

John 12:17-19 3/25/09 (Triumphant Entry #9) THE PHARISEES

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Folks, I believe that the figures we consider tonight from the painting of the Triumphant Entry may be the most important of all for “church people” to consider – for people who are “religious” – people like you, who feel that coming to worship on a Wednesday night in spring is more Important than using the lengthening days to do some yard work or start getting your flower beds in order.



SLIDE: Triumphant Entry - highlight Pharisee group, bring up group picture

Tonight we consider the spiritual leaders of Jesus’ day, represented by these guys right here. The painting does a good job of placing them where they thought they were – above the masses. They looked down on Jesus and everybody in that crowd. For that matter, the “masses”, the Jewish people, thought they belonged up there on a pedestal too. In order to understand these guys and how they relate to the center, to Jesus, I need to do a little teaching, similar to what I present in the Fit for Life in Christ class. You need to understand that there were four major groups among the Jews of Jesus’ day.

SLIDE: Crossways – four groups

The one we hear about the most in the Bible were the Pharisees, so for this sermon, I titled the whole group that way, but there are other groups represented in that group in the painting, and I’ll get back to that. First the Pharisees: In the Fit for Life class, I call them the “Holy Schmoes” of Israel. And they truly were very righteous people. 10 commandments weren’t enough for them. They came up with 613 different rules and regulations to follow so that they could really make sure they were do-gooders in the eyes of God and the people. The guy in the picture is pointing at the commands and maybe also shaking his finger at the rest of us for not keeping them.

The next group were the Sadducees. Like the Pharisees, they were certainly a religious group, but they were far more interested in the politics of religion. For instance, they typically used their wealth to worm their way into positions of power and influence. Often they became chief priests of the temple. Oddly, their religion seemed to be all about this life, since they did not believe in the resurrection from the dead or angels or spirits.

A third group might be called the Zealots. Their religion primarily showed itself in their fanatical desire to overthrow Rome by force and set up an Israelite government like King David’s. This group finally got the Jews to revolt against Rome in 70 a.d. And when Rome came to Jerusalem to put down the revolt, they were the last to die in their fortress high on the plateau of Masada where the 936 inhabitants all committed suicide rather than be captured and killed by the Romans. They didn’t really associate with the other groups and Jesus doesn’t mention them, although He is very careful to say, “The kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation, nor will people say, ‘Here it is,’ or ‘There it is,’ because the kingdom of God is within you.” (Luke 17:20-21 NIV) Oddly enough, He did choose one of these guys to be his disciple, a guy known as Simon the Zealot.

The fourth main group among the Jews were the Scribes, or as they are usually called in the Bible, the “teachers of the law”. Not only did they do an incredible job of preserving the Bible

through very precise copying of the texts, they also taught the people from the texts. But if anything, they were even more arrogant and superior than the Pharisees and the Sadducees.

So, even though the Pharisees and Sadducees and Teachers of the Law were often very different their religious beliefs, they were similar in their giant egos. They all knew they were better than the common man and kept aloof from them. They were all far more interested in the outward acts of righteousness than in having a real and living relationship with God. And as you might expect, when Jesus came into the world and began His public ministry, preaching and teaching and healing and performing miracles, He and these guys simply did not see eye to eye.

One more thing to note is that these three groups were the main groups that made up the ruling body of the Jews called the Sanhedrin, the council of 70. 71 actually, with the chief priest making the extra. This idea was spawned from the 70 leaders that Moses commissioned to help him lead the Israelites during the Exodus from Egypt.

SLIDE: Triumphant Entry and Pharisees

Looking at the picture again, we can begin to define these guys a little better. This guy in the back with the jewels on his chest would be the chief priest, Caiaphas, who would declare at Jesus' trial before the Sanhedrin, "...it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish." The Bible says that even though he meant it one way, purely political and bloodthirsty for Jesus' death, as a representative of God he was acting as a prophet and telling the truth from a spiritual perspective. Jesus was dying for the people to take away their sins.

I would suggest that the very pompous looking guy to our left of Caiaphas would be his father-in-law Annas, who was also called a chief priest and was consulted at Jesus' trial as though he were equally as powerful. And he was. He had been chief priest before Caiaphas and he would later see five of his sons seated as high priests. As I mentioned, the Sadducees were into power and this particular family had worked with King Herod and the Romans and basically formed a dynasty of chief priests over the years. This also helps to understand a scene that John records that happened just before this Triumphant Entry, and after the raising of Jesus' friend Lazarus. He says:

SLIDE: "Then the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin.

"What are we accomplishing?" they asked. "Here is this man performing many miraculous signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation." (John 11:47-48)

What were they concerned about? "**Our place.**" They say the same thing in the text. There the "Pharisees said to one another, "See, this is getting **us** nowhere..."" Folks, they not only knew about the resurrection of Lazarus, they had representatives right there to see it. But rather than be the first to lay their cloaks at Jesus' feet and welcome Him as their Lord and King, they were only concerned about their place, their power, their prestige.

