

Lessons from the scribes and Pharisees

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The Pharisees and the scribes were at the root of evil in Israel. They saw themselves as separate and of exalted status. However, they did not do the things commanded by the Law and they added their own traditions to the Word of God. The Apostle Paul provides an example of a Pharisee who truly forsook their ways.

THE LORD JESUS said, "For I say unto you, That except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven" (Mt. 5:20). This is a warning for ourselves. In this article we will examine a few aspects of the scribes and Pharisees in order to discern why their "righteousness" was not acceptable. A failure to be warned by their wrong example could prevent us from entering into the Kingdom.

Separate

The word 'Pharisee' is thought to derive from the Hebrew word *parash*, which has the meaning of 'distinctiveness' or 'separateness'. For example, in Nehemiah 8:8 it is written, "So they read in the book in the law of God distinctly [*parash*]". Certainly, the Pharisees regarded themselves as a distinct sect with regard to religion, for Paul describes the Pharisees as "the most straitest sect of our religion" (Acts 26:5).

The exact origins of the Pharisees are unclear, but Josephus names them as one of three sects which existed in the second century B.C.: "At this time there were three sects among the Jews . . . the one was called the sect of the Pharisees, another the sect of the Sadducees, and the other the sect of the Essenes".¹ For part of this time, the Jewish Hasmonean dynasty ruled in Israel. According to Professor Dan Cohn-Sherbok, the rise of the Pharisees "appears to date from the Hasideans who broke away from the Hasmonean regime in the second century because of its irreligious character".² This desire for separateness fits with the supposed meaning of the word 'Pharisee'.

The concordance shows that there is another Hebrew word that is spelt the same as the word

for 'distinctly' but pronounced *peresh*, and meaning 'dung', for example in Exodus 29:14: "But the flesh of the bullock, and his skin, and his dung [*peresh*], shalt thou burn with fire without the camp: it is a sin offering". The sense of this word is 'something separated from the body'. When in

Matthew 15:17, having spoken out against the Pharisees, the Lord Jesus spoke of that which is "cast out into the draught", it is an ironic allusion to the word 'Pharisee'. Likewise, in writing to the Philippians, Paul makes this allusion, when, having mentioned that he was a Pharisee, he says, "I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung" (3:5,8).

Root of evil

In Luke 16:14 it is written, "And the Pharisees also, who were covetous, heard all these things: and they derided him". The Greek word translated "covetous" is not the usual word for covetous. It is the word *philarguros*. This is made up of two Greek words. The first part, *phil*, derives from *philos* (friend) or *phileō* (to love). The second part, *arguros*, is the Greek word for *silver*. A definition of the word would be 'friend or lover of silver or money'.

A related Greek word, *philarguria*, is found in 1 Timothy 6:10 and is translated "the love of money": "For the love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows". Solomon said, "money answereth all things" (Eccl. 10:19). Money can be used by man to pursue all his evil desires, and therefore the love of money is the root of all evil.*

The Pharisees were renowned for their love of money. The love of money is the root of all evil.

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1. *Antiquities of the Jews*, xiii, 5, 9 (Whiston translation).
 2. Cohn-Sherbok, D. (2003), "Judaism—History, Belief and Practice", London, Routledge, p. 90.

Therefore the Pharisees were at the root of all evil in Israel. This is one reason why the Lord Jesus frequently spoke against the Pharisees. In Matthew 15 the Lord Jesus shows what would happen to the Pharisaic root of all evil in Israel.

At the beginning of Matthew 15 it is written, "Then came to Jesus scribes and Pharisees, which were of Jerusalem, saying, Why do thy disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? for they wash not their hands when they eat bread. But he answered and said unto them, Why do ye also transgress the commandment of God by your tradition?" (vv. 1-3). The Lord Jesus goes on to show how the Pharisees used tradition to escape their responsibilities with regard to honouring their father and mother.

The Lord Jesus then "called the multitude, and said unto them, Hear, and understand: not that which goeth into the mouth defileth a man; but that which cometh out of the mouth, this defileth a man" (vv. 10,11). At this point the disciples, no doubt uneasy at this public refutation of the Pharisees, came to the Lord Jesus "and said unto him, Knowest thou that the Pharisees were offended, after they heard this saying?" (v. 12).

The response of the Lord Jesus shows that he regarded the Pharisees as a root of evil: "But he answered and said, Every plant, which my heavenly Father hath not planted, shall be rooted up" (v. 13). This was what would happen to the Pharisaic root of all evil in Israel. It would be rooted up.

The traditions of men, unlike the Scriptures, had not been planted by God. Less than forty years later, the Pharisees, together with the nation itself, were rooted up by the Romans and scattered throughout the Roman world and beyond. In the materialistic world in which we live, the love of money is still at the root of all evil. We must be warned by the example of the Pharisees, knowing that all evil roots will be rooted up when Christ returns.

