad thing to be a Pharisee. It was a good thing. Jesus was condemning these Pharisees not for being Pharisees He was condemning them because of their "hypocrisy".

Luke 11:52 "How terrible for you teachers of the Law! You have kept the key that opens the door to the house of knowledge; you yourselves will not go in, and you stop those who are trying to go in!"

They preached the truth, but in their lives, they just pretended to obey God's law. They really did not respect or care about others. Imagine if I said to Bismark, 'hey you shouldn't be getting drunk' and then I go out and get out drunk that would make me a hypocrite. Or if I said to Jenny, 'hey the Bible says that we shouldn't be gambling' and I go out and play the lottery that would make me a hypocrite.

The religious leaders of Jesus' time were "hypocrites". Now there is another group of people who didn't get on very well with Jesus, they are called the Sadducees. The Sadducees were Jewish religious leaders who were from the wealthy families. And they often argued and debated with the Pharisees. The apostle Paul took advantage of this one day when he stood before the religious council.

Acts 23:6-10 "When Paul saw that some of the group were Sadducees and the others were Pharisees, he called out in the Council, "Fellow Israelites! I am a Pharisee, the son of Pharisees. I am on trial here because of the hope I have that the dead will rise to life!" As soon as he said this, the Pharisees and Sadducees started to quarrel, and the group was divided. (For the Sadducees say that people will not rise from death and that there are no angels or spirits; but the Pharisees believe in all three.) The shouting became louder, and some of the teachers of the Law who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and protested strongly: "We cannot find a thing wrong with this man! Perhaps a spirit or an angel really did speak to him!" The argument became so violent that the commander was afraid that Paul would be torn to pieces. So he ordered his soldiers to go down into the group, get Paul away from them, and take him into the fort."

The Sadducees didn't believe that people would be resurrected, or raised from the dead. They also did not believe angels existed. Now I don't know about you but if you don't believe in the resurrection or in angels that could make you "sad, you see". That's why we say that the Sadducees we're sad you see.

Now there was a group of Jews who were like the main leaders and they made up a group of councillors called the Sanhedrin. It was composed of a group of 71 men who were Pharisees and Sadducees. But we need to keep in mind that not all the religious leaders were proud and conceited.

You may be familiar with three good Pharisees who were prominent in Bible times; Paul the apostle, Nicodemus, and Gamaliel, a wise man on the council. According to some sources there were 70 men and the high priest presided over the council.

But most of these religious leaders we've looked at didn't like Jesus and His teachings, despite the fact He went about doing good and healing people.

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Jesus said they looked like good people, but really they were wicked inside. You see guys were living in a world where we as human beings have discovered several ways to reject God's law. We can defy the law, taking the antinomian stance, "I am my own person, I do not need law." Or, like the scribes and the Pharisees, we can reduce the law to hundreds of rules we can keep.

For example, the rabbis "fenced" the Sabbath commandment with 39 categories of possible violation. Each category was then broken down into specific rules. They debated whether one could wear a wooden leg or a brooch on the Sabbath. Would this be "carrying objects" on the Sabbath?

Legalism begins with reverence for God's law and ends in making the law trivial and absurd. The legalist runs the risk of at least three sins. **First**, he loses sight of the Lawgiver in reducing the law to rules. **Second**, he reduces God's great claims upon us to manageable rules he can keep. He then loses sight of the holiness of God and the sinfulness of man. **There's an old African proverb asks, "How do you eat an elephant?" Answer: "One bite at a time."** **Third**, having lost sight of the holy God and his own sinfulness, the legalist becomes self-righteous and judgmental of others.

In **Matthew 5**, Jesus restates the law as the Word of the holy God. He is not fighting the liberals; he is taking the legalists to task for reducing the law to bite-sized chunks. "The holy law of the holy God cannot be watered down so easily as you think," he says. "Anyone who reduces the great claims of the law is least in the kingdom. For example, you do not kill. Do you hate? You are proud because you do not commit adultery? Do you lust? You give your wives a legal paper of divorce; what about your commitment to live with them until death do you part? You stay inside the law in your business dealings, but is your word your bond? You live by 'an eye for an eye,' but do you love your enemies and pray for them? You must not reduce God's great claims upon you to a list of rules you can keep."

In view of Jesus' teaching about the holiness of God and this law, **what do we see in the cross of Christ?** The cross was the sin of sins. **But why?** Because the Jews and Romans broke the law, "Thou shalt not kill?" Yes, **but is that all? Was there not also a law which said that blasphemers must die in Leviticus 24:16, and did not many in Israel sincerely see Jesus as a blasphemer?**

What happened that day outside the walls of Jerusalem was not only the breaking of God's law; it was also the rejection of the holy and loving God who gave the law, the prophets, and even His own Son. The sin was not just the breaking of the law, but the breaking of the Lawgiver's heart. Jesus was crucified by the most conscientious legalists in town. As we stand before the cross we see a love so wide, so deep, and so high that all human beings come within its reach.

In the cross, God reaches out once again to those who refuse to acknowledge His law and to those legalists who trivialize His law and declare themselves righteous. All our human pride and pretension is shattered on the rock called Golgotha. The cross is the only real correction for legalism.

They thought they could please God just by obeying a lot of rules. Obeying rules is good. We have rules at home and rules at school, and these are necessary to make our lives run smoothly. But you cannot get to heaven by obeying rules. Jesus said the most important thing is **love**.

Mark 12:29-31 "The most important one is this: 'Listen, Israel! The Lord our God is the only Lord. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second most important commandment is this: 'Love your neighbour as you love yourself.' There is no other commandment more important than these two."

The first commandment is to love God, and the second is to love others. If you love God and love others, you will always do the right thing, no exceptions. Make this your goal to love God first and put others before yourself.