

The Pharisee Fallacy

John Launchbury

Religions often get characterized in terms of outward religious behaviors. Whether it's our own religion or someone else's, we commonly gravitate to the external factors. Someone might say "I don't eat pork because of my religion," or someone else may say, "I go to church on Sunday because of my religion." Pretty quickly we can gain the impression that a religion is defined by sets of rules that need to be kept.

Religious rules can become quite detailed. They might specify what food to eat (or not), or what sort of clothing to wear and when to wear it. For example, some Christian congregations require men to wear suits for church. Others prohibit women from wearing trousers, or have rules about women wearing head coverings whenever they go out in public, or perhaps just while at church. In Judaism and Islam—the cousin religions to Christianity—it is men who have to wear head coverings during religious devotions.

Some religious rules cover daily aspects of personal devotion. Someone might say, "Because of my religion, I read my Bible every day," or "I pray three times a day," or "I always pray before meals." Other rules might limit interactions with specific people, where some—because of their religion—will not mix with those considered to be especially sinful, or members of a competing sect, for example.

For many Christians, religious declarations like these are often taken to be at the core of their religion, as if they define their Christianity. In this I think they have missed something critical. The religion that Jesus was preaching is not of this kind. Religious rules and regulations can be immensely helpful as aids to discipleship, but they carry a major risk. They can become surrogates for the real spiritual purpose Jesus offers, or—even worse—a barrier to Jesus' message. This becomes very clear when we watch how Jesus interacted with the Pharisees.

Appreciating the Pharisees

Today, the term “Pharisee” has become a bit of an insult. Certainly the dominant tone of the New Testament tends to be negative towards them, but actually, there was much to praise about the Pharisees. So before we dig in to Jesus’ critiques of their approach, let’s take a moment to honor the Pharisees for what they were trying to accomplish—at least originally.

The Pharisees emerged as a religious movement a couple of centuries before Jesus, in the time between the Old and New Testaments, though their roots went back to when the Jewish people had been exiled.

Solomon’s beautiful temple had been destroyed by the Babylonians. It had been the center of Judaic religious life, but now the sacrifices and major feasts were over. How then could the people make sense of the Law of Moses? After all, neither Moses’ tabernacle nor Solomon’s temple existed any more, so if God’s law was eternal, it had to have meaning beyond the sacrifices and other rituals.

This was a time of religious upheaval and intense scholarship. Small gatherings—synagogues—started to form as centers of worship and study. And the solution that emerges is to focus on personal behaviors. They came to believe that God—through Moses—had given the Torah to prescribe how individuals should live their lives. They carefully re-interpreted the Law in this light. And so the Oral Torah, the Mishnah, was born.

After two generations, Israel returned to their homeland, bringing their new perspectives with them. The nation was not permitted to appoint a king so, as the second Temple was built, both national and religious rulership fell to the priests, which, over time, became a priestly aristocracy. We know them from the New Testament—they are the Sadducees. The Sadducees rejected the new oral interpretations of the Torah. Instead, they held that the written Torah, the Law of Moses, should be obeyed just as written. An “eye for an eye” means precisely that. If you had blinded someone, you would get blinded in punishment. They saw the Law of Moses primarily as a legal justice system for the nation.

However, outside of worship in the new temple, the synagogue system was still going strong, and scholars were continuing to study and develop the oral interpretations of the Torah. At its core, this was a holiness movement. They wanted to devote themselves to God, to separate

themselves for God. And so they came to be known as “the separatists”. In Aramaic, this word is *parisa*—hence Pharisee.

In their drive to be holy, the separatists—the Pharisees—strove to define precisely what someone needed to do to please God in each and every circumstance they might find themselves. And once they “discovered” and defined these elements of “righteous” behavior, they believed they were as binding on them as the Torah itself.

Meanwhile the Sadducee group was grappling with the realities of running both the nation and the Temple. They started selecting and replacing the national leader—who was also the High Priest—based on political considerations. This was a bit ironic, given their origins as literal followers of the Torah. Moses had said that the primary descendent of Aaron should be High Priest and should stay in office until he died. But now political expediency played its part.

