

The Pharisee and the Tax Collector

Part 1

Doing the Right Thing.

Today I want to look at a problem group encountered by the Lord Jesus when he walked the earth. They were called Pharisees and we read about them a great deal about them, particularly in the Gospels. They also feature in the book of Acts and the spirit of the Pharisee affected some of those who made up the early church. The apostle Paul was a Pharisee before his conversion. Unfortunately, the Pharisee has not disappeared over time and whilst the Pharisee not called by that name in the Christian church, Pharisees or people much like them are in the church today. Possibly even here. But who might they be?

Looking at some basic principles:-

Christianity is not about “Add God to your life and He will make you feel better”

It is not about, come to Jesus and He will make you happy.

It is not about come to God and will give you all the loving care and attention you need.

It is not about come to God and He will make you feel good about yourself.

In a fellowship like Coundon where a fair amount of effort is spent on ministering to people who are hurting or in need of healing, it's easy to get the impression that Christianity is about those things but I hope we don't give that impression.

Christianity is about a people coming to themselves, seeing that their sin has created a major rift between them and God, repenting of that sin and turning to God for forgiveness; that forgiveness being possible through a sacrifice that the Lord Jesus made on a cross. Then God does a divine exchange. He comes into the person who does that, He takes all of their sin, their failures and unhappiness and in exchange He gives his forgiveness, his love and his joy. It is not God's plan to put all of His good things amongst stuff of an old life in the hope that we'll be able to make something of it. He takes a person, makes them new and then shares good things with them. It's what the Lord calls "putting new wine into new bottles".

Some years ago I heard for the first time the word "Believe-ism" and how it was producing Christian look-alikes who believed in God but who had not repented of sin. They had simply taken God on board to make them feel better in a hurting world. That is a danger faced by the church. It is more seeker friendly to push believism than to push the need for repentance and change. However, it is only by repentance and receiving forgiveness that a

person will receive the Holy Spirit and He is the one who gives assurance that we are sons and daughters of God and have eternal life. On the day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit was poured out, Peter preached to the Jews who were there and said to them

Acts 2:38

38 [Peter replied,] "Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

(NIV).

It is the Holy Spirit who brings the assurance that a person has eternal life. Those who believe without repentance are not Christians in the Biblical sense. They will have no assurance and will invariably find themselves in a position of hoping that by coming to church and leading a good life they will have performed sufficiently well to please God and that one day God will welcome them into heaven. The trouble is, it is impossible to know when you have done well enough and so the serious mined person tries even harder.

Such a person cannot understand how someone can say they have eternal life in Christ. When asked if they would go to Heaven if they died right now, such people would invariably say "I hope so" because they lack the assurance that repentance and forgiveness brings.

A friend of mine used to go round churches preaching and would stand at the door afterwards shaking hands with the congregation as they left. Occasionally when he felt someone who shook his hand was not a Christian, even though they frequented the church, he would ask them if they knew if they would go to heaven if they died that night. When they said “I hope so” he knew they had no assurance and tried to persuade them of their need to repent and receive forgiveness. He saw a good many come into the kingdom of God by doing that. If anyone here would say “I hope so” when asked that question, God has more for you. If you will repent of sin and put your trust in Jesus Christ to forgive your sin He will forgive you and make you new and with that will come an assurance that you have received eternal life. If you have been hoping that good works will get you eternal life, it is even necessary to repent of that. Eternal life and the assurance of having it cannot be gained in any way other than repenting of sin and receiving forgiveness from Jesus Christ.

Pharisees

In the scriptures, some of the best people at performing in the hope of pleasing God and gaining eternal life were the Pharisees. They followed God’s law to the letter and they had no end of home made rules that they followed to help them keep God’s law. Those rules were almost put on the level of scripture. Some of what the Pharisees did, and didn’t do, is well illustrated in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector.

