

...FOR THOSE SEEKING THE EMPOWERING PRESENCE OF THE *Holy Spirit*

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Pharisees Yesterday & Today

by RT Kendall



The main thing that threatened Pharisees was any success enjoyed by those who did not uphold their party line. Keep in mind that the Pharisees were a party within Judaism. They wanted prestige and glory for their own party and party line. They feared being outnumbered and were therefore threatened by the common people taking so fondly to Jesus. Some thought that Jesus really was the promised Messiah. This really upset the Pharisees. Therefore, if Jesus enjoyed any measure of undoubted success (though Jesus was not trying to be “successful” as such)—whether by growing crowds or performing a miracle—the Pharisees were then thrust right out of their comfort zones.



It was basically a matter of jealousy, of course. Jealousy—the sin we never see in ourselves but readily seen when others have it—always intensifies when someone is pushed suddenly and without warning outside their comfort zone. When someone chooses to go outside their comfort zone

because of obedience to the Lord, it is a different matter; jealousy has greater difficulty growing. But when we are threatened by another’s anointing, as Saul was threatened by David (1 Sam. 18:12), our insecurity grows. Fear spreads from the crown of our heads to the soles of our feet. This is what was happening to Pharisees every time Jesus opened His mouth or performed another miracle.

Even Pontius Pilate knew that “it was out of envy that the chief priests had handed Jesus over to him” (Mark 15:10). They were threatened by the miracles. They were threatened by Jesus’ treatment of the Law and his doctrine of sin, and were of course threatened by not achieving significance from the applause of people. But what really got their goat was having to watch someone outside their own party winning the hearts of the people.

Their attack lay in the idea of “guilt by association.” This tactic was used by Pharisees then and continues to be used today. If people who are attracted to you—or people you spend time with—are unworthy, theologically inarticulate, not of good stock or of respectable credentials, all of you are in the same boat together and should be regarded as being cut out of the same cloth. You are all

THIS MAN welcomes sinners and eats with them

Luke 14:2

equally guilty. You prove your guilt by those with whom you are friendly.

The Pharisees’ trump card therefore: The kind of people that Jesus allowed to be around Him, the quality of people affirming Him and the backgrounds of those who were brought closest to Him. “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them” (Luke 15:2). This, to the Pharisees, should be enough

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to indict Jesus as one to be shunned; surely this would cause everybody to turn against Jesus. But it didn't work. Jesus even pleaded guilty to the charge and told several more parables (Luke 15 and 16) to show that the Father loves and welcomes sinners into His family.

Pharisees yesterday and today love to repudiate a person by the quality of the people they seek to reach or those who admire them. Jesus surprised everybody by choosing a tax collector to be one of the twelve disciples. That was just not right! The Pharisees, on the other hand, quickly wrote off those who mixed with non-adherents to their party line.

I received a letter from a man who ended it with, "May God have mercy on your soul," which I doubt he really wanted for me, because I spent time with Yasser Arafat and tried to lead this leader to Christ. I was charged with guilt by association, but I knew Jesus would go into Ramallah. One of the closest friends I ever had broke with me because I accepted a preaching invitation of which he did not approve. His reason was that it did not make him look good. Since I was known to be close to him, it did not suit him for me to be seen preaching to that particular group of Christians. Again, it was guilt by association.

...BUT I KNEW Jesus would go into Ramallah

RT Kendall

I had a close friend who refused to go into a bar to witness for Jesus. "Why?" I asked. "Because someone might see me go in and think I was there to have a drink," he said. I said to him, "Surely your life is such that people would never question why you would be there. Jesus would not care what people thought but would be right in the middle of that bar talking to sinners."

Reputation means everything to a Pharisee who is looking over his shoulder all the time to see who is watching. The Pharisees wanted to preserve the Law, their fence around the Law, and the reputation of their forefathers who they thought were the last to see God work powerfully in Israel.

The Pharisees were at home when praising the great men of God of the past but threatened by the thought that God was doing something now. That God would be at work today and putting them right outside their comfort zones. For all of us today it is great indeed to hear of wonderful revivals of the past, of men of God who did marvelous and courageous things two hundred years ago, or perhaps only fifty years ago. But not today. We are in our comfort zones talking about what God did yesterday. But talk of God doing something today, unless it is on some remote island in the Third World, is too threatening a topic. Anyone who says that what is happening now is of God will be treated with disbelief.

