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Thinking Like A Pharisee

Dear Friend,

Of all the people Jesus encountered during His 3½ year ministry it seems that the Pharisees, along with the scribes, were far and away the people Jesus spoke to most sternly. Jesus scolded the Pharisees (John 5:39) because they believed they knew and followed God's Word to the point that they had eternal life, but did not recognize the Word made flesh standing right in front of them.

The attitude of the Pharisees was completely opposite to everything Jesus represented. If you were to list all the characteristics of the Pharisees on one side of a page and the characteristics of Jesus on the other, you would see that they were diametrically opposed to each other.

Everything that Jesus stood for and promoted was non-existent in the Pharisee mindset. Love and compassion motivated Jesus while self-promotion, self-seeking, and self-centeredness was the motivation of the Pharisees. Therefore, when Jesus was given the opportunity to expose their hearts, He didn't pull any punches.

Even though Jesus spoke very sharply to the Pharisees, His heart was filled with love for them. He loved them as much as anyone else and didn't want them to reject Him. I believe His strong words to them were an effort to wake them up to the reality of their real spiritual condition.

All the while they were afraid of losing their coveted position as spiritual leaders over Israel, which is another trap I believe many spiritual leaders have fallen into today. They build ministries that they view as their own little kingdom; positioning themselves as though they were the "go between" for their people to God. Under the New Covenant each of us has the ability to go to God for ourselves without having to go through another human being. Teaching this kind of freedom would require leaders to relinquish control over their people and because of that more often than not, they don't.

Here's something to keep in mind. When the Pharisees were giving directions to the people from God's Word, the people were supposed to follow what they said from the law. But Jesus warned against **following their conduct**. (Matthew 23:3b)

“But do not after their (the Pharisees) works: for they say and do not.”

The Pharisees were hypocrites. They told the people to live one way and then they proceeded to live the opposite. This is a dominant characteristic in someone acting like a Pharisee. In the Greek language the word used for hypocrite describes a person acting on a stage, pretending to be someone they are not. We are to never be like this.

Jesus gave us the perfect example of how we are supposed to live by showing us how He lived. Time and time again, He pointed to the lives of the Pharisees and told the people not to be like them. More than any other message Jesus taught, the contrast He demonstrated between His life and the lives of the Pharisees was the most important message He gave us. The reason this is so important is because it highlights a life lived in faith believing He is who God said He is and not trying to prove anything by His actions. Remember the temptation by the enemy was for Jesus to do something to **prove** He was the Son of God. The enemy's stock and trade is convincing Christians that taking God at His Word and believing it beyond all else is never enough.

When we hold fast to the belief that we are truly born again children of God and don't have to do anything to earn what Jesus did for us, the enemy has nothing to use against us. It's when we begin to think like Pharisees and believe that what Jesus did isn't enough that we start trying to do something in addition to His finished work. **The devil's objective is to keep as many Christians as possible caught in this trap of believing they have to do something in addition to what Jesus did in His death, burial, and resurrection. The most dangerous person to the enemy is a believer who knows he is a son of God and does not need anyone to validate him or what he believes.**

The trap the enemy works so hard to ensnare Christians in, ensnares both the sheep as well as the under shepherds. If he can convince the people to become dependent on the leaders, while at the same time, convincing the leaders that the people can't make it without them, then both are imprisoned in a belief system that says what Jesus accomplished was not enough. In order to solidify this point let's look at the way Jesus excoriated the Pharisees in His effort to shake them free from satan's trap.

As we read through the 23rd chapter of Matthew we can see many of the character traits of the Pharisees identified by Jesus, beginning with binding heavy burdens on the people. (Matthew 23:4)

“For they bind heavy burdens and grievous to be borne, and lay them on men’s shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one finger.”

Whatever form these “heavy burdens” took, what’s noteworthy is that the Pharisees laid these burdens on the people with absolutely no compassion. In some way or another these burdens had something to do with the people trying to make themselves right before God, which was impossible. All the while the Pharisees believed they were right before God and didn’t need to take the same medicine they were forcing on the people. This kept the people in a position of submission to the leaders, even though the leaders were equally unrighteous. A characteristic of the Pharisees; they must be in control.

Jesus came to set us free not to weigh us down with a burden we are unable to carry. Jesus is all about liberty and freedom and the devil is all about bondage and control. Anytime you see control being exerted over the people know that a Pharisee mindset is pulling the strings. In contrast to this, Jesus taught the people quite the opposite. (Matthew 11:30)

“My yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

Jesus destroyed the yoke of the devil off our lives and gave us liberty and freedom. God’s grace lived in faith is supposed to keep us from being bogged down with the weight of trying to make ourselves righteous. Jesus made us righteous in His righteousness. Now, instead of trying to be good enough to approach God we are told that Jesus made us good enough and all we are to do is come boldly into the presence of God and fellowship with Him. (Hebrews 4:16)

“Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”

The “Pharisee Attitude” says that we are not good enough and we will never be good enough but just keep on trying because you never know you might just make it after all, but probably not. This is the mantra of the devil. The devil hates the fact that he has been beaten by God in Jesus. The devil hates the fact that God was willing to sacrifice Himself for humanity and not him. There is no salvation for the devil. Because of that, he will do everything possible to convince believers there is no salvation for them, that they are never good enough, and all the while they are righteous in God’s righteousness.

