

# Growing in Jesus vs. Traditionalism

## Matthew 23:1-12

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**Introduction:** Did you ever get in a rut? Ruts were created in stone pavement on Roman roads by the repeated passage of cart wheels; but a rut can also be created in our behavior when we fall into habits that are hard to break. The Pharisees in the NT are sometimes seen as being in the “rut” of religious traditionalism. Is this an accurate perception? Claude Goldsmid Montefiore (1858-1938), known as founder of “Progressive Judaism” in England in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, was one of the first to challenge the standard notions regarding the Gospels’ portrayal of the Pharisees. Were they indeed the awful hypocrites and self-righteous legalists that the New Testament often portrayed them to be? Since then, the debate on this topic has never stopped, but perhaps only recently has it begun to reach the attention of Christians beyond the academic world. In 2007, the book *In Quest for the Historical Pharisees* appeared (Jacob Neusner & Bruce Chilton, eds.), sketching the many appraisals of the Pharisees that emerge from ancient sources: drawing on the Gospels, the writings of Paul, Josephus, the Mishna (an early collection of Jewish oral tradition), and archeology. This volume profiles the Pharisees without trying to homogenize the distinct pictures or reconstruct a singular account of the Pharisees; instead, they carefully consider the sources, allowing different perspectives of the Pharisees to stand side by side (recognizing their pluralistic and diverse nature).

1) Kent Yinger, NT professor at Portland Seminary, in *The Pharisees: Their History, Character, & NT Portrait* (2022), produced another study attempting objectivity and synthesis. Their existence as a solidified group probably dates to the middle of the second century B.C. in connection with the Maccabean struggle against Hellenism. In other words, they were all about helping to preserve Israel’s true identity against the cultural invasion (with all its idolatry); they were the “*hasidim*” of Judaism, the “pious ones,” zealous for the law of Moses as the core foundation of their lives. Yinger also takes note of doctrinal differences between Pharisees and Sadducees that had become a big part of the religious scene in Jesus’ day (resurrection, angels/demons, rewards/punishments). What Pharisees were known for was their careful, meticulous observance of Torah as well as many traditions which they believed were implied by the law or consistent with it. So they enjoyed a favorable reputation among the general population, especially because of their strict obedience to the law (they were believed to be very righteous) and because of their opposition to the oppressive ruling party (the Sadducees and Romans). But the common people didn’t really have adequate criteria to weigh the Pharisees’ teaching and know whether they were on target or not. Our take-away from this study might be that we don’t want to fall in with “stereotyping” all Pharisees, lumping them into the same category to be condemned; we need to remember also that the book of Acts affirms that large numbers of priests and Pharisees became believers, reinforcing the notion that Jesus really represented the fulfillment of their deepest hopes.

Into this scenario comes the long-awaited Messiah, the young upstart rabbi from Galilee who had not studied at one of their schools, but showed up in Jerusalem for Passover one spring with a group of followers; when He came to the temple He started causing a terrible ruckus with the money-changers and animal vendors. It was scandalous – except to the common people, who believed there was corruption in the religious system that only the Messiah would uncover. So began Jesus' public career, supposedly with His threatening to destroy the temple (Jn. 2:19). Of all the politico-religious groups in Judea and Galilee, the Pharisees were the ones with whom Jesus had the most in common in terms of their beliefs. They were biblical fundamentalists, and of course, Jesus had inspired all the fundamentals of Scripture and practiced them with total consistency in His life. Yet *their* "take" on Scripture had a definite tendency toward the letter of the law, hence legalism, including a rigid stance in regard to all the traditions they had added to the law (613 commandments), which they saw as a kind of hedge around the law of Moses in order to ensure people's compliance. So the Pharisees would become Jesus' most frequent opponents and most ardent adversaries. But Jesus doesn't hesitate to correct them, all through His ministry, but especially toward the end. In the last week of His earthly life, He doesn't mince words when pointing out the pridefulness of their ways, the hypocrisy of their zeal, the blindness of their reasoning, and the resulting fallacies in their teaching.

2) That's our Scripture passage for today – from the final week of Jesus' life. In other words, He didn't carry out His scathing critique of Pharisaic religion at the beginning of His ministry, because He was always seeking to be a witness to them too, knowing how close they were to the kingdom in their zeal for God's Word, in their longing for the restoration. It's only after repeatedly presenting His message and acting it out, plus repeated signs and wonders that should have made their hearts soft (as they did Nicodemus' heart), and seeing their continued obstinacy, that Jesus now comes to this point of having to denounce them so harshly and publicly. In Mt. 15 He had a private discussion with them, calling them to account for nullifying the law of God with their tradition; in Mt. 16 He had warned His disciples about the leavening of the Pharisees (their teaching). But now He's going public with the denunciation, also directing His words to the crowds (v. 1) so that they will have criteria for not falling into the Pharisees' trap! They were sitting in the seat of Moses; His "chair" (*cátedra*) represented the authority of the law and of God. In what they speak from the law, Jesus said, pay attention to them and observe what they say, but just don't follow their example: especially because of the heavy burdens they lay on others, rules of tradition which they had been adding, supposedly to help apply the law, but in time they had been elevated to a status equal to the law. And they wouldn't think of reducing their weight (Peter would later call it **"a yoke that neither we nor our fathers were able to bear,"** Acts 15:10). Examples included the distance you could walk on Sabbath, the distance you could transport articles on Sabbath, what you could or couldn't do in the preparation of meals and clothes on Sabbath, the rescues you could not perform on Sabbath, the kindling or extinguishing of fires or candles (not permitted, though you could hire a Gentile to do those things on Sabbath). Jesus said the Sabbath was made for man, not vice versa, but the Pharisees had turned it completely around: instead of reflecting the character of God, the Sabbath became a reflection of the cruel character of us sinners!