Just as an aside at this point, this is a parable. That is, a story with a meaning. It might have been a true story used by Jesus as an example but it doesn't really matter. What matters is that the hearers learned the central truth. There are also things called fables which are not necessarily the same as parables. A fable will often relate a story which can't possibly be true but from which a lesson can be learned. Aesop – a Greek – related fables which were eventually written down. They sometimes involved animals or trees talking and they had a moral. Some have given rise to well known sayings. For example Don't kill the golden goose and He has a dog in the manger attitude. A Biblical fable can be found in Judges Chapter 9 and is about trees going to anoint a king to rule over them and you get olive and fig trees talking and a vine and thorn bush talking.

Looking at parables, it's important not to interpret a parable beyond what it was intended to mean and it's important to see who it was being applied to and to apply it in a similar way.

Luke makes it easy by saying precisely to whom parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector was to be addressed:-

Luke 18:9

9 To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable:

(NIV)

Just out of interest, let's have a show of hands here. Who is confident of their own righteousness and looks down on everybody else?

Even the Lord Jesus may have had the same response to such a question. So then, if no one is prepared to make such an admission, to whom does the parable apply? I wonder!

While on the subject of parables, we need to make sure that we separate out parables from actual occurrences. Let me explain. It's possible to interpret a factual occurrence as if it were a parable. In other words, we reduce a factual account to a story with a meaning which is different from what happened in the story itself.

For example, Let's look at Blind Bartimaeas. Here is a quick run through a typical sermon on Blind Bartimaeas

Jesus is walking out of Jericho.

Bartimaeas was blind and sitting in the road begging. Until Jesus Christ comes into a person's life they are spiritually blind. Spiritual blindness means that person walks in darkness and does not have Jesus Christ the light of the world in their life and they are eternally lost.

Bartimaeas calls out. A person without Jesus needs to call upon the Lord while He is near. Now, at this very moment, there is an opportunity to cry out to Jesus. Tomorrow may never come. Now is that accepted time to come to Jesus.

Bartimaeas calls for mercy and you need to do that. Cry to Jesus to forgive you of sin and in His mercy give to you eternal life and fill your life with light to see how wonderful the Lord is.

People around tried to keep Bartimaeas quiet but he just kept on. Satan will tell you that you are good enough and don't need Jesus. Friends will say you'll never keep up the Christian life and you'll lose all credibility but you need to break through that and let nothing stop you coming to Jesus.

Jesus stops for Bartimaeas. When you call on Him, he will not ignore you but listen to your prayer.

He asks Bartimaeas what he wants and Bartimaeas was specific. Be specific, repent of your sin and ask Jesus for the forgiveness you need. He answered the prayer of Bartimaeas and he will answer your prayer to. He'll forgive your sins, come into your heart and give you eternal life.

Call on Jesus today.

As you can see, it is possible to relate the story as if it's a parable illustrating the way in which Jesus will save a person who seizes the opportunity to repent and receive forgiveness, whereas it's really about the ability of Jesus to heal blindness. I'm not decrying such interpretations, I daren't - and I've used them myself – and so have preachers much greater than I, but we need to take care that in doing it too often with accounts from the life of the Lord Jesus, we don't lose sight of what Blind Bartimaeas and other accounts of healing are really about.

OK now where were we?

Going back to the Pharisees, they originated from the time of Nehemiah when the Israelites made , a binding agreement in writing under oath committing themselves to follow the Law of God given through Moses, what they called God's covenant of love, and to obey carefully all the commands, regulations and decrees of the LORD our Lord. You can read what it involved in Nehemiah Chapter 10

It was a tremendous commitment and they meant it with all of their hearts but it gave birth to the group of people who many years later confronted the Son of God with accusations, who planned to put Him to death and were instrumental in that happening. So where did it go wrong?

Somehow in the process, the great commandment to love God with all their heart and their neighbour as themselves was reduced to making sure their theology was correct and to keeping traditions called the Traditions of the elders.

