

## #228 "Characteristics of a Pharisee"

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The Pharisees occupied a prominent position in the synagogue during Jesus' day. They viewed themselves as the most righteous, the best, the holiest, and the leaders of the people. They took the extensive laws of the Old Testament covenant and multiplied them and made them ridiculously specific. Their entire lives revolved around proving to themselves, to God, and to the people just how great they were because of how they kept the externalities of the law according to how they themselves had written it. As Jesus said in Mark 7:6-7, "THIS PEOPLE HONORS ME WITH THEIR LIPS, BUT THEIR HEART IS FAR AWAY FROM ME. BUT IN VAIN DO THEY WORSHIP ME, TEACHING AS DOCTRINES THE PRECEPTS OF MEN." Even today, many talk a good talk and even live lives of great sobriety and piety. Some consider themselves great moralists while others claim a religious motivation and attachment. In either case, their hearts, because of their Pharisaical attitudes, are far from God, despite what they might say or think. They may have many fooled. Perhaps they are involved in church, perhaps they give to the needy, and perhaps they have attained their own checklist of righteous deeds. They feel vindicated before men and God, but are they truly righteous? According to Jesus' verbal assault on the Pharisees in Matthew 23, the answer is a resounding "no."

Jesus spoke to the crowds and the disciples with the Pharisees likely listening in from a distance, keeping tabs on Jesus. In verse 3, Jesus said, "Therefore all that they tell you, do and observe, but do not do according to their deeds; for they say things and do not do them." In other words, the Pharisees knew the Law and could teach it eloquently, but they didn't live it. If the Pharisees were honest with themselves, they would have seen their own shortcomings and sin. Before receiving grace we must acknowledge our sin, but they couldn't and wouldn't do that, despite their hypocrisy.

In verse 4, Jesus said, "They tie up heavy burdens and lay them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are unwilling to move them with so much as a finger." The Pharisees were ready and willing to point out the error of the people, but they were not willing to see their own errors. The delusion and denial that they possessed was astounding. The reality is that they were full of self-seeking and self-glorification, seeking out the places of honor, titles of prestige, and apparel that flaunted superiority (verses 5-7). There was no humility or the heart of a servant but rather a consistent elevation and praise of self.

Jesus' railing against the Pharisees grew more intense and specific in verses 13-36. Here are some of the main points of emphasis. Jesus condemned the Pharisees for blinding people from the gospel with their message of righteousness through the Law, and He called them out as those who were not going to enter heaven themselves (v. 13). He called them out for their greed and for their fake long prayers (v. 14). He called them fools and blind guides. He called them hypocrites, being adorned in glorious religious garments externally while being filled with robbery and self-indulgence inwardly (v. 25-26). In verses 27-28, Jesus called them whitewashed tombs, beautiful on the outside yet full of death and uncleanness inside. These, who considered themselves the ultimate success in law-keeping were called lawless by our Lord. They believed that they were so good that they would never have made the

mistakes of their forefathers, but Jesus said differently (v. 29-32). This pointed to their delusion and their great capacity to deny the reality of their own pride and arrogance. Finally, speaking to those who readily recognized the serpent of Genesis as being Satan himself, Jesus said they were a brood of vipers destined for hell (v. 33-36). Calling them snakes, Jesus pointed out their deception, their treachery, their wickedness, and their great capacity for lying to themselves, to others, and to God. The proof would be in what they would do to the ministers of the gospel that would visit them in the future, including Jesus Himself. After all, it was the Pharisees who made the deal with Judas to betray Christ.

What is clear from this passage is that Jesus had to be extremely bold and direct with the Pharisees because of how blind they were. This wasn't malicious or unkind, but it was necessary because of the danger that they bred. The fact remains that no one among us is sufficient of ourselves for salvation or sanctification. None of us would have resisted the fruit that Eve and Adam disobediendly ate. None of us would have kept the righteous requirement of the Law in its entirety. We are all law-breakers, and our only hope of satisfying God's holiness is the shed blood of Christ. To receive salvation we must acknowledge our sins by confessing them to God, turn from them, and trust only in the work of Christ on our behalf. Righteousness is only through Him. It is not enough just to admit that we are messed up people who aren't perfect and then continue as we are as if grace is an excuse for sin. No, we must let Christ change us from the inside out and begin to gradually perfect us. Only through Christ can we stand made perfect before God. With this free gift of salvation, there is no room left to boast and no sane reason to be a Pharisee. As 1 Corinthians 1:30-31 says, "But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption, so that, just as it is written, "LET HIM WHO BOASTS, BOAST IN THE LORD."