The Pharisees objected. They hated how religion had become secular and wanted to get back to something pure and right. They came to despise the ruling Sadducee group for what they saw as their irreligious teachers and their daily ritual impurity. They wanted to get back to committing their lives to God, personally and individually. And this desire by the Pharisees to discover and practice true devotion to God persisted through New Testament times.

Hillel the Elder was a particularly famous Pharisee. Rabbi Hillel lived throughout the century immediately before Jesus. Long before Jesus had given the golden rule, Hillel states that the Torah can be summarized by, “What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow man.” Some of his wisdom is seen in his grandson, the Pharisee Gamaliel, who appears in Acts 5, counseling patience towards the early Christians.

When Jesus started his teaching, a number of Pharisees recognized the prophetic spirit in him. One famous example is Nicodemus, a member of the ruling Jewish council. He started out as a closet supporter. But the crucifixion changed that. Nicodemus and another council member, Joseph, became so moved by Jesus that they personally requested his body to lay it in a rock tomb, even though it would make them ritually unclean—and at Passover time no less.

And these two weren’t alone in their discipleship. Within a couple of months, it appears as though many hundreds of the earliest members of the New Testament church were Pharisees. The preaching of the apostles convinced them that their messiah had come and had been walking among them. Now that their eyes were opened, they too wanted to follow him.

Resisting the Pharisee mindset

All was not rosy with the Pharisees, however. Their motivations were good, but by Jesus' time the Pharisee party had fallen into destructive thought patterns. This becomes a big deal for Jesus, and again and again he confronts them about it. Here's a classic example in Luke 13:

On a Sabbath Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues, and a woman was there who had been crippled by a spirit for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not straighten up at all. When Jesus saw her, he called her forward and said to her, "Woman, you are set free from your infirmity." Then he put his hands on her, and immediately she straightened up and praised God. Indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, the synagogue leader said to the people, "There are six days for work. So come and be healed on those days, not on the Sabbath." (Luke 13:10–14)

Unsurprisingly, Jesus was appalled. They would rescue a donkey on the Sabbath, so how could they not justify "breaking" their Sabbath regulations to rescue a person!? In Jesus' view, the synagogue leader was misunderstanding the point of the Sabbath. The Sabbath was a time for release from the obligations of the world. It was a time for renewal. What better moment could there be to receive healing?

I think it would be fair to characterize the fundamental conversation Jesus has with the Pharisees as a conflict over how to understand law and lived righteousness. Here's an example:

Then some Pharisees and teachers of the law came to Jesus from Jerusalem and asked, "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don't wash their hands before they eat!" Jesus replied, "And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition? For God said, 'Honor your father and mother' and 'Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death.' But you say that if anyone declares that what might have been used to help their father or mother is 'devoted to God,' they are not to 'honor their father or mother' with it. Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition. You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you: "'These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules.'" (Matt 15:1–7)

Here we have Jesus zeroing in on the Pharisee fallacy: the mechanisms of rules have become elevated over any original purpose those rules may have had, and even negate those purposes. He calls this hypocrisy.

Woe to you

In Matthew 23, Jesus gives his most poignant analysis of the religion-by-rules fallacy. He starts with a warning:

The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. So you must be careful to do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them. (Matt 23:2–4)

Religion-by-rules leads to a lack of compassion towards those impacted by the rules. The rule is the rule. It must not be broken. And religious leaders become blind to the human impact... And yet this is a violation of the whole purpose of religion!

Jesus then highlights seven different examples of the hypocrisy that arises from rules being elevated over their purpose. Each criticism starts with, “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites!” He brings out multiple examples where their religious regulations tear the heart out of the very principles they were supposedly designed to uphold. Here’s one:

Woe to you, blind guides! You say, ‘If anyone swears by the temple, it means nothing; but anyone who swears by the gold of the temple is bound by that oath.’ You blind fools! Which is greater: the gold, or the temple that makes the gold sacred? You also say, ‘If anyone swears by the altar, it means nothing; but anyone who swears by the gift on the altar is bound by that oath.’ You blind men! Which is greater: the gift, or the altar that makes the gift sacred? (Matt 23:16–19)

Even if they were using oaths, it should be about developing trust and trustworthiness—with each other and before God. But instead, it has become a matter of the technical detail of words. It’s ridiculous, Jesus says. How could they possibly make a word distinction like this? It just leads to artificiality, to hypocrisy.