When a Pharisee is outside his comfort zone he has to do something. One of the main things: He accuses and says, "This is not of God." Sometimes he crosses over a line and says, "This is of the devil." This is a dangerous thing to do. When this was done in the presence of Jesus and the very miraculous,

He introduced a very scary teaching—the sin for which there is no forgiveness. He called it blasphemy against the Holy Spirit which makes a person guilty of an "eternal sin"—all because they were saying of Jesus, "He has an evil spirit" (Mark 3:28-30).

Why is it that some of us are more willing to accept that it is the devil at work than we are that something or someone is actually of God? If we have a party line that says, "God doesn't do the miraculous nowadays; that ended after the closing of the canon of Scripture," we are forced to explain what is happening. To be on the safe side we may say a miracle takes place by a psychological reaction (this is what some said when my wife Louise in her weakest and darkest hour was prayed for by Rodney Howard-Brown—and was instantaneously healed). But I know of some who accused Rodney of preaching in a tongue that was demonic and out of the dark regions of Africa. Whoever said it first, I don't know; I only know I would not want to be in their shoes. It is one thing to be outside your comfort zone because of reports of the miraculous which you don't understand; it is crossing well over the line to say it is of Satan. Whatever you say, don't say that.



It is sad but sobering to realize how far we will go to defend our party line. We get defensive. Say crazy things. Get very suspicious. Send out spies, like those Jews who were sent from Jerusalem to investigate John the Baptist (John 1:19). Anyone who puts us outside our comfort zone—such as a man whose clothes were made of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and calling for repentance—becomes our next target. Before it is all over we even turn on the man who was actually healed. That’s what happened to the lad who was healed of blindness. Though he ought to have had a chance to enjoy his sight for a while, he was instead having to explain himself and was eventually persecuted—just because he was the one healed (John 9:26-34).

Those Pharisees who are thrust outside their comfort zones seem to live for the moment when they can trap the one who threatens them, catch them in an unguarded comment or find something that enables them to say, “Gotcha!” What a way to live: using your time and energy to hope someone will make a comment by which they can be labeled heretic or, at least, be embarrassed. Pharisees yesterday and today live for this. “Then the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap him in his words” (Matt. 22:15). When they found the woman in the act of adultery they used their questions about her “as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him” (John: 3-6). The moment they hope for: When they can make another lose face and be caught. People like this are not happy with themselves but will continue on unless God mercifully reaches down and touches their hearts—as in the case of Nicodemus or Saul of Tarsus. That means there is the hope for all of us who are plagued by a pharisaical weakness.

HOW CAN YOU BELIEVE if you accept praise from one another yet make no effort to obtain the praise that comes from the only God?

John 5:44

The worst thing of all, however, was this. The Pharisees’ search for significance outside God and from the praise of people lay at the bottom of their inability to recognize God’s Messiah when He stood before their very eyes. Have you wondered why ancient Israel missed out when the Messiah came? Have you wondered why they still reject Him? I can tell you. It is because they chose the immediate gratification of receiving praise from people rather than to seek honor that comes only from God. Seeking the honor, praise, and glory that comes from God alone means letting go of the applause of men and women. Surely their reverence for the Law was good enough. The Law is God’s product; the Law isn’t God himself. And those who give priority to the Law inevitably end up as Pharisees and miss out on God’s next move, just as the Jews missed out on their own Messiah.

Therefore Jesus was not surprised at their refusal to believe in Him. He gave the explanation Himself and summed up their unbelief in a simple question. He asked: “How can you believe if you accept praise from one another, yet make no effort to obtain the praise that comes from the only God?” (John 5:44). They made a choice: They preferred compliments, adoration, admiration, and glory from people. Jesus said they “made no effort” to see what it would have been like had they sought their significance in the sheer glory of God. But they opted for the glory of man. This felt better. Possibly, for a while. But at the end of the day one who makes this choice will pay for it dearly and suffer for it bitterly—forever—unless God mercifully steps down as He did in the cases of Nicodemus and Saul of Tarsus. And me. And I hope you.

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We look forward to hearing from RT Kendall at the August 1-4, 2007 Holy Spirit Conference, **“Jesus and the Kingdom of God.”** He will be speaking on Wednesday.



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