

Luke 16:14-18
The Definition of a Pharisee

God has never been reluctant to express His disapproval of sin and sinners. Some of the most impassioned passages in Scripture are eloquent statements of God's condemnation of sin. Consider,

“¹¹The multitude of your sacrifices—
what are they to me?” says the Lord.
I have more than enough of burnt offerings,
of rams and the fat of fattened animals;
I have no pleasure
in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats.

¹²When you come to appear before me,
who has asked this of you,
this trampling of my courts?

¹³Stop bringing meaningless offerings!
Your incense is detestable to me.

New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations—
I cannot bear your worthless assemblies.

¹⁴Your New Moon feasts and your appointed festivals
I hate with all my being.

They have become a burden to me;
I am weary of bearing them.

¹⁵When you spread out your hands in prayer,
I hide my eyes from you;
Even when you offer many prayers,
I am not listening.

Your hands are full of blood!” (Isaiah 1:11-15).

Or this,

“²¹I hate, I despise your religious festivals;
your assemblies are a stench to me.

²²Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings,
I will not accept them.

Though you bring choice fellowship offerings,
I will have no regard for them.

²³Away with the noise of your songs!
I will not listen to the music of your harps” (Amos 5:21-23).

Or this ominous passage,

“⁹Will you steal and murder, commit adultery and perjury, burn incense to Baal and follow other gods you have not known, ¹⁰and then come and stand before me in this house, which bears my Name, and say, ‘we are safe’ - safe to do all these detestable things? ¹¹Has this house, which bears my Name, become a den of robbers to you? But I have been watching! declares the Lord” (Jeremiah 7:8-11).

God seems to have reserved His special condemnation not for those who reject Him, but rather for those who acknowledge Him outwardly yet live a life that does not reflect their pretense to faith. Such were the Pharisees. They studiously devoted themselves to learning the Law for the purpose of avoiding its more uncomfortable requirements. As Jesus preached the true kingdom of God, they became increasingly hostile. They moved from being curious, to testing Jesus, to grumbling as He spoke, to outwardly mocking and scoffing. In this passage, Jesus responded to them and called out those characteristics that most distinctly revealed them as the self-righteous sinners that they were.

They Satisfied Themselves

The Pharisees had heard what Jesus had been saying to the disciples. They still lurked on the fringes of the crowd. Jesus had been speaking of the inability to serve both God and the flesh. Jesus had clearly stated that a choice had to be made, “no one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money” (Luke 16:13).

Thought the Pharisees had remained relatively silent, Luke noted their response. They “heard all this and were sneering at Jesus” (v.14). They muttered and mocked. They murmured their disapproval. They had no intention of modifying their behavior to meet the standard that Jesus taught. They had created their own standard of holiness, and they believed it was sufficient to earn them a place among the blessed. Scripture insists that their refusal to obey Jesus proved to be their own condemnation, “this is the verdict: light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil” (John 3:19). Yet, they could not openly deny what Jesus was teaching, however, for fear of seeming to be greedy lovers of money. Ironically, that is precisely what they were known as, “the Pharisees, who loved money” (v. 14) as Luke pointed out.

The word Luke used, *philarguros*, is actually a combination of two words. The first, *phileo*, is familiar to us as the word meaning love. The second, *arguros*, means silver. Taken together, they simply meant the love of silver. Judas Iscariot and his betrayal of Christ for thirty pieces immediately comes to mind. The Pharisees were greedy. They looked out for themselves. They were known for it. We know that selfish greed was, and is, a common characteristic of all false teachers. Scripture bears this out. Peter wrote of false teachers that “in their greed these teachers will exploit you with fabricated stories” (2 Peter 2:3). Paul cautioned that “¹⁸many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. ¹⁹Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things” (Philippians 3:18-19). The temptation of those in position to use their influence for selfish motives is why both Peter and Paul insisted that freedom from the love of money be a defining trait of church leaders.

“Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, watching over them - not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve” (1 Peter 5:2).

“²Now the overseer is to be above reproach, faithful to his wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, ³not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money” (1 Timothy 3:2-3).

