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GOOD NEWS *Unlimited*

THE PHARISEES

By Ron Allen

Andrew Falconer had abandoned his marriage and devoted himself to a debauched life. Overcome with grief, his wife sickened and died, leaving her young son to the doubtful mercies of his grandmother who must have been the most ardent Presbyterian in all of Scotland.

Grandma Falconer suffered a saintly sorrow over the sinful ways of her son Andrew. She laid siege to the Almighty on his behalf; never missing morning and evening Bible readings with prayers in which Andrew's name was mentioned with extraordinary beseeching. She lived in fear that Robert, her grandson, might fall prey to Satan and go the way of his father, so she watched over his soul with a diligence that threatened to smother him.

It happened that Grandma's late husband had been the owner of a violin. Village folk recalled his skill at making lovely music with it. Once, when Robert was exploring in Grandma's house, he came upon the instrument. Instinctively, he realized that Grandma must not wish him to find it; still less to play it. People who play fiddles could easily be led astray by the subtle work of music on the emotions. Fiddles—and all music, except the music of the perseverance of the saints—were an agency of evil in the world.

Robert took the fiddle from its case then returned the case to its place. He hid the violin in his room and secretly began to learn to play. A world of creative experience began to open to him. Whenever he played his heart felt full and ready to burst. But one day he arrived home from school to see the beloved violin in flames on Grandma's kitchen hearth. He went to his room heartbroken. The old woman had done what she believed was right. She had nipped evil in the bud, and safeguarded her grandson for God.

Grandma's actions did not produce a grateful piety in Robert; they had an opposite effect. He was filled with grief and rage. He loved his granny, but nothing about the God she tried so hard to serve gave him any comfort, joy, or hope. He wanted to serve God, but not a God who was the enemy of music and joy.

Grandma Falconer's is a species of devotion which features in all religions. When Jesus was in Palestine, the incarnation of this reverent zeal could be found in the party of the Pharisees. So well did they capture the essence of this phenomenon that wherever it has occurred since, it has been nick-named 'Pharisaism.'

As in the case of Grandma Falconer, the Pharisees were not what you would call horribly wicked. They were more like the man Mark Twain referred to: *"A good person in the worst sense of the word."*

The Pharisees aimed to do right. They dominated the ranks of Israel's teachers. They were dedicated to the Law of Moses. It was their task and passion to apply that body of divinity to every aspect of national life.

To realize this goal, they found it necessary to develop applications that were not explicitly laid down in the text of the law itself. As an example: Moses had said that priests must wash their hands before entering the temple (Exodus 30:9; 40:13). The conclusion was drawn that this duty really applied to all Israelites. So the law was extended to require that all men—not just priests—must wash their hands

before eating.

Personal hygiene was not the issue. This was religious disinfectant. The washings took place in compliance with an interpretive commentary built up around the law; a commentary deemed just as important as the law itself. It was sometimes referred to as "the tradition of the elders"; a safety barricade to keep the devout back from the precipice of disobedience to God. It was like Grandma's law: "Thou shalt not enjoy music or play fiddles."

Though the Pharisees were widely respected, not everyone took them as seriously as they took themselves. Witness these seven types of Pharisees listed in the Talmud.

1. The Shoulder Pharisee—wears his good deeds on his shoulder so everyone can see them.
2. The Wait-a-little Pharisee—always looking for a lawful excuse to delay a good deed.
3. The Bruised Pharisee—keeps his eyes shut all the time so he does not sight a woman and lust after her. As result he

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- runs into walls and bruises himself.
4. The Hump-backed Pharisee—has a hang-dog appearance in an effort to achieve humility.
 5. The Ever-reckoning Pharisee—always counting his good deeds.
 6. The Fearful Pharisee—terrified of the wrath of God.
 7. The God-loving Pharisee—like Abraham. That this kind is mentioned in the list that shows there were Pharisees who were not lampooned, but respected.

In the second century B.C., the Pharisees' spiritual forbears had saved Israel from extinction at the hands of the heathen Antiochus Epiphanies. In Jesus' time, the Pharisees believed that creeping apostasy was an equal threat to national identity. The only way they knew to withstand this menace was through vigilant observance of the law of God. They were saving Israel, all over again.