The scribes

In Matthew 13:52 the Lord Jesus described a godly scribe: "Then said he unto them, Therefore every scribe which is instructed unto the kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that is an householder, which bringeth forth out of his treasure things new and old". A faithful scribe is one who firstly is instructed in the things concerning the Kingdom, and who secondly teaches others about the Kingdom from his store of knowledge. The things concerning the Kingdom of

heaven provided a test by which scribes could be discerned.

Later on, in Matthew 23:13, the Lord Jesus shows that the scribes failed this test: "But woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye shut up the kingdom of heaven against men: for ye neither go in yourselves, neither suffer ye them that are entering to go in". Firstly, the scribes were not instructed in the things concerning the Kingdom; consequently they were not going to enter it. Secondly, not only did they not have anything in store to teach about the Kingdom, they were actually stopping those who wanted to learn. The teaching concerning the Kingdom of heaven, including its future restoration to Israel (Acts 1:6), is a key aspect of the gospel, and we should be warned by the example of the scribes. As Christadelphians we should be faithful scribes in the things concerning the Kingdom of heaven.

In the days of Josiah, Shaphan the scribe brought "forth out of his treasure" the copy of the Law that Moses had written, although he seems to have been more concerned with the money that had been collected (2 Kgs. 22:9,10). This original copy of the Law would have been vital. Jeremiah 8:8 states, "How do ye say, We are wise, and the law of the LORD [Yahweh] is with us? Lo, certainly in vain made he it; the pen of the scribes is in vain". The sense of the word "vain" here is that of lies or falsehood. This is conveyed in the AV margin: "the false pen of the scribes worketh for falsehood". The scribes were writing things that were lies, but the original copy of the Law would help to expose their falsehood.

In the days of the Lord Jesus, the scribes were regarded as experts in the Law. For example, Herod approached them for advice on where the Christ was to be born (Mt. 2:4), and the disciples referred to the teaching of the scribes when speaking to the Lord Jesus about the work of Elijah (17:10). However, the scribes were still writing falsehood and lies.

We saw in Matthew 15:2 that the scribes and Pharisees asked the Lord Jesus, "Why do thy disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? for they wash not their hands when they eat bread". The Lord Jesus responded by showing how their tradition contradicted the commandment concerning the honouring of parents (vv. 4-6). However, it was not simply a case of contradiction, as the Lord's quotation from Isaiah shows: "Ye hypocrites, well did Esaias prophesy of you, saying, This people draweth nigh unto Me with

their mouth, and honoureth Me with their lips; but their heart is far from Me. But in vain they do worship Me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men" (vv. 7-9). The traditions of the scribes, which were simply "commandments of men", were being put forward as "doctrines". The distinction between the Word of God and the word of man had become blurred.

The Lord Jesus said, "The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat: all therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe and do" (23:2,3). These words indicate that, amongst other things, the scribes and Pharisees made correct statements when they read from the Law. However, the Lord Jesus went on to say, "but do not ye after their works: for they say, and do not". So, even on the occasions when the scribes and Pharisees said right things, they did not do the right things. The right attitude is that which Paul was confident that Philemon would show, that he would do not only what he was asked, but more besides: "Having confidence in thy obedience I wrote unto thee, knowing that thou wilt also do more than I say" (Philem. v. 21).

The Pharisee and the publican

The full extent of the error of the Pharisaic attitude is demonstrated in the Parable of the Pharisee and Publican. The Lord Jesus said in his parable, "The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess" (Lk. 18:11,12). The Pharisee thought he could justify himself by his works, thinking that he was better than other men. Yet it was the publican who was justified: "And the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner. I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other: for every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted" (vv. 13,14). The Pharisees, along with the scribes, exalted themselves, but in the end they would be brought low.

Paul

The Apostle Paul had been a Pharisee, yet he rejected the Pharisaic approach. Like the publican in the parable, he confessed his sins: "O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" (Rom. 7:24). He rejected

"the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees" (Mt. 5:20) and instead sought "the righteousness of God" (Rom. 1:17), "the righteousness of faith" (4:13). As he wrote: "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God" (Eph. 2:8). As we will now see, Scripture provides specific examples in which he had made a break with his Pharisaic past.

Garments

The first we read of Paul is the reference to him looking after the garments of those who stoned Stephen: "and the witnesses laid down their clothes at a young man's feet, whose name was Saul" (Acts 7:58). The last we read of him, he is languishing in a prison hoping that a cloak would be sent to him: "The cloke that I left at Troas with Carpus, when thou comest, bring with thee, and the books, but especially the parchments" (2 Tim. 4:13). This contrasts the poverty of Paul at the end of his life with his status as a Pharisee when he was young. However, there is a deeper point that emerges from this comparison.