We must remember that there is no place for selfish greed in a servant of Christ. Servants are to serve. They are to serve their Savior, and they are to serve each other.

They Justified Themselves

In addition to being greedy, the Pharisees were also self-justifying. Jesus called them out as being merely a facade of righteousness. He declared them hypocrites, “He said to them, ‘you are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of others’” (v. 15). Their interest was always the approval of men, not of God. They did not care if they truly were religious, only that they *seemed* so to others. They were zealous only for themselves, and they remind us that zeal, apart from truth, is worthless.

Jesus regularly warned His disciples to “³⁸watch out for the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, ³⁹and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets” (Mark 12:38-39). For the Pharisees, “⁵everything they do is done for people to see: they make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long; ⁶they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; ⁷they love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to be called ‘Rabbi’ by others” (Matthew 23:5-7).

Paul understood this. There had been a time when he was well on his way to being a great leader in first century Judaism. He had been “⁵circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless” (Philippians 3:5-6). But by God's grace he realized that he was merely justifying himself by trying to earn God's favor. Eventually, he came to “consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ” (Philippians 3:8).

We simply cannot justify ourselves. We cannot convince God that we have earned heaven. Scripture is as clear about this as it is about anything it teaches.

“Therefore, no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin” (Romans 3:20).

“Know that a person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ” (Galatians 2:16).

“⁸For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith - and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God - ⁹not by works, so that no one can boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9).

The list could be continued, but the point is that no man can save himself. We do not establish the standard, and we cannot attain the standard set by a holy and righteous God. And again, it is important to point out that the Pharisees were not really even trying to keep the Law of God. They were instead trying to adjust the Law of God to make their own feeble efforts acceptable. They did not want to attain the righteousness of God; they wanted their own righteousness to be sufficient. It was foolish. God is absolutely holy. With Him is no imperfection. God knows if our religion is a sham, and we simply cannot try to lower the bar to a place where we can reach it.

Jesus reminded the Pharisees that “God knows your hearts” (v. 15). He was God incarnate and He had told them in terms picturesque and unmistakable “²⁷woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you

hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean. ²⁸In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness” (Matthew 23:27-28). The Pharisees, like all false teachers, try to justify themselves in the sight of God and man, but their efforts are futile.

They Entitled Themselves

We know that all mankind is fallen. Therefore it comes as no surprise to learn that “what people value highly is detestable in God’s sight” (v. 15). Our values are not His values. The difference between God and man is infinite,

“⁸For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways,”
declares the Lord.

⁹As the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isaiah 55:8-9).

How different are the values placed on things by man and God. Man values riches, prestige, pleasure; God values faith, discipline, and holiness. Whose value will count in the last day? Whose standard will be the one by which all men are tried?

This is no more true than in defining the requirements for entrance into the kingdom of God. The truth has always been proclaimed. There was never a time when man did not have all he needed to know, for “the Law and the Prophets were proclaimed until John. Since that time, the good news of the kingdom of God is being preached” (v. 16). The “Law and the Prophets” refers to the entirety of Old Testament teaching. John, of course, is John the Baptist. He was the last of the Old Testament prophets and a transitional figure. He bridged the gap between the Old Testament and the New. The revelation of the Old Testament was preparatory. Now, since the days of John the Baptist, the fulfillment of the kingdom had come. His coming marked the beginning of a new age, since he was the forerunner of the Messiah. With the baptism of Jesus and the beginning of His ministry, John receded into the background, as he knew he must, “He must become greater; I must become less” (John 3:30).

Entrance into the kingdom of God is acquired only by self-denial and exertion. That is why “everyone is forcing their way into it” (v. 16). The Pharisees could not, and we cannot, simply entitle ourselves to be saved. True, we cannot earn salvation, it is entirely by God’s grace. But nevertheless there is work involved. Jesus explained that there was only one way to enter the kingdom, “make every effort to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to” (Luke 13:24).

