

The Heart of a Humbled Pharisee

Meta

Location: Apostles Anglican Church

Date: November 5, 2023

Readings

Micah 3:5–12

Psalm 43

I Thessalonians 2:9–20

Matthew 23:1–12

Opening

Growing up in a certain culture, you learn about your local heroes and your local rivals. I was brought up a Tennessee fan and that means I'm always for Tennessee and whoever's playing Alabama. As a Red Sox fan, I'm always for the Sox and whoever's playing the Yankees. When I see a crimson jersey in football, or pinstripes in baseball, I learned an instinctual response—there's my archival, my opponent. I learned that response before I knew the history of the rivalry; of Johnny Majors vs Bear Bryant; of Carlton Fisk vs Thurmon Munson.

Growing up in the Church, when we learn the stories of the Gospels as children or new Christians, it's obvious that the Pharisees are Jesus' opponents, especially in the Gospel of St Matthew. No Gospel writer arguably has more disdain for the Pharisees than Matthew. We have an instinctual response when the Pharisees appear in a Gospel story. But have you ever considered: how did they get like that—strict, judgmental, hypocritical? What motivated the Pharisees of Jesus' day? Why were they that way?

Today we read the beginning of Matthew 23, a passage in which Jesus addresses the crowds and his disciples, yet the main topic is the Pharisees. Immediately following the conclusion of our reading today, Jesus announces a searing rebuke of the Pharisees in seven sayings, known as the seven woes.

We won't read the seven woes against the Pharisees in coming Sundays. After today, our lectionary takes a considerable jump in Matthew's Holy Week account with a change in setting. Beginning next week, Jesus won't be addressing his opponents inside the Temple. For the remainder of November, we will hear Jesus address his disciples in private, outside the Temple, gathered on the Mount of Olives. So, before Matthew advances his Holy Week narrative to a different location and audience, we ought to hear Jesus' sharp rebuke of the Pharisees, not just at a surface level, but in its depths. If Christ has given such a stern warning to *not* follow the example of the Pharisees, we would do well to learn more about the Pharisees themselves; and, of course, to offer our own repentance wherever we may find a pharisaical spirit within.

Section 2

This topic, of course, is much greater than one day or one sermon. But even when summarizing the Pharisees' history, we need to see a complex picture with this group. History doesn't allow us to have a monolithic view of the Pharisees. They had divisions and factions among themselves. And they weren't all enemies of Jesus. In Luke's Gospel, some were allies of Jesus and helped protect the Lord when Herod had a plot to arrest him. Many were convinced Jesus was a man with divine authority. Remember Nicodemus, too. Nicodemus was a Pharisee. Nicodemus visited Jesus at night and he cared for Jesus after his crucifixion, bringing spices to embalm the Lord's body.

Now, this doesn't by any means vindicate the Pharisees. The weight of their legacy lies with the woes Jesus pronounced over them. But seeing a more complex picture reveals that Pharisees, with their view of the world, their view of Scripture, had a choice to make regarding Jesus. Some chose the way of Jesus, others chose to oppose Jesus.

Let's return to those earlier questions. What motivated the Pharisees of Jesus' day? Why were they that way?

We think of the Pharisees as some kind of thought police, but actually their motivations were slightly different. Essentially, the Pharisees emerged as a religious/political pressure group to overthrow paganism in Israel. When the Pharisees required everyone to keep the most strict observance of Torah, it was motivated by a desire to resist pagan rule—to resist Rome. Theirs was not a private piety alone, but ritual observance fused with political revolutionary ambitions to end the Roman occupation. Pharisees believed God would redeem Israel from pagan empires, yet they believed God required faithful and pure Israelites in that cause. But only those Israelites who had the right liturgy, who observed ritual purity in the right way. NT Wright summarizes the Pharisees' motivations well when he says:

*faced with with social, political and cultural 'pollution' at the level of national life as a whole, (they) concentrated on personal cleanness, to cleanse and purify an area over which one **did** have control as a compensation for the impossibility of cleansing or purifying an area—the outward and visible political one—over which one had (no control).¹*

The Pharisees pursued this vision for holiness because they desired deliverance and salvation so badly. Suffering oppression from Rome, they became oppressive towards others. When we get desperate for salvation, we seek to control what we can control. And seeking to control what we can control, we focus on things we can see and do. We put our trust in the things we control, and see, and do. We try to become our own savior, focusing on our outward habits, our performance, our works. And all the while, we may not realize that we have slowly, steadily become blind to the place where holiness is needed most—the heart.

That is the disease of the Pharisee. They have placed their hope for salvation in external things—from politics, to seats of honor, ritual garments, and prayer aids like phylacteries. It's easy to condemn them, but remember the Pharisee desires salvation, too. As Metropolitan Anthony Bloom says, 'there is no evil in a person that is not at the same time a suffering in the same person.'²

¹ N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 187–188.

