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The Paradox of Phariseeism

Holiness Gone Awry

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“Luke” was a youth pastor at the largest and most influential church in his community. He had a huge budget, exciting programs, and tons of students who genuinely loved him.

Luke was married to a beautiful, talented, godly woman. Their church loved and appreciated both of them for investing their lives into ministry leadership.

But Luke was also an addict—a sex addict. He knew his secret cravings weren’t congruent with the holiness God had called him to, and in his mind, marital infidelity was the worst-case scenario.

Unfortunately for Luke, he couldn’t have been more wrong.

He implemented several strategies to avoid sexual immorality. First, since he felt pornography wasn’t as bad as “actually cheating,” he absorbed every conceivable form of adult entertainment to satisfy his sexual appetite. Since that tactic didn’t work, and since Luke failed to realize he was *already* committing sexual immorality, he began to frequent bars and “gentlemen’s” clubs; because, again, he figured this wasn’t as bad as actually having an affair.

It wasn’t long before this approach also fell short of solving his problem. When he couldn’t find another method for avoiding an affair, he gave into the urges he so desperately wanted to avoid and began making out-of-town trips that were filled with physical sexual infidelity. For many agonizing months, he entered into one short-term affair after another.

Of course, his lifestyle broke his wife’s heart. While she sought counsel and healing, he became judgmental and condemned her as an “unbiblical wife” in an attempt to avert attention away from his hypocrisy.

Luke is no longer a youth pastor, nor is he married. The divorce was tough, and expensive, so these days he lives with family members and

works a secular job. He's bitter toward the church, and suspicious of people who appear to have a healthy marriage. Luke's attempt to be holy only left him cynical and more unlike Jesus than he'd ever been.

Luke is a Pharisee.

The Letter of the Law

His dilemma is not unique or new. Many well-intentioned believers in serious pursuit of holiness have found themselves more like Jesus' enemies, the Pharisees, than like Jesus. D.M. Baillie called this irony the "Paradox of Phariseism," and youth pastors aren't immune from stumbling into it.

In Jesus' day the Pharisees were an elite group of scholarly men who prided themselves on knowing and following the Law of Moses. Believing that obedience to the law granted them righteousness before God, they devised an elaborate system of rules that were more stringent than the law to ensure they never broke the actual law.

For example, to keep the Sabbath holy, they drafted a list of actions that weren't permitted on that day. Putting out a fire on the Sabbath was unlawful, even if it was your home that was burning. And don't even think about "carrying" any extra clothes from your burning home; you could only take as many clothes from the house as you could wear. (But you *could* go back into the burning building to put on more clothes to wear out of it...again.)

There was no doubt the Pharisees knew the law, but it was their practice of it that put them at odds with Jesus. They meticulously washed their hands and pots to avoid becoming unclean; yet they harbored thoughts of murder, theft, and false testimony in their hearts. When they prayed and fasted in obedience to the law, they did so publicly, to draw attention to themselves. They loved money but condemned Jesus for spending time with tax collectors. And don't forget, it was the Pharisees who plotted Jesus' death.

Focused on Self

It was for these acts of sin and self-centeredness that Jesus verbally scorched them in Matthew 23, calling them blind guides, hypocrites, snakes, and vipers. Not only were *they* not holy, but they were also keeping *others* from being holy.

While no Pharisees would admit to being enemies of God, that's exactly what they had become. And ironically, it was their pursuit of holiness that put them in opposition to God. Here's how Baillie describes the quandary he called the "Paradox of Phariseism."

"Self-centeredness is the very thing from which we need to be saved, because it is the essence of sin. That method fails, and failure brings discouragement and moral paralysis. Or if we ever begin to succeed in improving ourselves, or even to think we are succeeding, then we congratulate ourselves secretly on our achievement, which is the very worst

kind of self-centeredness—self-righteousness and pride. So instead of becoming saints, we become Pharisees.”¹

Under the Paradox of Phariseeism, we become exactly like what we’re trying to avoid—unholy sinners, unaware of our woeful state. One would think we’d have learned our lesson from the Pharisees of Jesus’ day, but we haven’t. Many throughout church history have acted just like them.

Take the first monks for example. They raised legitimate concerns when the early church became worldly and corrupt. Their pursuit of holiness compelled them to trade civilization for the desert. Like the Jewish Pharisees before them, these monks took vows to aid in their holiness, but it wasn’t long before the monasteries were just as corrupt as the church. The monks had become Pharisees.

Reformation Pharisees

Moving forward, there were grim examples of Phariseeism among the heroic Reformers. Forgetting that he was once a rebel himself, when asked about a rebellion of peasants, Martin Luther said, “If the peasant is in open rebellion, then he is outside the law of God. Therefore, let everyone who can, smite him...secretly or openly, remembering that nothing can be more poisonous, hurtful, or devilish than a rebel. It is just as when one must kill a mad dog.”²

Ulrich Zwingli, the leader of the Swiss Reformation, had Felix Mantz, an Anabaptist who rejected infant baptism, “baptized” in Lake Zurich. (This “baptism” included tying the condemned’s hands and feet and pushing him overboard.) Even John Calvin joined the killing. In 1553, Calvin allowed Michael Servetus to be burned at the stake for his heretical view on the Trinity.