The traditions of the elders were written in what is called the Talmud which they virtually put on a level with scripture. Although Jesus kept the Law of Moses (the Torah) perfectly, it seems that he went out of His way to break the traditions of the elders frequently, like not washing hands before eating and spitting on the ground on the Sabbath to heal someone (John 9). Spitting on a rock was ok but not on the ground as that made mud and that was work. Like healing in church on the Sabbath when Jesus knew it would get under the Pharisees' skin even though they allowed an animal to be pulled out of a ditch.

The Pharisees loved discussions hence they repeatedly bombarded Jesus with questions and to them faith was no longer trusting in God with expectancy but was reduced to having a sound theological position based on the Talmud.

Faith was all in the head and not in the heart. One day a man born blind was healed and could now see. Even though it was clear to all that God had done it, the Pharisees simply couldn't accept that God could work through anyone who did not have credentials acceptable to them as and as far as they were concerned Jesus had no credentials. However, Jesus was not concerned about

credentials he was concerned about fruit and when the Power of God was at work the fruit was always good.

The Pharisees knew the temple needed clearing out, that wasn't the problem, the problem was it was Jesus who did it. The fruit was good but He didn't have the qualifications which were acceptable to them. He hadn't attended a rabbinical school.

Fruit!

Just a note about fruit. You cannot use the fruit test to justify something clearly against scripture. For example, a professing Christian husband leaves his wife and children and runs off to live with another woman. When questioned he says "It must have been God leading me because I was so miserable with my wife and kids but I'm so happy with the woman I'm living with now. The fruit's good and so it must be God's will" That's not good fruit. That's delusion as it is clearly in breach of the teaching of the Lord Jesus in the Gospels and the epistles.

The faith of the Pharisees had become an intellectual exercise and their walk with God was keeping a multitude of rules and regulations and preferably doing it in a way which would be seen by lots of people so that it all had the appearance of being holy. It made Jesus angry when he saw how they put keeping rules above a person's well being. It was a stench in God's nostrils then and it still is now.

Despite their careful law keeping, they seemed to lack assurance that they had eternal life.

On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Part of me feels that it was a genuine enquiry because despite his rule keeping he was not sure if he had eternal life. It happened another time too when a rich young ruler came to the Lord Jesus and even though he had kept the commandments from his youth up, he still needed to ask the question "What good thing must I do to get eternal life? His keeping of rules gave him no assurance that he had eternal life and rule keeping never will. It will come only through repentance, forgiveness and the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit which results from that. From the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, we can see that the Pharisee did not major on repentance.

Anyway, the lawyer asks "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

26 "What is written in the Law?" Jesus replied. "How do you read it?"

27 He answered: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with your entire mind'; and, 'Love your neighbour as yourself.'"

28 "You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live."

29 But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbour?" Luke 10:25-29

(NIV)

Whilst in theory he knew what to do, in practice, the lawyer didn't even know who his neighbour was, let alone what it meant to love God! The lawyer would know the text of the Song of Solomon. In that book we see the depth of love which exists between two lovers. We also see a demonstration of the way God feels about those He loves and what it means to love God with all your heart, soul and strength. Love for God touches the depths of a person's emotions. It is not an intellectual exercise. Look at some of the verses.

Song 2:10-14

10 My lover spoke and said to me, "Arise, my darling, my beautiful one, and come with me.

Song 2:14

My dove in the clefts of the rock, in the hiding-places on the mountainside, show me your face, let me hear your voice; for your voice is sweet, and your face is lovely.

Song 1:15-16

15 How beautiful you are, my darling! Oh, how beautiful! Your eyes are doves.

16 How handsome you are, my lover! Oh, how charming! And our bed is verdant.

(NIV)

However, all such emotion was lost on the lawyer and all those like him. To love God meant keeping rules.

One of the lovely things that happens when the Spirit of God comes with seasons of refreshing as in the mid 90's is that people fall in love with Jesus like never before. However, during such times the Pharisee or the person with a Pharisee spirit can't cope with such a show of emotion. They rise to defend the status quo and are likely to put such a move of the spirit, and some of the unusual things that often accompany it, down to the demonic or at least to the flesh, just like the Pharisees did with Jesus.

