

Who were the Pharisees?

The Pharisees were an influential religious sect within Judaism in the time of Christ and the early church. They were known for their emphasis on personal piety (the word Pharisee comes from a Hebrew word meaning “separated”), their acceptance of oral tradition in addition to the written Law, and their teaching that all Jews should observe all 600-plus laws in the Torah, including the rituals concerning ceremonial purification.

The Pharisees were mostly middle-class businessmen and leaders of the synagogues. Though they were a minority in the Sanhedrin and held a minority number of positions as priests, they seemed to control the decision-making of the Sanhedrin because they had popular support among the people.

Among the Pharisees were two schools of thought, based on the teachings of two rabbis, Shammai and Hillel. Shammai called for a strict, unbending interpretation of the Law on almost every issue, but Hillel taught a looser, more liberal application. Followers of Shammai fostered a hatred for anything Roman, including taxation—Jews who served as tax collectors were persona non grata. The Shammaites wanted to outlaw all communication and commerce between Jews and Gentiles. The Hillelites took a more gracious approach and opposed such extreme exclusiveness. Eventually, the two schools within Pharisaism grew so hostile to each other that they refused to worship together.

The Pharisees accepted the written Word as inspired by God. At the time of Christ’s earthly ministry, this would have been what we now call the Old Testament. Unfortunately, the Pharisees gave equal authority to oral tradition, saying the traditions went all the way back to Moses. Evolving over the centuries, the Pharisaic

traditions had the effect of adding to God's Word, which is forbidden (Deuteronomy 4:2). The Gospels abound with examples of the Pharisees treating their traditions as equal to God's Word (Matthew 9:14; 15:1-9; 23:5; 23:16, 23; Luke 11:42). Jesus applied the condemnation of Isaiah 29:13 to the Pharisees, saying, "Their teachings are merely human rules" (Mark 7:7).

The Pharisees taught the following doctrines:

1. God controls all things, but decisions made by individuals also affect life's course.
2. There will be a resurrection of the dead (Acts 23:6).
3. There is an afterlife, with appropriate reward and punishment on an individual basis. The Messiah will set up His kingdom on earth.
4. The spiritual realm, including the existence of angels and demons, is real (Acts 23:8).

Many of the Pharisees' doctrines put them at odds with the Sadducees; however, the two groups managed to set aside their differences on one occasion—the trial of Jesus Christ. To accomplish the demise of Jesus, the Sadducees and Pharisees united (Mark 14:53; 15:1; John 11:48-50).

The Pharisees were responsible for the compilation of the Mishnah, an important document with reference to the continuation of Judaism beyond the destruction of the temple. Rabbinical Judaism and modern-day synagogues owe their existence to the Pharisees' work.

In the Gospels, the Pharisees are often presented as hypocritical and proud opponents of Jesus. The Lord stated it bluntly: “They do not practice what they preach” (Matthew 23:3). As a general rule, the Pharisees were self-righteousness and smug in their delusion that they were pleasing to God because they kept the Law—or parts of it, at least. As Jesus pointed out to them, however scrupulous they were in following the finer points of ritualism, they failed to measure up to God’s standard of holiness: “You have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness” (verse 23).

Of course, not every Pharisee was opposed to Jesus. Nicodemus was a Pharisee who rightly considered Jesus “a teacher who has come from God” and honestly sought answers from Him (John 3:1-2). Nicodemus later defended Jesus before the Sanhedrin (John 7:50-51) and was on hand at Jesus’ crucifixion to help bury the Lord’s body (John 19:39). Some of the early Christians were Pharisees, as well (Acts 15:5).

The apostle Paul was trained as a Pharisee, and his credentials in that group were sterling (Acts 26:5). Paul called himself “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” (Philippians 3:5-6). But Paul found that his performance of the Law could not produce true righteousness. After he placed his trust in Christ’s finished work on the cross, he desired to “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” (verse 9). No one, not even the strictest Pharisee, is justified by keeping the Law (Galatians 3:11).