

The Church of the Servant King
Survey of the Bible Series
The Gospel of Matthew
(Lesson SB-MT15)

Definition of Terms

Pharisees – a non-priestly group of uncertain origin, generally learned, committed to the oral traditions, and concerned with developing *Halakah* (rules of conduct based on deductions from the law). The Pharisees in the Sanhedrin were laymen in the sense that they were not priests; however, many of them were scribes (i.e. teachers of the law) and thus different from the elders. Both the Pharisees and the Sadducees arose from the ranks of the scribes and priests of Israel after the Babylonian captivity (i.e. after the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem in 516 BC). The Pharisees believed in the immortality of the soul through a resurrection. They also believed in the existence of angels and the providential sovereignty of God.

Sadducees – arose from the ranks of the priests of Israel after the return from captivity and were viewed as more aristocratic in nature than the Pharisees. The Sadducees did not believe in a resurrection and did not believe in angels. They acknowledged only the written law (the Pentateuch) as binding and rejected the oral tradition developed over the centuries. As a result, on many occasions, the Sadducees took a stricter interpretation of the Law than did the Pharisees. The Sadducees put great stress upon human freedom and minimized God's sovereignty in relation to man's free will.

Sanhedrin – a Jewish council that arose during the Hellenizing period of Jewish history and was translated into a form of puppet rule under Rome. The Sanhedrin included both Pharisees and Sadducees (Acts 23:6) and elders.

Elders – this group was mostly lay nobility and primarily Pharisees most likely.

Some Historical Background

The priests and scribes after the Babylonian captivity were very instrumental in the development of Israel. Under the influence of Greece (especially Antiochus IV), Jewish society and religious life became Hellenized and the priests and scribes arose as defenders of the accurate observance of the Law. During the Maccabean (Hasmonean) period (ca. 167 BC to ca. 37 BC), the priests and the scribes became more and more separated until two distinct groups emerged known as the Sadducees and the Pharisees. During the later portion of the Maccabean period, the Maccabees began to focus more on extending their political power. The Pharisees, who had arisen from the laity, won the bulk of the nation to their side. Queen Alexandra (a later period Hasmonaean) abandoned power to the Pharisees in the interest of peace. Eventually, all of the decrees of the Pharisees which had been eliminated during the later, political period of the Maccabean rule, were reintroduced and the Pharisees ruled the public life of the nation.

Later, amid all of the changes of government under the Romans and the Herodians, the Pharisees maintained their spiritual authority. Although the Sadducean high priests were at the head of the Sanhedrin the decisive influence upon public affairs was in the hands of the Pharisees and they had the bulk of the nation as their ally. Their sway over the masses was so absolute that they could obtain a hearing even when they said anything against the king or the high priest.

The Pharisees were not a political party, at least not in a direct sense. Their aim was the strict observance of the Law. As long as nothing interfered with this objective, they could be content with any form of government. It was only when the secular power prevented the practice of the law in that strict manner which the Pharisees demanded, that they gathered together to oppose it and then they became a political party in a certain sense. Even though the Pharisees and Sadducees could fight each other fiercely on certain issues to the point of being enemies, their political circumstances required that they work together at many levels.

Jesus and the Tradition of the Elders (15:1-20)

The fact that the scribes and the Pharisees had traveled from Jerusalem to Galilee to see Jesus indicates that Jesus' reputation was becoming widespread. *Show map here.* The fact that this group came from Jerusalem meant that they were most likely held in special esteem.

