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GOOD NEWS *Unlimited*

THE PHARISEES

By Ron Allen
(Concluded)

The spirit of Pharisaism is evident in the secular fundamentalism that bedevils some corporations. A telephone company sends out a bill to a little old lady for several thousands of dollars. The bill is clearly in error because the old lady hardly ever uses her phone. Nevertheless, the telephone company insists the bill be paid. Telephone companies are never wrong!

Last summer, fire swept through parts of Australia causing large scale loss of life. In the aftermath, there was much soul-searching; some of it in the form of a commission of enquiry. Could the various agencies have performed better? Some survivors testified, that on the fateful day, they called the Fire Safety Authority to report smoke within ten miles of their dwelling. Central Fire Control confidently assured the callers that there were no fires burning in that locality. “No Ma’am, there are no fires in that area.” “Thank you, sir; we wouldn’t tell you there were no fires if there was.” But the callers could see the flames leaping skyward with their own eyes.

There is such a thing as an ‘appalling certainty,’ a ‘dreadful doubtlessness’ with regard to policies, procedures, doctrines, and beliefs deemed to be above the need for scrutiny. When Pharisaism gets a hold—whether religious or secular—blind, unquestioning deference follows; with results that are absurd and uncharitable. For all its discipline and idealism, Pharisaism hurts people.

Even so, Pharisaism attracts many. There is something precious in being sure you are correct; knowing that your guidelines mean you are an upholder of the truth; obeying God. It is choice indeed to be a doer of God’s will though others are not. Then there is the thrill of the ‘savior syndrome’—realizing that in your dutiful attention to the tradition, you are a saving Israel; saving the ignorant masses.

Yet, in religion, things are not always what they seem. Jesus states bluntly that the Pharisee’s conscientious routines are a lie. They do not serve God at all; they are self-serving. This, not just because their rules are an extrapolation of the law and not strictly part of it, but because their premise is wrongly conceived.

The Pharisees think they come before God with a clean moral slate. Therefore, all that is necessary is diligence with respect to their code and they will be able to live above evil. Jesus blows this idea out of the water:

Listen to me everyone and understand this, nothing outside a man can make him unclean by going into him. Rather, it is what comes out of a man that makes him unclean... For from within, out of men’s hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance, and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man unclean (Mark 7:14-23).

Corruption does not live in the atmosphere, floating around like so many germs which might be kept at bay by vigilant preventive techniques. Corruption lives inside humans. There is its home. Every vile thing that spoils life comes from inside people.

In Dostoevsky’s grand tale, father Zossima the revered monk dies. He lies in his coffin for many days while people come from near and far to glimpse the holy man’s corpse. Because he is such a spiritual giant, people assume that his body will not be subject to the natural processes of putrefaction; he is far too pure for that! But as days pass, an unpleasant odor fills the room where he lies. Since no one is willing to admit what their nose is telling them, the windows remain shut. The smell becomes a stench, but to open the windows for fresh air would be to yield to the unthinkable—father Zossima is going rotten. The room remains sealed until at last, someone breaks and opens a window. Others run outside gasping and retching.

The Pharisee fantasizes that evil is alien to him; that he can keep it out by rigorous moral policing. Jesus indulges no such myth. It is as if he says: “There is a stink. It is not a stink that comes from somewhere else; it comes from inside people. It is not what is outside human-beings that defiles them; it’s what’s on the inside. There is the seat of corruption.”

By speaking so frankly, Jesus trivialized the Pharisee’s solemn routines. He showed that when people try to create and

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EDITORIAL . . .

*“Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil; to save life or to kill?”
(Mark 3:4).*

The Pharisees come to Synagogue on the Sabbath—not to worship God—but to see if Jesus will say anything that might be against their religion. A man with a withered hand is also in attendance. Jesus, realizing that people are present looking for a chance to accuse him, rightly reads their motives, so he heals the man with the withered hand, right in front of them all.

The question in the mind of the Pharisees is: “Will he prove his ungodliness by trampling on our traditions?” But Jesus has a question too. He moves the focus away from established standards and fixes it on the plight of the man with the withered hand. For Jesus, what matters is not their laws or their fundamentals; it’s the man that matters.

Here is a person whose humanity is shortened, shrunken. Like a flower that has failed to fully open, the crippled man is in a state of arrested development. Additional hardships have heaped themselves on this person because of his handicap. But



Like a flower that has failed to fully open...

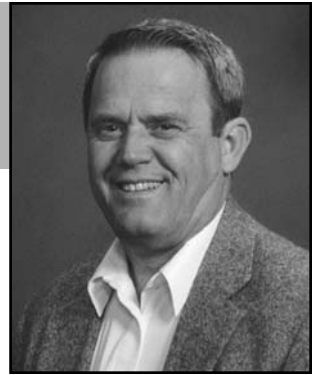
these are of no concern to the Pharisees. Their exposition of the will of God is paramount.

By asking his own question: Is it permissible to do good; to save life or to kill on Sabbath? Jesus makes the Pharisees face the logic of their position. In effect, their religion is more important than human life. Their ideas about God must remain intact even if this means the prolongation of a man’s suffering. Jesus equates ‘doing good’ with ‘saving life.’ His enemies equate ‘doing good’ with defending their traditions.

What religion is yours? Does it seek to separate serving God from serving mankind? Does it save life, or kill? Am I religious in a way that helps me to be more human; more humane?

That day, in the synagogue, Jesus was distressed at the hard-heartedness of some of the churchmen there. In defense of their tradition they had hardened themselves against love. They did not want a religion that made them their brother’s keeper. They preferred to compass heaven and earth in pursuit of saintliness—provided it did not require the exercise of compassion, fellow-feeling, the bearing of another’s burden.

