

Surpassing the “*Righteousness*” of the Pharisees, Matt.5:20

1Cor.10:6,11 emphasize that events of ancient history are preserved in the biblical record “*as examples for us*” and are “*written for our instruction*” to prevent our falling into the same pitfalls of disobedience and sin.

Last week I mentioned, somewhat in passing, two Jewish sects that were prevalent during and immediately following Jesus’ time upon the earth. They were: **Sadducees**, who did not believe in *angels, spirits, or resurrection*, Acts 23:8. 4:1-2; and, **Pharisees**, who acknowledged all three. To these two we could also add the **Essenes**, who believed a form of *dualism* in which unrighteous souls are punished, while righteous ones pass into other bodies- perhaps at a general resurrection (*Wars of the Jews*, 2.163; Josephus). What’s the point? *Now as then*, men divided themselves into socio/economic/religious groups, each believing themselves *right* and all others *wrong*.

So today, we have:

- Those who believe, like the **Sadducees**, that there is no afterlife; that the *corporal* form of man is all there is, 1Cor.15:12; Acts 17:32; and therefore, that whatever *rewards* or *punishments* we experience are all composed and completed in the *here and now*.
- Those who believe, like the **Pharisees**, that they have all the right answers to all the right questions in religion, Mark 7:1-5; view others with contempt, Luke 18:9; and see themselves as *seated in the chair of Christ* (rather than *Moses* as previously, cf. Matt.23:2) as *Law-giver*, John 12:48.
- Those who believe, like the **Essenes**, that although the *spirit* of the good and righteous lives on after death, it does so by being *reincarnated* into another form (some think another *person*, and others imagine inhabiting an *animal, plant, or* some other *material* thing)... and/or every other idea imaginable.
- We could also outline the basic beliefs of the **Epicureans, Stoics, Zealots, Herodians, etc.** but surely the point is made: **History repeats itself... even in the ways, means, and motives that we devise to divide ourselves.**

But if I were to ask (and I have done so many times before), “**Which of these sects do we most resemble?**” how would you respond? “**The Pharisees**” is invariably the response. **Why, do you suppose?**

Perhaps primarily because although the Pharisees took things much too far, and failed miserably to have good/right attitudes, they were *sticklers for truth*- or at least what they perceived to be “truth,” Phil.3:4b-6; Acts 22:3; 26:5.

However, let’s also consider more specifically the charges proffered against the Pharisees by Jesus in Matt.23 (in hopes of avoiding the same condemnations, since we admit we resemble them):

1. **They say and do not, vv.2-4**; we must instead *prove ourselves “doers of the word”* rather than “*merely hearers who delude themselves,*” Jas.1:22;
2. **They do all their deeds to be noticed, vv.5-12**; reasons matter- therefore we must not even *let our left hand know what our right hand is doing*, Matt.6:3-4;

3. **They shut off the king of heaven, v.13**; there are so many ways we can “turn off” others from Christ/Christianity; what say/don’t say; what we do/don’t do; our thoughts, emotions, words, and actions (and what we *like*, *share*, and *post* on social media) reflect Christ and His way, Matt.5:13-16; Phil.3:14-15; Col.4:5-6;
4. **They devour widow’s houses, v.14**; we must not prey on the weak, and take advantage of the helpless, but instead *help*, *encourage*, and *be patient*, 1Thess.5:14; and *strengthen the weak and feeble*, Heb.12:12-13;
5. **They make proselytes (instead of disciples), v.15**; we must endeavor to “make disciples” of Christ with His Word, rather than ourselves and our ideas and ideology, Matt.28:19-20;
6. **They practice ‘loophole logic/Christianity, vv.16-22**; we must be *without guile* like Nathanael, John 1:47; and not only *speak truth* always, Matt.5:33-37, but make every effort to *practice what we preach*, Luke 6:35;
7. **They neglect the weightier provisions of justice, mercy, and faithfulness, vv.23-24**; we must strive to “do all the things which are commanded,” Luke 17:10, we will be just “unworthy slaves” who have done only “that which we ought,” but we won’t have to worry about which are the “big” and “little” commandments (or sins!)... or *gnats* and *camels*; however, if it is *unjust*, *unmerciful*, and *faithless*, it is always wrong, and it is never wrong to be *just*, *merciful*, and *faithful*;
8. **They clean the outside of the cup or tomb/sepulcher (the part others see), vv.25-28**; this coincides with vv.5-12 regarding *doing to be noticed by others* and being *overly concerned with how others see/perceive and treat you*; it is “image” Christianity rather than *obedience from the heart* and *true commitment to truth*, Rom.6:17; we must *clean* ourselves from the *inside* to the *outside* (mind/heart to life) rather than the other way around, Matt.15:18-20; and,
9. **They think they’re better than their forefathers, vv.29-38**; we must become better than our forefathers- whether *Essene*, *Sadducee*, or *Pharisee*; but such begins with admitting our faults and failures rather than hiding, excusing, or justifying them as we’ve seen exemplified here in our text; Rom.3:23 is still true and applies to us also; we must *listen to* and *heed* the *prophets*, *wise men*, and *scribes* who bring us God’s Word instead of *persecuting* them, cf.v.34; we must break the pattern of history repeating itself.

Conclusion / Take-Home Points:

- Yes, in general terms, the *Sadducees* were wrong *doctrinally*, the *Pharisees* were wrong *morally*, and the *Essenes* were wrong in *both* ways; but,
- We can learn from their *negative examples* and do better... we can *know the truth AND practice it both from the heart and for the right reasons!*
- Are you/we *willing*, v.37?
- If not, our house will also be *left desolate*, v.38. Let’s not only *do* better, let’s *be* better by thinking, feeling, and doing *right!*