² Metropolitan Anthony Bloom, *Churchianity vs. Christianity*, 118.

False teachings doesn't mean that the whole body of teaching is wrong all the way down. It means that somewhere, somehow, at a critical point—and usually *because* of suffering, whether of principle or practice— something fell off the rails.

In this cascade of criticisms against the Pharisees, it's easy to overlook Jesus' first statement when he addresses the disciples: "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat, so *do and observe whatever they tell you*, but not the works they do."³ Jesus doesn't censure their instruction, but their practice! It was a critical point of *practice* that was the fatal error. You could trust the instruction of the Pharisees regarding the Torah, the Law of Moses, but not their practice, their works.

It was no mild error though, but a fatal error. Fatal for their own souls, faithful for the souls of those under their authority. For the fatal error was the absence of mercy; of humility; of love.

They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger.

Can you hear these burdens with the weight of revolution added thereunto? If you're going to be part of God's liberation from the pagans, he'll fulfill his promise, but it's up to you to follow the Law with complete purity.

Yet when God came Man in Jesus of Nazareth to save his people from the greatest Enemy, not from pagan Rome, but from the prince of darkness, Satan, he said this to souls wearied by the false gospel of the Pharisees:

*Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.*⁴

Section 3

This is the exchange Jesus has offered from the beginning, not just at the end of his life, in Holy Week. Remember the beginning:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

This is the revolution of the heart. This is what Jesus offers in exchange for the heavy burdens of the Pharisees—his gentleness, his lowliness, his humility of heart. The Pharisees live and trust in their own strength. Jesus blesses the weak, invites the wounded, the weeping, the afraid to come into his embrace.

Do not mistake Jesus' revolution of the heart as simply a foil for the Pharisees extremism of external acts. No, Jesus was not teaching the way of the heart simply to usurp the Pharisees and gather a following himself. His was no private piety sealed off from the kingdoms of this world.

³ Matthew 23.1

⁴ *Matthew 11.28-30*

Our Lord proclaimed the truths of a kingdom that would unseat the powers of this age and the age to come. 'Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.' Holy humility will mean the downfall of Rome. Caesar will fall one day because of meekness. The heart that mourns and weeps in repentance will bring joy and freedom in the Holy Spirit, setting free the captives of sin from every tribe, tongue, and nation.

The Heart of a Humbled Pharisee

Oh, we have heard stern words from our Lord to the Pharisees in the Gospel today. But just before we heard the Gospel, we heard such tender words from St Paul, addressing the Thessalonians. Hear the testimony of a man who, mind you, was a former Pharisee, a man who, by his own description was 'a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee, as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.' But then the Lord changed his course, broke his heart. How many times did Jesus say the Pharisees were blind guides in the seven woes? Several. So no wonder Paul was blinded on the road to Damascus. But when his sight was restored, Paul saw everything anew. He saw not the strength of his own zeal and purity, but the power of Christ made perfect in Paul's weakness.

From confidence in his own righteousness, Paul became tender and merciful like his Lord. The Pharisees were known for tying heavy burdens. Listen again to Paul's redeemed heart speaking to the Thessalonians: 'we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God.'⁵

Consider the tenderness we've heard from Paul last Sunday: 'we did not seek glory from people, whether from you or from others, though we could have made demands as apostles of Christ. *But we were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children. So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us.*'⁶

Then Paul shifts from the maternal imagery to fatherly imagery in verse 11: 'For you know how, like a father with his children, we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory.'

And finally, hear Paul pour out his heart of love—a heart that had died and risen in Christ; a heart aflame with love for the saints--when he says to his beloved Thessalonian brethren, 'For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? For you are our glory and joy.'⁷

This is the love of Christ, the heart of the Gospel, the joy of the Kingdom.

Closing

And you know what our joy and glory is today? We welcome a new brother into the Kingdom of God. (Later this morning/In a few moments), we will baptize Sean Finklea in the Name of the Father, the

⁵ 1 Thessalonians 2.9

⁶ 1 Thessalonians 2.8

⁷ 1 Thessalonians 2.19

Son, and the Holy Spirit. Sean, you enter a Kingdom whose King is gentle and lowly of heart, whose burden is light. Never forget in the call to holiness that we share together—no matter the rituals, the habits, the liturgies, the prayers—all must pierce the heart, humble the heart, yet set the heart afire with love for Christ and for neighbor. Our hearts must become gentle, tender, and merciful like our Lord. All the spiritual gifts we have must build up the soul, build up the church in love. For this is the revolution of the heart Jesus brought to establish his church and save the world. May our hearts always burn with holy love for the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, both now and unto ages of ages. Amen.