And rule-making is often like this, laying down artificial distinctions between what is acceptable and what is not.

As we noted, this speech in Matthew 23 has a series of “Woe to you” declarations. For most of my life I read the “Woe to you” as a statement of condemnation, as if Jesus were saying, “I call down curses upon you because of what you do.” Modern versions tend to promote this perspective by including exclamation marks. “Woe to you!” It makes it seem like Jesus is yelling at them.

But recently I have started hearing the “Woes” differently. I now hear a voice of sadness, as though Jesus were grieving inside. “I’m so desperately sad that woe is coming upon you, Teachers of the law, Pharisees, hypocrites, because you are so badly missing the point.” Indeed, at the end of the chapter, Jesus expresses his sadness explicitly:

Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing. (Matt 23:37)

Jesus had come to rescue people from whatever chained them to suffering and death. And even this late in his ministry he has still been unable to reach this group. It is so desperately sad. “I have longed to gather your children together,” he says, “like a hen with her chicks under her wings.” But sadly they were not willing. This is the voice of tragedy, not condemnation.

So let’s take a couple more “Woe” examples, and as we do, try hearing his “Woe unto you” not just as critique but also as sadness. Taste a different impact to his words.

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel. (Matt 23:23–24)

“Ahh,” says the religious mind, “I know about tithing and I’ve got some peppercorns here... Nine for me, one for God, nine for me, one for God...”

And this is religion??

How sad that you so badly miss the point, says Jesus.

And Jesus is right. It is all too easy to neglect the true essence of spirituality—fairness, merciful kindness, and enduring faithfulness—because they are so hard to quantify. It’s very natural to focus on whatever can be measured, whatever can be seen, whatever is external. And

so the Pharisees ended up focusing on the small things, even when it destroys the spiritual intentions God has for his people.

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean. (Matt 23:25–26)

Clean the outside of the dish, dress up for church, have a polite and respectable demeanor, but inside be full of greed, self indulgence...

This is blindness! This is hypocrisy, Jesus says. Instead, he says, bring your focus to the inside. Help people to become transformed within. And you yourself also! And a spiritual inside will be manifest on the outside. It too will be clean before God.

The rule trap

That was the Pharisees. How does Jesus' critique apply to modern religious life, especially Christian religious life? I think it applies pretty directly. Look across the whole of scripture and ask yourself which community is most similar to many modern Christian groups? I think we would end up picking the Pharisees. With both their virtues and their challenges.

That means, if we are serious about being disciples of Jesus, we have to learn the lesson of the Pharisee. We have to take the censure of Jesus and use it to examine our own practices. What parts of my religious thinking do I need to change so that I don't fall into same patterns; patterns which are ultimately destructive? Where is it that my rule orientation may be actually hindering the deeper manifestation of the gospel?

Now let me again be clear. I'm not saying that all religious rules are negative. Not at all! Having a rule about "no rules" would have its own intrinsic irony. And, a religious rule like avoiding pork, for example, or wearing a suit and tie to church may be perfectly good manifestations of your personal discipleship and of the relationship you and your community have with the divine.

But even if those rules work for you, they may not work for others. When I was first baptized, I used to wear a suit every Sunday. It was the norm. It was expected. But one day I caught myself admiring how I looked in the mirror. Very sharp! And I was suddenly struck with shame. Here I was being prideful as I prepared for my weekly devotions before Christ. So that

day, I abandoned the suit. I was still living at home and my mother was pretty upset. To her I was not showing respect. But I was! It was out of respect—and faith—that I was removing a personal barrier to my humility before God.

Here's what I'm trying to say. When we think that rules are Christianity—when we elevate the importance of regulations above inner spiritual transformation—that's when we have lost our way. Our focus has become the outside of the cup and not the cleansing inside.

Sadly, it is all too easy to fall into the same trap as the Pharisees. I'm sure we can all come up with obvious examples, but sometimes it can be very subtle too. At the risk of being provocative, I'm going to give a subtle example from my own church group. Even though the incident I'm about to relate was from about 40 years or so ago now, I think the lessons are still relevant.