To our left of the chief priests would be a scribe, studying his scroll. He should have been studying to see if Jesus was indeed the promised Messiah of the Old Testament as it was obvious from all his signs and miracles that He was, but the teachers of the law refused to see the connection. As a result, Jesus put it to the people very bluntly:

SLIDE: "Leave them; they are blind guides. If a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall into a pit." (Matt 15:14 NIV)

Then we have the last guy to our right in the group, the guy wearing the box on his head. What's that all about? Well, it was an interesting practice of the Pharisees to take literally a command of God from the Old Testament. God had told the Israelites in Deuteronomy: **SLIDE:** "These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates." (Deut 6:6-9 NIV)

Folks, what was God talking about? He wanted them to keep the word of God seriously. He wanted them to memorize it and let it guide their lives. But the Pharisees decided to take this word literally. We ran across this in the Truth Project this week. The teacher of those materials Del Tackett, puts it very well. "Quite frankly, it's a lot easier to just literally follow God's word, than to do what it really means... to have God's word be in the foremost thoughts of our mind..." Instead, they just put wrote the Scripture passages on little leather boxes called **"phylacteries"** and leather strips on their left arms to show everybody how very Scriptural they were. Jesus was not impressed. Look at what He says in Matthew 23:

SLIDE: "Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: "The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. They tie up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them.

SLIDE "Everything they do is done for men to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long; they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; they love to be greeted in the marketplaces and to have men call them 'Rabbi.'" (Matthew 23:1-7 NIV)

Folks, I've got to tell you, there is absolutely not time enough to get into how much Jesus and these proud guys up here despised each other and why. But let me just ask you to open up to Matthew 23 in your pew Bibles and follow along as Jesus has His say:

Slide: Triumphant Entry

11 The greatest among you will be your servant. 12 For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.

Matthew 23:13 "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the kingdom of heaven in men's faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to.

Matthew 23:15 "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as you are.

Matthew 23:16 "Woe to you, blind guides! You say, 'If anyone swears by the temple, it means nothing; but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath.' 17 You blind fools! Which is greater: the gold, or the temple that makes the gold sacred? 18 You also say, 'If anyone swears by the altar, it means nothing; but if anyone swears by the gift on it, he is bound by his oath.' 19 You blind men! Which is greater: the gift, or the altar that makes the gift sacred? 20 Therefore, he who swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. 21 And he who swears by the temple swears by it and by the one who dwells in it. 22 And he who swears by heaven swears by God's throne and by the one who sits on it.

Matthew 23:23 “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. 24 You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.

Matthew 23:25 “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. 26 Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean.

Matthew 23:27 “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men’s bones and everything unclean. 28 In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.

Matthew 23:29 “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You build tombs for the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous. 30 And you say, ‘If we had lived in the days of our forefathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.’ 31 So you testify against yourselves that you are the descendants of those who murdered the prophets. 32 Fill up, then, the measure of the sin of your forefathers!

Matthew 23:33 “You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell? 34 Therefore I am sending you prophets and wise men and teachers. Some of them you will kill and crucify; others you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town. 35 And so upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Berekiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. 36 I tell you the truth, all this will come upon this generation.

Wow! Folks, let me make a very long sermon shorter by trying to pull it together in a short summary. The Pharisees, Sadducees and Teachers of the Law did not get along with Jesus and Jesus did not get along with them. Can we at this point make that statement? I think so. Why not? Because even though they were face to face with Jesus, the Son of God, the Messiah, the promised Savior of the world, it was still about them. “...this is getting **us** nowhere.” “Look how the whole world has gone after **Him.**” – **instead of us!** In fact they even dared to cry out to Jesus in this scene, “Teacher, rebuke your disciples!” Tell them to be quiet. Jesus simply responded, “I tell you...if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out.”

Folks, church people, especially you leaders of the church, we cannot afford to ever become like these guys, blinded to Jesus as our Savior. Religion is o.k., and not the bad guy it’s made out to be in the world today. Religion, as far as it is the keeper of the collected doctrines of the Bible, is necessary – to know what it is you believe about God and to distinguish your beliefs particularly from non-biblical ones. But “religion” is never the end. It’s a means to the end of having a true relationship with Jesus Christ. The One in the center of this picture, in the center of the universe, must be at the center of our lives. When your “religiosity” blinds you to Christ, then you are truly blind indeed.

We cannot afford to be these guys. Instead, we must always paint ourselves in to the picture right here, as the blind beggar who can only hope and pray for God’s grace. Because that is exactly what Jesus came to bring. Grace. The undeserved love by which He continued this journey all the way to the cross and their bore all of your burdens and all of your sin and all of your guilt and paid for it in full and let it kill Him so that it would all be judged forever in Him and you could be forgiven and have eternal life with Him in heaven. Amen.