Jesus was especially concerned about the Pharisaical hypocrisy of doing things for show, to be seen by others (v. 5): advertising their righteous deeds (did you ever want to do that?) with phylacteries (small leather boxes with tiny scrolls and scriptures on them, tied to the arm and head with leather straps, Dt. 11:18); tassels (special borders on their garments extended for super-spirituality, Num. 15:38-40); seats of honor at synagogue or fine dinners (this really stroked their ego); greetings of recognition (sent their ego over the moon). So is it not good to call somebody teacher/pastor/father? The apostle Paul gives us perspective on this point: he calls himself teacher, and a father to Timothy. So this wasn't an absolute prohibition, but a warning to those who tend to cherish and collect such titles. What Jesus saw in the religious culture of His day was a society stuck in the deep ruts of tradition, but without the corresponding grace and truth that should have characterized a people focused on God's law. So the Pharisees often represented the human tendency to try to get control over our behavior, hard situations, even God, by reducing the complexity of life and Scripture to

formulas and traditions – so I don't have to think or work so hard! They had turned the “best religion in the world” into a “transactional relationship” [“we do this so that He will do that”], instead of a transformational one as God intended (the same “reductionism” that we're all susceptible to).

**3)** Breaking the chains of our old nature is not something we accomplish by tightening our belt, by imposing more rigorous demands on ourselves, or performing greater feats of sacrifice. It's something only God can do! Are we actually experiencing the deep changes in *our* lives that God has made available for us in Christ? Or are we too stuck in the ruts of our religious traditions? Just going in our religious circles, but not actually going deeper in becoming like Jesus? Those Pharisees could look so respectable and dignified at synagogue, temple, or public square – until we see them later in the Jewish council meeting, conspiring to get rid of Jesus. That's where their true colors came out; they showed the misery they carried inside when the great Rabbi from Galilee was brought before them bound. How was this “hardened criminal” treated behind closed doors? Would He still be these people's Advocate when their miserable nature was shown for what it was? ...when they pulled out all the stops on their hatred and rejection of His divine authority? Those same Pharisees, who put on such a respectable, pious front when in the public eye, turned on Jesus with all their fury: insulting, mocking, humiliating, striking, belittling and putting Him down, ridiculing, spitting in His face, sentencing Him to death (representing us all). And that's where Jesus continued to practice the essence of all His teaching in Mt. 23:11-12: ***“The greatest among you will be your servant. For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”***

The answer to our dilemma is all about **getting the cross in focus**: it was the **“great showdown”** – between the forces of good and evil, heaven and earth, and Jesus made such a strategic move, counterintuitive choice to not give us selfish creatures what we deserved, but to give up His own life instead! In the face of all our murderous intentions, He would still **turn the other cheek**. He was the Son of Man and Son of God, declared Judge of heaven and earth by His Father (Jn. 5:22), the only One on earth who had authority to forgive sin (Mk. 2:10); so He would pronounce His most critical verdict even as He agonized under the torment of His prosecutors: ***“Father, forgive them.”*** In so doing, He was wiping the slate clean, personally, to our face, even as we committed our worst crime against Him (the fulfillment of all our inner rebellion since the Garden of Eden, Mk. 4:22). What He was doing was stripping the enemy of all his weapons – what would Satan have to accuse us with? With our sins and guilt forgiven, he no longer has any ammunition (Col. 2:15).

It was also a genuine **relational coup de grâce** (knockout blow): because He never ceased to love His Father with all His being (Dt. 6:4-5), and He was totally true to His Father's heart by manifesting all His Father's mercy and faithfulness toward us, literally enfleshing love for us creatures as He loved Himself (that equals total fulfillment of the two big commandments, Mt. 22:36-39). Yes, God-in-the-flesh would still consider His prize creation worth saving even when we poured out on Him all the wretchedness we carried inside: He just kept taking it from us, kept forgiving it, kept staying true to His mission. To the last drop of His blood, to His final breath, He would continue loving and forgiving ... because He didn't come to “pay God off”: God was not the “bloodthirsty one” in this picture – that's us! That's the role we were playing out at the cross – thirsty for God's blood! Jesus, meanwhile, was totally focused on enfleshing His Father's mercies and making them an earthly reality, human, accessible, restorative, because He lived them out to their final consequences, making them real right here in human history where we needed them! The victory was happening right there in front of their eyes and they didn't have eyes to see it! So may our eyes be opened to that vision of Jesus, so we can grow deeper in Him, getting out of our ruts with His strength, facing our daily challenges with courage and faith.