The parallel gospel account in Mark 7:3-4 provides additional clarification that Matthew omits since Matthew didn't need to explain Jewish customs to his readers. Also, as we have seen on previous occasions (e.g. the raising of Jarius' daughter in 9:18-26 where Matthew doesn't record the arrival of the messengers who announce the death of the daughter) Matthew's style of writing is to condense the narrative of certain events. The tradition of the fathers to which Mark refers is that body of oral tradition that had been passed down through several generations and which the Pharisees viewed as having the force of the written Law. Later it became codified and known as the Mishnah. An example:

If a man poured water over the one hand with a single rinsing, his hand is clean; but if over both hands with a single rinsing, R[abbi] Meir declares them unclean unless he pours over them a quarter-log or more. (M *Yadaim* 2:1)

Jesus points out to the Pharisees that they have broken the written Law through clever maneuverings with their oral tradition. In Lev 27:9, 16, a son could dedicate certain assets as *korban* or a gift devoted to God and set aside for the temple treasury. Later such a vow could be annulled in various ways based upon tradition. In this manner, the Pharisees could cleverly maneuver to withhold assets from the parents. This was tantamount to having broken the fifth commandment – honor your father and mother (Ex 20:12). Therefore, a needy set of parents would not have their needs met simply because the son's assets had been declared *korban*.

This was the first recorded instance of Jesus calling the Pharisees and teachers of the law hypocrites. While they made a show of devotion to God, their religious traditions took precedence over God's will.

In verses 8-9, Jesus says that Isaiah was right when he prophesied about "you." However, Isaiah's audience was hundreds of years before. Jesus' point is not that Isaiah prophesied about the people of Jesus' day in a direct sense. Rather, since the Pharisees saw themselves as the preservers of ancient oral tradition, Jesus criticizes them for preserving the spirit of those whom Isaiah criticized long before. Jesus quotes Isaiah 29:13 to make the point that the Pharisees and teachers of the law have displaced a spiritual life with a mere form that makes their worship vanity (emptiness).

A parallel application to the Christian believer: Paul dealt with this issue in Galatians 1:14 and Colossians 2:8 where he recounts his religious accomplishments in the former and in the latter he warns believers regarding the traditions of men. Several principles emerge: 1) religion (verses spirituality) is a subtle form of rationalism based upon one's own selfish interest; 2) a spiritual person is honest with him/herself in all matters; 3) the spiritual person is discerning regarding his/her status before the Lord and does not use anything or anyone as an excuse for spiritual failure or lapse; 4) spiritual honesty is the basis for humility; 5) religious people as opposed to spiritual people are blind (vv. 13-14). The Lord desires honesty in our assessments of own behavior before Him. We will have no excuses when we stand at the Bema Seat judgment and are evaluated as to the quality of our spiritual lives. Don't deceive yourself now only to miss out on all that God has in store for you in eternity.

In verses 16-20, we see Jesus teaching the principle that the eyes are the window to a man's soul, i.e. what a man takes into his mind affects the manner in which he thinks. This principle is recognized throughout the Bible in such passages as Psalm 101:3; 119:11; and 2 Corinthians 10:5.

A Gentile Woman Demonstrates Faith (15:21-28)

No doubt, this Gentile woman appeared to be nothing more than another miracle seeker and not necessarily a true believer. However, she passes the test of her true intentions in verse 26-27 when she acknowledges her true status as a Gentile in relation to the covenant people, the Jews. [Note: This section is good evidence that Jesus was still offering the gospel of the kingdom to the Jews first and forms a bracket around chapter 13 when combined with Jesus' naming and instructing the 12 apostles to Israel in chapter 10 that should require chapter 13 to be interpreted in view of that consistent message to Israel].

Jesus Heals Great Multitudes (15:29-31)

In these verses, Jesus has traveled from Tyre and Sidon on the coast to the Sea of Galilee. However, this area is still in Gentile territory. The Gentiles in this area believed and glorified Israel's God, while many in Israel remained blind to their Messiah.

Jesus Feeds the Four Thousand (15:32-39)

This is a different event than the feeding of the five thousand in 14:13-21. Jesus Himself identifies it as a separate event in 16:9 & 10. In this situation, it appears that Jesus' preaching and miracles so captivated the people that they refused to leave him until he dismissed them. However, since some had come a long distance, He was concerned that they might collapse because of hunger on their way home. In spite of the disciples having previously observed Jesus' miracles, they have no clue as to the source of their provision.

[Note of parallel application: even when we have seen the Lord deliver on previous occasions, we are still tempted to not see Him as the source of our provision. The disciples were no different.]