

The Spirit of the Pharisees #1

By Bill Denton

INTRODUCTION

A. We're at the start of a new month which means we're at the start of a new sermon series

1. I keep referring to my sermon planning committee, but they did a great job and came up with terrific suggestions for sermons
2. The series this month is: The Spirit of the Pharisees

B. The plan is for five sermons in this series, and I believe they may be among the most important sermons that you have heard in a long time

1. The subject is important because we're going to talk about the people with whom Jesus had his greatest conflicts
2. It's not just conflict, but the Pharisees stood for so much that had gone wrong in Israel's effort to follow God's will
3. It's not just an ancient problem either - we're going to discover that the conflicts and issues between Jesus and Pharisees have an all-to-modern ring about them
4. We just might be challenged with some of our own practices, beliefs, customs and traditions that are little different from those of the Pharisees
5. If you're looking for a confrontational, hard-hitting sermon series, this might be it!
6. On the other hand, if you think it's going to hit the other guy, you might be wrong!

C. In the book of Matthew, we meet the Pharisees during the ministry of John the Baptist - they had come to be baptized by John

1. Matthew 3:5-10 5Then Jerusalem was going out to him, and all Judea and all the district around the Jordan; 6and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, as they confessed their sins. 7But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? 8"Therefore bear fruit in keeping with repentance; 9and do not suppose that you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham for our father'; for I say to you that from these stones God is able to raise up children to Abraham. 10"The axe is already laid at the root of the trees; therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. NASB95
2. It is fair to say that the New Testament gives a mostly one-sided view of Pharisees, but this is because they stood as a major obstacle to Jesus, and held much of the responsibility for his crucifixion
3. The Bible does not intend to give us a balanced history of Pharisees, it tells us about the spiritual emptiness of the people of Israel, and as

those considered to be among the most spiritual in all Israel, they represent in a very clear way, that spiritual emptiness

D. I hope this series of lessons will challenge you to think

1. That's one of the purposes of every sermon I preach
2. But these, in particular, can serve to help your walk with the Lord be what both you and he want it to be

I. THE ORIGIN OF THE PHARISEES

A. Nobody knows exactly when Pharisees came to exist, but they probably began during the Babylonian exile

1. When the Assyrians took away the northern kingdom, the weak faith of those people and the lack of leadership contributed to their total loss
2. They adopted the lifestyle and religion of the pagans among whom they lived
3. They were completely lost as the chosen people of God

B. Around 600 B.C., the Babylonians rose to power, defeated the Assyrians then set their sights on Judah, the southern kingdom of the Jews

1. Over a period of some 15 years, Nebuchadnezzar deported almost all the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem
2. They removed the gold from the palace and the temple, and took the wealth of the treasury
3. They destroyed the city walls, the homes, and the temple itself
4. This should have marked the end of the Jews
 - a. They had no unifying symbol like the temple
 - b. They had not leaders
 - c. They were scattered and powerless
5. They would have been destroyed except for a few remarkable men like Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego, and others who were committed to their faith in God and to their identity as the Jewish people

C. They did not want a repeat of what happened to the northern kingdom

1. They believed one of their primary tasks was to educate their young in the Jewish faith and worship
2. They organized classes for religious instruction
3. The synagogue had its origin during this time and became a center for education
4. They steadily looked forward to the time when they could return to their homeland as prophesied by Isaiah
5. These were the forefathers of the Pharisees who called Israel in captivity to know and hold on to their faith
6. Do not miss the powerful impact these people had on keeping Israel together during very dark days

7. William Coleman -- "The Pharisees rise to power reads more like a modern novel than like ancient history. It is the story of raw courage, daring heroics, and a deep dedication to God. It is also the account of assassinations, mass murder, and political plotting."

D. The Courage of the Pharisees

1. The first mention of Pharisees ("separated ones") is in connection with the strong nationalistic and religious pride resulting from the Jewish guerilla battles fought against Antiochus Euphianes in 165 B.C.
2. A Pharisee named Eleazar rose during a banquet and challenged the right of John Hyrcanus to rule as king. Nobody should doubt the raw courage of this act.
3. During the reign of Alexander Jannaeus the Pharisees fought tenaciously in a cruel and bloody civil war
4. During the reign of queen Salome Alexandra, the Pharisees developed into a powerful political party because the queen was favorably disposed toward them

E. Thousands of Pharisees died for their country, and the name Pharisee is very respected among modern Jews

1. They were dedicated national heroes
2. They accepted the scriptures as God-given
3. They were careful students of the Old Testament
4. They kept the ceremonial laws
5. They emphasized education
6. They were fervently evangelistic
7. They were sacrificial tithers
8. They anticipated the Messiah