The sad thing is that even those who have repented of sin and turned to Christ can become like a Pharisee and begin to base their lives on rule keeping rather than on relationship. There is a need to be vigilant that a beautiful loving relationship doesn't become reduced to that.

One way in which that can happen is where the impression is given that relationship is performance based whereas it must be the other way around. For anything done for God to be worthwhile, it must be done out of love for

Him and as a result of knowing His love for us. Once the motive for God's work is to gain God's favour or love, it can soon become a religious performance.

Going to church out of love for God?

“Well, it's time for church again, glory to God. You'd better get your hat and coat or we'll be late.”

Imagine a deaf man going into a room. In the room a person is sitting down tapping his feet and snapping his fingers listening to a music cd. The deaf person thinks the man is enjoying himself and thinks that he'll join in and snap his fingers tap his feet too. He manages to copy the rhythm and although it's not that much fun it's alright. Then some more deaf people walk in and begin doing the same. Finally there's a room full of deaf people all tapping their feet and snapping their fingers.

However, the first man's actions are natural responses to the music in his ears. He loves the music and responds to it. The others are just imitating the actions even though they can't hear a thing. That illustrates the difference between real Christianity and Pharaism. When we live the Christian life as God intended our attitudes and actions and the work we do is in response to the “music” we hear. The music is our personal relationship with God who lives within us. The Pharisee isn't concerned about relationship with a loving

God. All the Pharisee is concerned about is that everyone is tapping their feet in time and keeping the rules. That means all the rules and I've heard some.

You must be at all the meetings – and you feel smug because you went but so and so didn't. I'm glad I'm not like other Christians who don't come to the meetings.

You shouldn't go to the football match but it was ok to watch it on TV at home. One was clearly worldly but the other wasn't.

A Christian must not use bad language and I felt good about that but it seemed that there were some Christian swear words that were OK like "I'll be blown" and "for crying out loud" and "Goodness me" which for some reason were ok. Our own Christian Talmud was being written. Early one morning I came across an elder trying to open the church door. He was usually incredibly kind, placid and gentle. Anyway, whoever closed the door last has slammed it hard and jammed the lock and as I as a young Christian approached, I noted very clearly that the air was tinged with a light shade of blue and it gradually got worse until the door opened.

I heard someone say that such and such a person wouldn't cut their nails if it was Sunday and another group I knew had people round their house after the meeting on Sunday night. They would carry cups of coffee and give them to people who came but wouldn't wash up the cups until after midnight because

that was work and you shouldn't work on Sundays. Obviously carrying them wasn't.

One group was told they shouldn't run a successful Sunday School in a village hall on a Sunday morning because it meant that the teachers missed the Sunday morning meeting at their church. Finally, the Sunday School was changed from morning to afternoon and it then hit the rocks because of inter-village football on a Sunday afternoon. The kids who did come to Sunday School were subjected to face pulling through the windows of the village hall and rude comments from the kids watching the football. Eventually it closed - but at least the teachers got to church.

It wasn't ok to buy things on Sunday and that seemed fine to me as a young Christian but then I found that some Christians bought an ice creams when they went out on a Sunday afternoon - and it was ok to buy petrol for the car!

What a mess – yet for many, the Christian life is not about gazing into the eyes of a loving heavenly Father and wanting to please the One you love with all your heart, it's just become a complex web of dos and don'ts which has the appearance of Godliness which passes for Christianity. It's a kind of religious bondage. Christians who are bound to keep unwritten laws and rules all to help us to become better Christians – except that it doesn't work.

I remember being taught that for a Christian sex before marriage is wrong. And I still believe it because it is a clear declaration in scripture. However, even refraining from sex before marriage will come out of a love for God that a true believer has and will not be seen as an infernal restriction put there to make unmarried Christians miserable.

But you have to tell Christians to read their Bibles and Pray and come to church or they won't do it. Won't they? They will if they love Jesus and if they do it just because they are told to do it what does that say about relationship with a loving Father?

Next time we'll look a bit further into this.

11 September 2004