The good news of the gospel is that God gives those He chooses the grace to strive to enter by that narrow door. If entrance to heaven were easy, everyone would be going. The Pharisees were not part of the elect because they kept the Law, and we are not Christians because we say so. It is because God says so. It is God’s family and he decides who is in it. Rather than trying to entitle themselves for membership in the kingdom of God, we ought to rejoice, “⁴for he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy

and blameless in his sight. In love ⁵he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ” (Ephesians 1:4-5).

The Pharisees believed that by teaching grace and forgiveness, Jesus was repudiating the Law. They insisted that such doctrines grace and forgiveness undermined God’s holiness and removed the need for people to merit their salvation by obedience to the Pharisees’ interpretation of the Law. While Jesus did undermine the Pharisees’ insistence on earning salvation, He by no means disparaged the Law. Quite the contrary. While the Pharisees made only a show of outward obedience, Jesus demanded and inward, heartfelt obedience to God.

Jesus insisted that “it is easier for heaven and earth to disappear than for the least stroke of a pen to drop out of the Law” (v. 17). We all know that one day heaven and earth will pass away. Such a conflagration is beyond our imagining (despite the efforts of science fiction films to make it so). Yet for Jesus, the Law of God was even more permanent. As an illustration, Jesus chose the Jewish alphabet. Think of the Jewish letters *beth* כ (b, bh) and *kaph* כ (k, kh). Only the slightest tail marks the difference between them. Think of our own capital letters B and R, or E and F, or O and Q. Again, the tiniest mark makes a difference. Think of the comma. What a difference between “let’s eat grandma” and let’s eat, grandma” for example. Not one small detail of the Law will be lost, Jesus insisted.

Jesus then gave a practical example of His passion for sincere obedience to the law when He spoke of divorce. God’s ordinance on marriage is clear, “so God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:27), and “that is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh” (Genesis 2:24). Jesus had expounded upon this Himself, “³¹it has been said, ‘anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.’ ³²But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, makes her the victim of adultery, and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery” (Matthew 5:31-32).

Clearly the standards had been set. The Pharisees, however, had evolved teachings that provided exceptions. While they never openly condoned adultery (they could not as the moral leaders of society), they interpreted the Law in such a way as to allow more freedom for divorce than God ever intended. They took as their excuse Moses’ words in Deuteronomy 24,

“¹If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, ²and if after she leaves his house she becomes the wife of another man, ³and her second husband dislikes her and writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, or if he dies, ⁴then her first husband, who divorced her, is not allowed to marry her again after she has been defiled. That would be detestable in the eyes of the Lord. Do not bring sin upon the land the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance” (Deuteronomy 24:1-4).

We know from studying ancient laws (and even laws today), that governments only make law to regulate things that are being done. That such a law was required at the time of Moses, indicated the extent to which society had already deviated from the biblical norm. But the depravity only increased. Their key word was indecent. And with the skill of modern day constitutional scholars who parse the potential

meaning of any word to derive value for their argument, the Pharisees focused on what might be considered indecent. For example, the great Hebrew scholar Hillel argued that a man could divorce his wife if she burned his dinner. And the rabbi Akiba said a man could divorce his wife if he found someone more attractive. The point of the law was to prevent, or at least limit, divorce. The Pharisees twisted it into an excuse to behave as they chose.

Mankind has not improved. Even in analyzing this passage today, modern theologians try to argue that either:

Luke was mistaken in what he heard Jesus say, or

The word used in Matthew 5:32 meaning fornication/adultery actually means any offense against a husband or wife, or

That Jesus was not speaking a rule for society but only offering a specific example for a particular time and place.

Again, modern scholars try to find what is not there because it serves them. Many people are unhappy in their marriages and it is much easier to divorce than to persevere through difficult times. Jesus allowed divorce in the case of adultery because God, as a measure of common grace, allowed the penalty of death for adultery under the Mosaic Law to pass away. Divorce was never part of the God's plan; it was never meant to be convenient. The Pharisees challenged Jesus because they said He denied the Law, but really they modified the details of the Law to suit themselves. They used their position for greed, self-justification and entitlement. Their hearts were hard; their eternity ordained.

Takeaways

We must fight the Pharisee within us. May God give us the grace to love what He loves and hate what He hates.