II. FENCE BUILDING

A. We need to understand the basic approach the Pharisees used to determine how to follow God's law

1. First, it gives us a sense of what they set out to do, and we'll find that it is not all bad or negative
2. Second, it shows us how a good thing can go wrong
3. It shows us how human thinking replaces God's word, while continuing to believe it's God's word and not human thinking that the focus

B. We need to understand the Pharisees' effort

1. They felt a great responsibility to protect and propagate God's laws
2. They were extremely zealous in this respect, and wanted nothing more than they wanted to do exactly what God had commanded
3. They were so determined not to break the law that they devised a system to keep a person from even coming close to breaking the law

4. They came up with the idea of an "fence" - a rule that, if observed, would guarantee a safe distance between a person and violation of the law
5. Over the years, the fences numbered into the hundreds, and soon, the fence held the same force as the law it was meant to protect

C. Simple examples

1. God said not to work on the Sabbath, therefore, don't even pick a grain to eat
2. Don't heal anyone on the Sabbath because it might look too much like work
3. If you think about it, the Pharisees did little more than what many of us still do today - we make our personal applications of God's word into the same thing as God's word, without realizing what we've done

D. Pharisees even created new laws as times changed

1. If the scriptures did not address something modern, then they would create a law to cover it
2. They believed the new laws were just as binding as the ones God actually gave

E. Someone observed that the most serious problem with the Pharisees is that they were basically afraid of God

1. This may be more correct than you think
2. Their fear and their zeal combined to create an approach to God and his word that destroyed the close walk with the Lord that they wanted so badly

III. ENDING UP WHERE YOU NEVER MEANT TO BE

A. This is the great and sorrowful legacy of the Pharisees

1. They started out with a noble, courageous goal, and many men withstood the times and the enemies of God's people to insure faithful obedience to God's law
2. We would be wrong not to recognize the many Pharisees who accomplished great things for God and his people, and who stand today as excellent examples
3. But we must, as Jesus did, acknowledge that, as a group, the Pharisees ended up where they never intended to be -- on opposite sides from God

B. Examples (we'll come back to these later)

1. Matthew 15:1-9 1 -- Then some Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, 2“Why do Your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread.” 3And He answered and said to them, “Why do you yourselves transgress

the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? 4“For God said, ‘Honor your father and mother,’ and, ‘He who speaks evil of father or mother is to be put to death.’ 5“But you say, ‘Whoever says to his father or mother, “Whatever I have that would help you has been given to God,” 6he is not to honor his father or his mother.’ And by this you invalidated the word of God for the sake of your tradition. 7“You hypocrites, rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you: 8‘This people honors Me with their lips, But their heart is far away from Me. 9‘But in vain do they worship Me, Teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.’ ” NASB95

2. Matthew 5:20 20“For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. NASB95
3. Matthew 12:38-39 38Then some of the scribes and Pharisees said to Him, “Teacher, we want to see a sign from You.” 39But He answered and said to them, “An evil and adulterous generation craves for a sign; and yet no sign will be given to it but the sign of Jonah the prophet; NASB95
4. Matthew 16:6-12 6And Jesus said to them, “Watch out and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.” 7They began to discuss this among themselves, saying, “He said that because we did not bring any bread.” 8But Jesus, aware of this, said, “You men of little faith, why do you discuss among yourselves that you have no bread? 9“Do you not yet understand or remember the five loaves of the five thousand, and how many baskets full you picked up? 10“Or the seven loaves of the four thousand, and how many large baskets full you picked up? 11“How is it that you do not understand that I did not speak to you concerning bread? But beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.” 12Then they understood that He did not say to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees. NASB95

CONCLUSION

A. One obvious undercurrent throughout this series will be the way we treat our customs and traditions

1. You can't help but think about such things when you consider the Pharisees
 - a. Most of what the Pharisees did was begun with the effort to follow the will of God as closely as possible and remove the possibilities of violating his will
 - b. But they ended up a far cry from where they set out to be, and became the enemies of the one for whom they waited
2. We have sometimes been so caught up in our own customs and traditions that miss the fact that many of them are our own attempts to do God's will and avoid any violation of it
 - a. At the same time, we need to distinguish between what God has actually said and what we have determined to do

- b. It's not that what we do is so wrong, it's just that we might also forget that our words are not God's words, and we need to be very careful before we conclude that the way we do things is equal to a command from God

B. We need to let these questions roll around in our heads and hearts

1. Why did a unity movement produce more divisions than what we were trying to correct?
2. Why can we, ourselves, not agree on many of the things that distinguish our unique identity and practice?
3. How can some things be so clear to us, and yet so many other people have no clue how we got there?
4. Is it possible that the ancient Pharisee is alive and well today in us?

C. Invitation