In Mark 7, a delegation of Pharisees arrives in Galilee from Jerusalem. They notice that Jesus' disciples fail to wash their hands before eating (for his non-Jewish readers, Mark mentions that the Pharisees were scrupulous about many other traditions as well. [verses 3, 4]). They question Jesus, *"Why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with unwashed hands?"* (verse 5).

In many things, Jesus and the Pharisees were on the same page. With Jesus they shared the hope of a resurrection of the righteous dead. Not every Israelite had that belief. They shared with him the hope in God's coming kingdom. Nicodemus, who came to Jesus by night, was a Pharisee. When Jesus is asked why his disciples do not obey the law as interpreted by the Pharisees, his reply is curt and shocking: *"Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites: these people... worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men"* (verses 6, 7).

Jesus is not speaking to rank heathens. He addresses those whose life mission is to do God's will and thereby be his people. But Jesus is unequivocal. Their extreme attention to observances believed to be part of God's will, actually fails in its goal. Jesus is saying: *"Your watchfulness, your conscientious obedience to every detail of your handbook, does not take you to God, does not secure his favor, does not make you his, nor guarantee you fellowship with him."* *"Your teachings are but rules taught by men. You have let go of the commands of God and are holding onto the traditions of men"* (verses 7, 8).

Christ's ringing dis-endorsement of the most ardent religionists of his day must mean something for us, now. He clearly believed their religion was a farce. As an example of its failure, he offers this: *"You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions"* (verse 9) *"For Moses said honor your father and mother; but*

you say that if a man says to his father and mother 'whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is CORBAN (a gift devoted to God), you no longer let him do anything for his father and mother'" (verses 10-12).

Moses' law taught that God expected a man to honor his parents by providing for them in their old age. The Pharisees said that by pronouncing *corban* over his assets, a man could claim to be unable to provide for his parents because his means to do so had been dedicated to the temple. This was nothing but a consecrated ruse. Numbers 30:1-2, stipulated that a vow made to the Lord must never be broken. Pharisees encouraged people to promise their wealth to the temple, and then, through rigorous application of the law concerning vows, hold a man to his pledge even if his parents were destitute. In this way, they used one sacred precept to evade duty in another.

Pharisaism and its contemporary heirs, fundamentalism, or political correctness, love to take refuge in law. For them, conformity is a necessary prerequisite for membership. Uniformity is a must. Persons who do not conform invite the question: *"Why do you not observe the tradition of the elders?"* They must be brought under the rule of law.

Pharisaism inhabits a land of utter certainty. For that reason, it is *elitist*. Non-conformists cannot be accepted as fellow-believers; they are errant; they stand in need of correction. After all, no one is greater than the law! When you are right; when your dogma has the signature of God on it, then everyone else is wrong. The only hope for an 'outsider' is for him to become an 'insider.' For Pharisees, the principle reason for getting converts is to increase the numbers of those who all think and act the same. A new recruit is not so much valued for himself. His purpose is to provide affirmation and safety in numbers.

Pharisaism is *separatist*. Just as it is sure that its teaching is the law of God, so it is convinced that those who disagree must be condemned and shunned. Radical certainty of this kind undergirds an Ayatollah's violent Fatwa against a person who, through an expressed opinion, is deemed to have defamed Islam. The same drastic intelligence equips a preacher to confidently proclaim that Hurricane Katrina was God's will—a will that destroyed much innocent life, including that of children, aged and infirm.

-TO BE CONTINUED... 



Pastor Ron Allen

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WHAT LEGALISM IS

By Desmond Ford

Whenever man is made the center rather than God, and emphasis is placed on what man must *do* rather than on what God has *done*—there is legalism. The true gospel speaks of the divine acceptance of sinners which inevitably leads to holiness. But legalism seeks holiness in order to find acceptance. The whole book of Galatians was written to oppose legalism, and it applies to any church or individual which offers anything whatsoever as a substitute for, or supplement to, faith in Christ.