Like the Pharisees who condemned Jesus to death, these men who spent their lives perfecting the doctrine of justification by faith alone were willing to kill to protect it. Though they devoted their lives to religious freedom and purity of faith, even they couldn’t keep from being (very) unlike Jesus at times. Phariseeism can ensnare the greatest among us.

Youth Ministry Pharisees

Those of us in youth ministry are not immune to its lure or effect. Suppose we have an ongoing struggle with lack of spiritual discipline. Our prayer lives are weak, and our study of the Word is inconsistent at best. So, we set out to be better. We carve out time; we read a classic on the subject. We even keep journals. Eventually, we become more skillful in the discipline. But all too often pride sets in, and we may begin believing that those who don’t do the things we do, the way we do them, are sinful. So we become Pharisees.

Maybe this one rings a bell. We harp obedience to our students: “Obey your parents,” “Follow the rules,” and “Do as you are told.” But as soon as the senior pastor reveals a philosophy or direction of youth ministry that’s

different from our own, we disobediently resist his or her paradigm, claiming our stance is a justifiable “holy discontent.”

Pharisees.

The card most frequently played by the Pharisees of Jesus’ day was condemnation. They loathed anyone who was different from them, including the Son of God. How many times have we been guilty of slandering our colleagues because of slight differences in doctrine, or practice, or preference? “Sure, her ministry is big, but it’s shallow.” “He focuses on fun too much!” “They have a lot of bad kids in their group.”

Pharisees.

Preach It

Please allow one more observation about Pharisees: Those Jesus confronted were quite selective with their public talking points. They only wanted to point judgmental fingers at others, never acknowledging and discussing their own shortcomings (pride, immorality, corruption, etc). It pains me to mention this, because I see evidence of this in my life at times.

As Pharisees, we often won’t publicly denounce what we struggle with privately. Either that, or we cry out all the more against those sins with which we privately struggle. Both of these approaches feel (and are) hypocritical.

If we have a habit of lying, chances are good that we don’t spend a lot of time instructing our students to tell the truth—or we overdo an obsession with honesty. If we wrestle with lust, we may avoid bringing up the subject in fear of being asked by students if we are guilty of the same—or we rail so hard against it that no one would ever think we might be guilty of it. If we aren’t intentional about personal evangelism, we probably won’t challenge our students to the task—or we might spend a great deal of time and energy trying to get our students to do what we feel unable or unwilling to do.

These behaviors only make the nature of our Phariseeism worse. Because of our own sin, we know we either have little or no authority to instruct on the matter, so we allow the guilt in our private lives to overshadow or negate the proclamation in our public lives—or we use our platform to overcompensate for our own shortcomings

The Good News

It appears as though escape from the Paradox of Phariseeism is possible. Nicodemus apparently did so, and we know Paul did:

If anyone else thinks he has 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 legalistic righteousness, faultless.

But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the

surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, 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 and is by faith.

Paul stopped being a Pharisee the moment he realized he needed a righteousness that wasn't from within himself; he knew he needed a righteousness that came through Christ. We can join Paul in the "Recovering Pharisees Club" if we do what he did.

First, Paul shifted his focus from "avoiding sin" to "being with Jesus." Look over his resume again; you'll see words such as *law*, *zeal*, and *faultless*. These describe his pursuit of holiness by attempting to avoid sin, even though he offers a vulnerable confession in Romans 7:14-25. Strangely enough, Pharisees get into trouble by focusing on NOT being something bad or NOT doing something wrong.

Jesus didn't call us to a list of "thou shalt nots." He called us to "be with him" (Mark 3:14). If we focus on that call, not only will we experience "the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ," but as a by-product of that decision, we avoid sin. You can't very well sin if you're truly with Jesus. It's a two-for-one!

Secondly, Paul abandoned success in favor of faithfulness. By any account, Paul was a successful individual. We know he had a strong influence in both the Jewish and Roman world. But what word does he use to characterize his accomplishments? *Rubbish*.

Though Pharisees are consumed with success, their appearance, ratings, or the public's opinion of them, Jesus isn't. He's much more concerned with our degree of faithfulness. As he notes in the parable of the talents, "Well done, my good and faithful servant" was said to the man who earned five additional talents as well as the man who gained only two.

There's nothing wrong with the pursuit of holiness if we go about it the right way. But unless our pursuit is actually a genuine pursuit of Jesus, we run the risk of becoming Pharisees.

1. Baillie, D.M. *God Was in Christ: An Essay on the Incarnation and Atonement* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948) 206.

2. Bainton, Roland. *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1974) 280.