Many of the church groups in my religious community maintain a practice of women wearing head coverings in meetings. This particular congregation held their communion meetings on Sunday morning and a public gospel talk in the evening. A number of the women were wondering whether they needed to continue to wear head coverings for the evening talk, as had been the practice for many years. So, the (male) leadership group met to discuss. They consulted scripture, weighed the pros and cons that they saw, and ultimately concluded that it was not necessary for the women to cover their heads during the evening gospel talk. But the story doesn't finish there. Shortly afterwards the women of the church also discussed it amongst themselves. They were concerned about the lax standards this ruling might provoke, so they decided as a group that they would continue to insist on all women wearing head coverings during the evening talks.

Now, let's think about this for a minute. First, I am confident that everyone is acting from the best of motives. All are genuinely trying to determine a good path forward, to act in a way they think God would want. But I think they actually fell into the Pharisee fallacy. Let me explain.

The only explicit passage about women wearing head coverings is in Paul's letter to the Christian group in Corinth. It is a complex passage, and there is active debate about exactly what Paul meant, and how much of it is relevant outside of 1st century Corinth. At the very least, however, he appears to view the Corinthian head coverings as symbolizing submission of the women to their husbands. He then parallels this with the Church's submission to Christ.

As I say, there is debate about how much of this is culturally specific to the Corinth of 2000 years ago since this is the only biblical teaching we have about head coverings. But, if a Christian congregation continues the practice today, it must surely be for this purpose. So now, let's apply the meaning of the symbol to the choices of the church group above. The men, presumably understood to be symbolizing Christ, had made a decision. But the women then reversed the decision of the men. In doing so, they rejected the principle that the men had the authority to decide. They may well have been right, but they did so to assert the importance of wearing the symbol of submission. They asserted their right to demonstrate that the men (seen as representatives of Christ) had authority. Do you see the contradiction? The fact that they overturned the original decision was to deny the very authority that they wished to assert.

In doing so, the act of head covering had become more important than the apparent meaning. Again, at the risk of being provocative, it's not so different from quibbling about the gold of the temple...

But maybe the problem started with the creation of a one-size-fits-all rule in the first place. I am struck at how similar the rule-creation process was to the Pharisees own process. It rests on the same assumption: *that there is a rule to be discovered*. And it uses the same method: extrapolating a rule from a couple of complex passages to create a rule for the modern world (of course for the Pharisees, "modern" meant the new cosmopolitan world of the Graeco-Roman empires!).

The Pharisee fallacy is the belief that God has given us rules to follow regardless of meaning, as if mindless obedience to the rules themselves is the thing God seeks. Jesus disagrees. He argues again and again that God wants us to see the intent behind the commands he has given, and that it is the intent of the command that should be manifest in our lives, not necessarily the rule itself.

In the Pharisees religion of rules, the specific practices need have no meaning or purpose other than obedience. But to Jesus, this is not enough. Here he is on the sermon of the mount:

For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven. (Matt 5:20)

To focus on the external factors of religion at the expense of the deeper principles is to miss out on the kingdom of heaven, he says. You will not enter the rulership of God.

Now Jesus is not saying that religious rules or rituals have no place. He still went to the Jerusalem Temple to celebrate Passover each year, for example. But he is clear throughout his teaching that any rule must always remain subservient to the spiritual principle it is trying to establish.

And let us also note that moving away from a rule orientation does not imply “anything goes”, that you can behave however you like. Quite the opposite. Internal spiritual transformation is actually more challenging and more rigorous than simply following external rules. It requires a lifelong commitment to humility before God, a willingness to let the selfish ego die.

The apostle Paul grew up as a Pharisee. He had learned at the feet of Gamaliel himself. And he was zealous for God! Or so he thought. But his eyes were opened by Jesus. “You want rules?” he says later, “I had rules. All of them. And they were trash when it comes to my real relationship with God through Christ.” Well that’s my paraphrase. Here he is in his own words, in his letter to the church at Philippi:

If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised 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; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.

But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I 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 and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith.

I want to know Christ—to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead. (Phil. 3:7–11)