Luther, when preaching on Deuteronomy 4:25, 26 referred to the contrast between legalism and the gospel as follows:

The world wants to win heaven from our Lord God by right, although he is causing the message to be proclaimed throughout the world that he wants to give it to us for nothing. He says: I want to be your God; out of grace I want to give you heaven; out of grace and for nothing I want to save you, as St. Paul says (Ephesians 2:8, 9). I will not let you win heaven from me. Therefore make no other gods, do not invent things that you do yourself. That is what this sermon (Deuteronomy 4) also emphasizes, saying: Do not begin with your good works; allow me to have mercy on you. It certainly is a shame that people must accuse us of being unwilling to accept heaven for nothing, nay, of actually wanting to earn it, and of proposing to give to God, to him who desires to offer everything to us in plenty. Such fools we are. We want to give when we ought to take. Here the beggar come to the mighty king and begs from him; but he will not take alms from him for nothing; he wants to give him four pennies or lice for them.

The world is just as mad and foolish. It wants to give to him who has given all and from whom it should receive all. But when it should give something to the neighbor, it wants to give nothing but desires only to take from him.

Another writer in more recent times has expressed the matter thus:

This matter is so dimly comprehended that thousands upon thousands, claiming to be the sons of God are children of the wicked one, because they will depend on their own works. God always demanded good works, the law demands it, but because man placed himself in sin where his good works were valueless, Jesus' righteousness alone can avail. Christ is able



"Whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely."

to save to the uttermost because he ever liveth to make intercession for us. All that man can possibly do towards his own salvation is to accept the invitation, "Whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely."

-Desmond Ford.
ANSWERS ON THE WAY, pp. 151, 152.



KNOWING THE BIBLE; AND MISSING THE POINT.

By Rowland Croucher

The Pharisee is concerned about law: how to do right. Now there's nothing wrong with that as it stands. Except for one thing: you can keep the law and in the process destroy persons. I have a friend who lectured in law at one of our universities, before he got out of it all in disgust. He said with some conviction: "The whole of our Western legal system is sick, unjust. For one thing, if you're rich and can afford the cleverest advocacy, you have a pretty good chance of not going to jail; but not if you're poor."

There's a tension between law and love. Law is to love as the railway tracks are to the train: the tracks give direction but all the propulsive power is in the train. Tracks on their own may point somewhere, but they're cold, lifeless things. But love without law is like a train without tracks; plenty of noise and even movement, but lacking direction. Both law and love ultimately come from God. We need God's laws to know how to set



proper boundaries and behave appropriately. Without good laws we humans will destroy one another. Prophets, in the biblical sense, try to tie law and love into each other. The Old Testament prophets were always encouraging the people of God to keep the law of God. But the greatest commandment is love; love of God and of others...

There's probably something of the Pharisee in all of us. We take two good gifts from God—law and truth—and create all sorts of legalisms and dogmatisms to save us the trouble of loving people we don't like.... Have you noticed that in the ministry of Jesus, the message of repentance was mainly aimed at religious people; church-folk like us. When we elevate law over love; rules and precedents and structures above persons; when social justice is not at the top of our agenda, then we've got some repenting to do. Pharisees are people that know the Bible and miss the point. Lord help us!

-Rowland Croucher: John Mark Ministries.



ONE PRAYER

By Daniel Robinson

Mercy Action Nutrition Now Alliance (M.A.N.N.A.) spent a night with the disenfranchised on the Sacramento River as we have been for many years now, and we asked this question of a few of the homeless: "What One Prayer?":

Matthew 25:35, "For I was hungry and ye gave me to eat; I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink; I was a stranger, and ye took me in." M.A.N.N.A. has been serving the homeless for a few years now, and we have experienced many beautiful moments. We're always provided with the right amount of volunteer's, sometimes large groups, but a constant few. We are driven to serve the calling of God in our lives. Not all people are called to feed the homeless, but it is a calling; just as is any ministry. We have a great time in fellowship while we're making the peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. There's silence as the volunteers prepare the backpacks with sandwiches, bananas, oranges, and a cookie and or a nutrition bar.

In some volunteers you can see the look of meditation, while some are thinking, "Why am I here? I could be home watching a TV show or bowling, but why are we here? We are here because we have been called to be here to give hope to the broken, the fallen, and the lost."

