

Who were the Pharisees?

By

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The Pharisees have traditionally received a lot of ‘bad press’. Even people who have little to no knowledge of the Bible, seem to be able to identify the Pharisees as Jesus’ ‘enemies’ who did everything wrong. So, who were they? Did they completely misunderstand the Bible? Were they responsible for Jesus’ death....? And do they still exist?

A brief historical background – with some interesting details!

The Pharisees (in Hebrew: Perushim, or Chaverim) first emerged as a distinctive group in Judea from the end of the second century BC. This period is not covered by the Old Testament and as a result, Christians reading the Bible are mostly in the dark about who the Pharisees were. Their name means, ‘the ones who separate themselves’ (from persons or things impure) and they can be credited for setting up a national system of education in Judea, with religious schools known as synagogues. In

Jesus' days, the Pharisees were less powerful than that other group, the Sadducees, who controlled the Sanhedrin Council. But the Pharisees enjoyed much more support among the Jewish people, and to a 21st century audience, it may be of interest to know that the movement was particularly popular with the female half of the Jewish population (even though the Pharisees themselves were, 'of course', male Rabbis). And, there wasn't just 'one kind' of Pharisees. The Pharisees had, what in a Christian context would be known as, 'denominations'.

Why did Jesus hate the Pharisees?

This shouldn't be the second paragraph of this article, but let's get this question out of the way before continuing with other aspects: Jesus did not hate the Pharisees. For if He did, He must have loved them – remember Luke 6:27-28? He gladly made time – in the middle of the night – for a conversation with the Pharisee Nicodemus in John 3:1-21, for example. But, He did call them 'hypocrites' more than a dozen times, according to the Gospel of Matthew, so why was this?

The Pharisees claimed to abide by Moses' teachings, yet when the promised Messiah was standing in front of them, they refused to acknowledge Him (Matthew 16:4 and any verse in which they attempted to discredit Him).

They had created their own set of rules and regulations that were more important to them than God's Word (Matthew 23:4).

Indeed, they had devised a range of 'legal technicalities' that allowed them to AVOID doing God's will (Mark 7:7-13, Matthew 15:6; 23:13-14).

God's rules can be harsh at times, but the Pharisees imposed even harsher rules (Matthew 23:23; another example is their interpretation of Sabbath rules, specifically healing people on the Sabbath, which God never (!) prohibited).

They were seeking the admiration of people, rather than God's (Matthew 6:2 and 5; 23:5).

There is a LOT more to be said about the above, but this is essentially Jesus' criticism.

Why do WE hate the Pharisees?

Today, people often use the word “Pharisees” as an insult or a way to criticize others. Most people think of the Pharisees as strict rule-followers, and because they dislike rules themselves, they assume the Pharisees were clearly in the wrong.

But here’s the thing: the Pharisees were mostly strict about their own man-made rules. In fact, they often found ways to work around God’s commands when it suited them. And isn’t that exactly what many people do today—create their own standards while ignoring what God actually says? In that sense, maybe people have more in common with the Pharisees than they realize.

It’s worth thinking about — especially since Jesus called the Pharisees a “brood of vipers” in Matthew 3:7, 12:34, and 23:33. The conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees wasn’t about God’s law, but about the extra rules the Pharisees had added — rules we don’t find in the Christian Bible. He literally accused them of “sitting on Moses’ seat” in Matthew 23:2, which sometimes resulted

in “heavier burdens” and other times in relaxations, but in all cases: not as per what God had instructed. Given that, maybe we should start feeling a bit uneasy about how closely we might resemble them.

Hold up – how did we come to misunderstand the Pharisees?

So, the Pharisees were popular with the people – much more popular than the Sadducees — and had ways of NOT having to do God’s will? So how should we interpret the fact that Jesus rebuked them, rather than going along with them? After all, many people seem to think Jesus came to relax His Father’s rules.

Jesus told us to “love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength” (Matthew 22:37-40, Mark 12:30-31, Luke 10:27). Clearly, loving God doesn’t include inventing rules for avoiding God’s will. Jesus never criticized the Pharisees’ original tenets: the Law of Moses. Why should He: the Law had been given to Moses by God Himself, and as Jesus is one Person of the Trinity, the Law of Moses is also Jesus’ law.

He hadn't come to abolish it; He fulfilled it, and there's no point in fulfilling something if you abolish it first. The dispute between Jesus and the Pharisees was therefore not about Mosaic Law.

Does this 'matter' for Christians? Well, it does, if we're going to allow our opinion of the Pharisees decide how we feel about 'keeping God's Word'. Don't use your one-sided (21st century) opinion of the Pharisees as an excuse to flout God's will!

The contribution of the Pharisees to Judaism

Two Rabbis (= teachers), Rabbi Shammai and Rabbi Hillel, who had lived in the century before Jesus was born¹, had established the Shammaite and Hillelite schools of thought, to introduce their own perspectives on Mosaic Law. Rabbi Shammai placed a lot of emphasis on temple rituals and interpreted Scripture very strictly and literally. Rabbi Hillel was more liberal and tolerant towards Gentiles (non-Jewish people), and less concerned with temple worship. Their followers were called 'Pharisees'. There were also other groups, such as the Sadducees and the

Essenes. It's important to note that Jesus didn't specifically 'side' with one group, although the Sadducees were His worst enemies: they didn't believe in the concept of resurrection and were in charge of the authorities that got Jesus killed. After the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, the Sadducees more or less disappeared. The Pharisees remained, and it was chiefly the Hillelite Oral Law that would later (2nd/3rd century A.D.) become the Jewish Mishnah (= recorded oral law) that Jewish believers regard to be as important as the Torah (= recorded written law, i.e. the Word of God).

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