A characteristic of the garments worn by the scribes and Pharisees was that their borders were enlarged: "But all their works they do for to be seen of men: they make broad their phylacteries, and enlarge the borders of their garments" (Mt. 23:5). The garments at the feet of Saul would have no doubt included those with these enlarged borders.

The purpose of the borders is found in Numbers 15:38-40: "Speak unto the children of Israel, and bid them that they make them fringes in the borders of their garments throughout their generations, and that they put upon the fringe of the borders a ribband of blue: and it shall be unto you for a fringe, that ye may look upon it, and remember all the commandments of the LORD [Yahweh], and do them; and that ye seek not after your own heart and your own eyes, after which ye use to go a whoring: that ye may remember, and do all My commandments, and be holy unto your God". The fringes with their blue ribbands were intended to help the Jews "remember" and "do" the commandments of God. The scribes and Pharisees, however, did not "do" the commandments of God, as Christ said: "for they say, and do not" (Mt. 23:3). Instead, their borders were designed "to be seen of men" (v. 5).

As Paul lay in prison, his concern was not to be "seen of men" but for the true spirit of the teaching concerning the borders and their blue ribbands. As Numbers 15 shows, the blue ribbands represented

the commandments of God. Paul wished to read and write about the commandments of God. This is shown by his request that Timothy, in addition to the cloke, should bring "the books, but especially the parchments".

The sign of Jonah

In Matthew 12:38-40 we read, "Then certain of the scribes and of the Pharisees answered, saying, Master, we would see a sign from thee. But he answered and said unto them, An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given to it, but the sign of the prophet Jonas: for as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale's belly; so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth". An example of when this sign was given was when the Lord Jesus appeared to the Pharisee, Saul (Paul). In fact, Paul's own experience followed the pattern of this sign.

Just as Jonah was "in the belly of the fish three days and three nights" (Jonah 1:17), so Paul was "three days without sight, and neither did eat nor drink" (Acts 9:9). Jonah "prayed" (Jonah 2:1) in the fish, and the Lord said of Paul, "behold, he prayeth" (Acts 9:11). Jonah had previously stated, "I am an Hebrew" (Jonah 1:9), and Paul was to later declare this as well: "an Hebrew of the Hebrews" (Phil. 3:5). In Jonah 4:8 it is said that "the sun beat upon the head of Jonah". When Christ appeared to Paul, there was "a light from heaven, above the brightness of the sun" (Acts 26:13). Paul the Pharisee was truly given "the sign of the prophet Jonas".

Tradition

We have seen that the scribes and Pharisees followed traditions that were in opposition to the Word of God. Paul himself, before his conversion, had done the same, as he wrote: "[I] profited in the Jews' religion above many my equals in mine own nation, being more exceedingly zealous of the traditions of my fathers" (Gal. 1:14). These traditions were still prevalent later on, as he warned the Colossians: "Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ" (2:8).

However, as a faithful follower of Christ, Paul spoke of traditions which he expected others to

follow. In his Second Letter to the Thessalonians he wrote, "Therefore, brethren, stand fast, and hold the traditions which ye have been taught, whether by word, or our epistle" (2:15); and, "Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the tradition which he received of us" (3:6). These traditions were not man-made, but were the Word of God. Moreover, there was no hypocrisy on Paul's part. He strove to do the will of God, as did the Thessalonians: "And we have confidence in the Lord touching you, that ye both do and will do the things which we command you" (v. 4). The traditions of the Apostle Paul were a sign of his complete rejection of the traditions of the elders that were followed by the scribes and Pharisees.

Conclusion

The Pharisees were rooted out of the land in A.D. 70. However, the love of money remains a danger to us all, as does the temptation to exalt ourselves and look down on the publicans of our day; traditions that have no Scriptural warrant can gain a life of their own; and when we do say right things from the Word, we do not always do what we say.

The Pharisees thought they were righteous, but the Lord Jesus said, "For I say unto you, That except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven" (Mt. 5:20). The Apostle Paul recognised this. He knew that entry to the Kingdom would not be on a euphoric wave, borne of admiration in the synagogue and marketplace. Instead, he exhorted the believers "to continue in the faith, and that we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22). Faith and tribulation were alien to the Pharisee, but in that way lies entrance into the Kingdom of heaven.

* Another explanation of this rather sweeping statement is that the love of money is the root of all evil because it distorts our values and encourages dishonest and immoral actions to achieve its fulfilment. Alternatively, the RV may give the correct rendering: "the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil".—Eric Marshall and Tony Benson (editors)

"Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone" (Mt. 23:23).