We meet in the annex after preparing the backpacks to go over some simple safety rules, and then we pray that God watches over us and gives us an opportunity to minister to someone. (Normally it ends up being much more than one.)

We are saddened by the needy faces; yet, we see God working with them. It is amazing the way that the general population feels about homelessness as a whole. We have spent countless hours getting to know these people who live on the streets and along the Sacramento River. We are saddened sometimes by the opinions of many people who seem to be better off than their homeless neighbors.

Jesus was very specific in guiding us to love one another as we love ourselves. Yet, it is prophecy being fulfilled when people talk down to the homeless as if they were a blight, or a disease to society. We hear the statements that are voiced, such as, "Why don't they just get a job?" The homeless people are sensitive human beings just as you and I are, and in today's economy many more are entering the streets trying to find a place to sleep. It is no longer just the addicted and mentally ill that we are helping and sharing God's promises.

Now, we are hearing the same voices that used to be so critical of the homeless living on the streets with those who have been there for so many years. We asked the question of this new group of homeless people "If you could have one prayer answered, what would that prayer be?"

Andrew is a young man, 22 years-old, he left his home at the age of 19. His father was a policeman in a little town called Clovis, New Mexico. He had made his way to Sacramento to live with his sister. After a couple years with her, he moved out on his own only to lose his job as a clerk. After receiving an eviction notice, he begged his sister to hold some of his personal items. She was no longer able to let him live with her and her family. He is homeless now and has been for 4 months. He is presently living in safe ground, which to the homeless means safety from police roundups or citations. Andrew answered the question with one word: "Hope." — Simply, HOPE.

Only Jesus can give us that Hope. To have a relationship with God gives many of us the assurance that he provides for

us in times of need. Those provisions are not always seen by us as the provisions that we need, but God knows exactly what we need, and he fulfills that promise. We asked Andrew if we could pray for him, and he said yes. We prayed that God would give him Hope.

As we moved deeper into the muddy path laden with garbage and old tarps amongst a myriad of tents, we came upon a middle aged Hawaiian man named Kaihele, which he said means Jeff. He was trying to get his neighbor (a man sleeping under a tarp next to his tent) to get up because we had brought food. The neighbor never woke up. One of the M.A.N.N.A. volunteers arranged a bag filled with food and placed it at his feet in the dark. I asked Jeff what one prayer he would want fulfilled. His answer was "To have God first in his life." We asked if we could pray for him and, openly, he accepted. We prayed that his prayer would come to fruition: that God would be first in his life.

We moved deeper still into the path, only a few steps, when we heard a beautiful tenor voice singing a song that had never been heard before, but I am sure would make it to the top of the Christian charts. So much compassion and yearning for God. It was a young 24-year-old man named Josh. It was his first night out on the streets. He said it wouldn't be long before he would find a place to stay. The location, he didn't know yet; but, he was confident that God would open a door for him. We asked him if he had one prayer to be answered, what would be that prayer. He answered, "To have God in me at all times." We prayed for him and asked God to be in Him at all times." We explained the Holy Spirit abides in us, and he said he already knew that, and explained to us that he is a gospel writer, and one day he would glorify God with his music.

We moved on. As we were running out of food we came upon a woman named Megan. She was a mess. As we began to interact with Megan, we could tell that she was under the influence of drugs: she couldn't stop having conversations with herself. Even still we showed her love and compassion. We gave her a tote bag so she could carry some of the things that were given to her: a scarf, a shirt, and some food.

We find over and over that the true desire of the oppressed and down-trodden, essentially, is to know God, and to have that assurance that so many of us already know. That is M.A.N.N.A.'s mission: to share the Good News that He is raised, and that He gives us hope when it seems like there is no hope.

There are so many untold stories, needs, and prayers. Our desire is to meet these people where they are, feed them, and give the message for our God, a loving and powerful God that can bring peace.

On behalf of everyone at Good News Unlimited and M.A.N.N.A. Outreach, I'd like to thank those of you who continue to partner with us in prayer and financial support. We often pray that God will fill the desires of your heart as you continue to abide in Him.

*If you would like to help M.A.N.N.A. Outreach in its efforts to bring the gospel message to the homeless, please send your donation to:
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Laundry line in one of the camps we minister to on Friday nights.