The mentality of the Pharisees is straight from the pit of hell. Notice how Jesus held nothing back when it came to correcting them. He accused them of being like their father the devil because this kind of thinking, in which we place all of our confidence on ourselves and our actions, is from the mind of Satan. Here's what Jesus said in an effort to shake up their thinking. (Matthew 23:33)

“You serpents, you generation of vipers, how can you escape the damnation of hell.”

John recorded an even stronger indictment. (John 8:44)

“You are of your father the devil, and the lust of your father you will do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and abode not in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks of his own: for he is a liar, and the father of it.”

You have to know that Jesus loved the Pharisees and didn't want them to stay the way they were. He died for them as much as for anyone else. If He didn't care for them He could have just as easily said nothing to them and let them go to hell. Good riddance! But, that's not how love acts or thinks. Every person matters and every effort is made to reach them no matter how far gone they may seem. Jesus didn't stop with one or two statements. One after another He kept building His case against their ungodly lifestyles.

Jesus pointed out their flawed thinking about their giving. They mistakenly believed they could meticulously give their tithe while at the same time ignoring the other areas of the law. (Luke 11:42)

“But woe unto you, Pharisees! For you tithe mint and rue and all manner of herbs, and pass over judgment and the love of God: these ought you to have done, and not to leave the other undone.”

The point Jesus was making was that the action of giving, in and of itself, isn't enough. If we give with a heart full of envy and strife and division and think that God is pleased with our giving, we are just as deceived as the Pharisees. The same is true regarding anything else that we do in the name of Jesus. Are the motives of our heart right? Or, are we doing what we're doing with ulterior motives? The Pharisees always had ulterior motives.

Each time you see the words, **“Woe unto you!”** in the 23rd chapter of Matthew, Jesus is pointing out a character trait in the Pharisees that is not pleasing to God,

all of which are rooted in trying to earn their righteousness through their actions. In the 5th verse you can see the real motivation in their hearts. (Matthew 23:5)

“But all their works they do for to be seen of men...”

Think about that. The word “all” in this statement means that every single thing they did was in order for others to see them and think how holy they were. This gives us a pretty good indication of just how much they thought about themselves. They craved the attention of the people. (Matthew 23:6)

“And love the upper most room at feasts, and the chief seats in the synagogues.”

The Pharisees most highly valued the admiration of man. God doesn't intend on sharing the limelight with any man.

Look at some of the accusations Jesus made against them. In verse 14, Jesus said they devoured widow's houses and for a pretense they made long prayers. Think about this, on the one hand the Pharisees were so deceived that they would coerce the widows to give their last dime and yet they would make long prayers in public to show everyone just how holy they were. No wonder Jesus called them hypocrites. Holiness isn't demonstrated by how long we prayer. It is demonstrated by what we do when no one is looking, because that reveals what is truly in our hearts.

Jesus continued to show more and more of what was in the heart of the Pharisees throughout the 23rd chapter of Matthew. We will pick this up again in next month's teaching letter. For now, suffice it to say that where ever we see any of the characteristics of the Pharisees in our own lives we need to attack them with the truth of God's Word and get them out. We don't want to be hypocrites pretending to be one way while in our hearts we are quite the opposite, putting on a show for the world like characters in a play. This does not bring glory to our Father.

Please don't be deceived by the enemy into thinking there is not hope for you because that is also a lie from the devil. You have an inexhaustible supply of hope in Jesus, who gave His life to make you righteous in His righteousness. He made us worthy. His love for us made it possible for us to love Him back. Don't think that because you have seen some areas in your life where you resemble a Pharisee that God has given up on you. He brought you this teaching to help you see where you have been deceived by the enemy into believing a lie about yourself and He wants to deliver you out of this trap. Praise God for His mercy.

Our Father is so wonderful. He is glorified when we take Him at His Word, believe with all our hearts that we are who He said we are, and refuse to be lured by the enemy into trying to prove our Christianity by our good works. **Good works are only to be the product of** a life lived in confident assurance of knowing we are the sons of God Jesus died to make us. This confident assurance is to come from the inside out and doesn't depend on anyone else confirming or affirming we are what the Word says we are. God's Word to us is enough. Until next time...

~ Jesus Loves You!

Mark Jenkins