

Proper 16B (Pentecost 12)

Text: Mark 7:1-13

Title: Pharisees

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The Pharisees are always the bad guys. Every time. Every story. The Pharisees are the bad guys.

You can picture them, can't you. A group of old grumpy men with gray hair and long beards, with a frown permanently frozen to their faces. They follow Jesus around trying to stump him and trick him and accuse him of wrong-doing. The point their self-righteous fingers at Jesus and His disciples whenever He does something that they don't like.

The Pharisees are the villains in the story. When they come on the scene, you can hear the crowd bow and hiss and the music shifts to a minor key.

To us the word "Pharisee" is not a complement. The word "Pharisee" is an insult. The word "Pharisee" has become a synonym for "hypocrite". Who would want to be a Pharisee?

But what made the Pharisees act the way they did? Why were they so obsessed with the law and tradition? And are we guilty of acting like the Pharisees sometimes?

The Pharisees were big on cleanliness and purity. St. Mark tells us all about their quirky habits of ritual washing of hands and cups and bowls and plates and even tables and couches. They weren't washing these things because they were dirty, but because they were ceremonially unclean, they had come in contact with a Gentile or a Samaritan or even an Israelite who was sick or sinful, and they needed to be purified before use.

For the Pharisees, their home was an extension of the temple in Jerusalem. Their home was a holy place. And they saw themselves as the priests. So all of the purity rituals that the priests did in Jerusalem at the temple, the Pharisees did in their homes, too, because they wanted to be clean and pure and in God's presence.

Now on its own, this was a good thing. It was a reminder to the Pharisees that the Lord was with them here in their homes, just as He was present in the temple in Jerusalem. It was a reminder that they were God's special people, and that they should conduct themselves with reverence and respect.

What the Pharisees believed about God's presence and purity was a good thing. The problem was when they made these practices a requirement for everyone. They thought that everyone should keep the same high standard of purity that they did.

The Pharisees accused Jesus' disciples of not observing the washing rituals, in accordance with the traditions of the elders (notice they don't accuse Jesus directly, just the disciples). They

couldn't understand why a teacher like Jesus wouldn't teach His disciples to hold to a higher standard of purity/

So the Pharisees took a good, helpful practice and turned it into a law, a new requirement, and they condemned folks who wouldn't do things their way. And this is why Jesus quotes Isaiah to them. They are teaching the traditions of man as if they were God's law. They are making people feel guilty for things they shouldn't feel guilty about.

This was a big issue for Luther during the Reformation. The church at that time had taken a lot of things that were good and helpful, things like vestments and candles and processions and ashes and all sorts of ceremonies and made new laws out of them, and they said that everyone was required to do them. If they didn't do things a certain way, it was wrong and even sinful.

These ceremonies are good and helpful things, and many of them are things that we continue to do here in our congregation. But we dare not make a new law out of them and condemn our fellow Christians if they choose not to make use of them.

We Lutherans are big on tradition. And that's not necessarily a bad thing. Many of our traditions point to Christ and what He has done for us. These are good and helpful practices, but nowhere does God tell us we have to do them, and so we have no right to condemn those who choose not to. We can still encourage them to do these things sorts of things because of their helpful benefits, but it's not a matter of right and wrong.

So that was the first issue with the Pharisees. They turned traditions into laws. They made their rules into God's rules.

The second issue Jesus had with the Pharisees is when they tried to weasel out of God's commands by looking for loopholes.

For example, God tells us to honor our parents. One way to do this is to support them later in life. In Jesus' day there was no retirement plans, no social security, no 401Ks. You worked as long as you were able. If you were too weak to work, then you relied on your family to care for you.

But some people found a way out of taking care of their parents. They would declare their money or property to be dedicated to God and then they could avoid giving it to their parents.

We often look for loopholes in God's law, too. And we've found ways to take what God says in one part of Scripture and use it against what God says in other places.

Have you ever heard this one- "God is everywhere, so I don't need to go to church, I can stay home and worship Him in my own way." Now God is indeed everywhere, but that is meant to be a comfort to us, not an excuse to keep us from public worship.

Or you've probably heard this one: "Jesus says that we shouldn't judge ("judge not, lest ye be judged"), so you can't tell me what I'm doing is wrong."

Or how about “God says that he loves a cheerful giver, and if I gave to the church I wouldn’t do it cheerfully, so it’s better that I not give anything than give without being cheerful.”

We all find ways to dodge and get around God’s law. We find ways of making it accuse everyone else but us.

We are like the Pharisees in both ways. We accuse people when they don’t do things our way, and we find ways of justifying ourselves when we fail to keep God’s Law. We’re not the sinners, but everyone else out there is.

If that is your attitude, then you have no need for Jesus. Those other people out there may need to repent, but I’m doing okay. If you can make up your own rules, then you’ll always be able to find a way to make yourself look good and everyone else look bad.

If this is your attitude, then Jesus’ words are for you. “This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.”

Being a Christian isn’t about being better than everyone else. It’s not about being a good person. On the outside, the Pharisees were very good people. They were the pillars of society. They kept the law, even the extra ones that were added on.

But on the inside, in their heart, they were far from the Lord.

There is no happy ending to this story. There’s no real gospel in this text. There’s no good news for the Pharisees. Jesus gets mad with the Pharisees, and they are left hanging. There are no words of grace and forgiveness.

This is because the Pharisees never confess their sinfulness. They never admit their faults. They go home, they go back and reload for their next encounter with Jesus.

There were no words of forgiveness for the Pharisees because there were no words of confession. They did not confess their sins, and so they did not stick around to hear the gospel.

Jesus’ words should cause you to look in the mirror, look at yourself. When have you worshipped God with your lips and not with your heart? When have you put your own ideas and traditions ahead of God’s word?

Yes, you and I have been Pharisees. We have thought of ourselves as better than other people. We have twisted God’s Word to make it say what we want it to say.

But Jesus still loves you. Jesus died for you. Jesus died even for the Pharisees, especially for the Pharisees. There is hope even for Pharisees like you and me because Jesus died for us. Do not be like the Pharisees. Do not just turn around and go home without hearing the Lord’s words of love and forgiveness. Confess your sins to Him now, that you may hear His words of pardon.

Remember the words that we speak to one another each week at the beginning of the service. Hear them once more and take them to hear. “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sins, God, who is faithful and just will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

God will cleanse you from all your unrighteousness. Ritual washing like the Pharisees required, won’t get the job done. But God makes you clean from the inside out. He cleans not just your hands, but your heart. He creates in you a clean heart.

Our text begins by saying that the Pharisees were gathered to Jesus. It’s a passive verb. The implication is that Jesus is the one who gathered them, and He gathered them to eat. In fact, the verb used here is the same word the early Christians used for their coming together for the Lord’s Supper.

We know that Jesus ate with sinners. The good news for us is that Jesus eats even with Pharisees. He gathers us together to share a meal with us. Next week the Lord Jesus will gather us together once more to eat His body and drink His blood. When you come, don’t worry about those around you and how they’ve prepared for the meal and if they’re worthy to receive it. Come knowing that here, at this table, your sins will be forgiven and you will be made clean.