God preserve us from a religious view of the world that makes us think we are ‘doing good’ by turning away from the needy. We shall be safe from such catastrophe, if we follow Jesus—Jesus only.



Pastor Ron Allen



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maintain a relationship with God by studious compliance, ritual precision—even with regard to the law of God itself—the very effort becomes a clever way of retreating from God’s will and sidestepping the real claims of his law.

“*You do many things like that*” (Mark 7:13), Jesus said. Yes, the Pharisees did many things like that then, and they do still. Pharisaism finds it easier to pretend to be Godly by being a stickler for rules and conventions than to emulate the character of God by caring for people.

“You are so careful to pay tithes on every little herb growing in your garden,” said Jesus. “But you care little for the weightier issues in the law such as justice, mercy and faithfulness (Matthew 23:23). You are long on religious behaviors that do nothing to help anyone, and short on actions that would benefit and bless them.”

“O my Lawd,” shrieks Bell the slave-woman, as Kizzy, her daughter is sold off to another owner. “Please have mercy; she ain’t meant to do it.”

“The law is the law,” says Massa Waller. “She broke the rules.”

O yes. “The law is the law.” What a safe haven the law proves to be for those who care least for their fellow man. What miseries men and women serve upon one another in the name of the law.

“I wish I could help, but I can’t. I must obey God; I must not depart from the tenets of my faith; I must stick to the traditions of the elders; the law is the law!”

Men and women do not stand before their maker in a virgin moral state, as pure as the driven snow. They come with their imagination all alive to ways in which they might be able to bend God’s law in ways which serve their inherent corruptions. We are disposed to manipulate God’s will; dilute its radical imperatives; tame it to make it serve our interests, not the interests of God which are linked to the needs of our fellow man. No matter how good and right is that thing the law of God commands, human nature knows how to marshal its every resource to subvert it.

Pharisaism’s preoccupation with the ‘tradition of the elders’ is a way of sheltering from the far-reaching claims of the love of God. In their zeal for the law, Pharisees *out-law* love. And where love is not, all correctness in word, deed or thought, is only man-worship.

The bus I rode to school on meandered over twenty miles of dirt roads to collect its boisterous cargo of school pupils. The bus driver was a man of surly disposition. He seemed not to like children. We could see him casting his mean glances at us via the rear-view mirror. He would make threats. Often he would

stop the bus and thrash a recalcitrant kid with his broad belt. No one liked the bus driver—and misbehavior was rife.

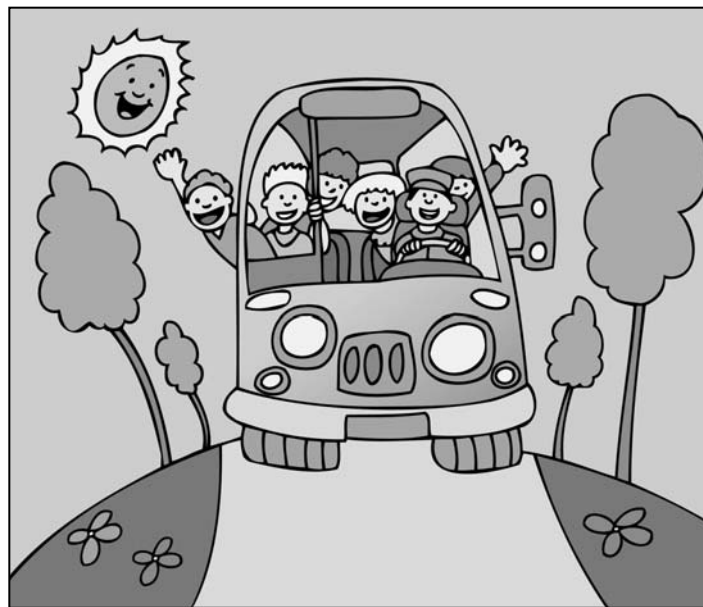
On wet weather days the road became slippery. The bus driver would struggle to keep control. Sometimes the bus would slide into the ditch and become hopelessly bogged. He would call out, “Everyone out; when I say push, every one push.” We would gather at the rear of the bus and when we heard ‘push’ we would pull as hard as we could. There would be a lull while he looked for reverse gear. Then, “everyone pull.” That’s when we would all ‘push.’ There was no way we were going to let him get that bus out of the ditch.

A day came when our bus driver was sick and he sent a replacement. The new bus driver was a big man with a cheery twinkle in his eye. Every morning as we climbed aboard he would grin and wink at us or make a joke. He seemed to like kids. He drove our bus for two weeks. Then we heard that our regular driver was getting better. We didn’t want that. We hoped his sickness would be prolonged.


Two days before our stand-in driver was to leave us he made an announcement. He said that he would like anyone who wanted to, to write a short essay on the topic: “I love (or don’t love) my bus driver; here’s why.” He said there would be prizes. A lot of kids thought it was a great idea, and they wrote an essay.

On Friday afternoon, the bus pulled away from the school house and stopped down the road at the corner store. “Now,” said the driver. “Let’s hear these essays.” He had about ten sheets of paper in his hand. Passing them to one of the older kids, he said, “Read, ‘em out.” And so the literary offerings of a delighted bunch of school kids were read. Some were full of childish admiration and affection for the bus driver; some were playfully negative. At the end of each reading he would call out in his big voice, “That was great; get him an ice cream; buy him a candy bar.” And so it went.

Everyone on that bus was in awe of the replacement bus driver. There was nothing we wouldn’t have done for him. We loved him.



For religion to be of any use at all, it must be an allegiance kindled by kindness; breathed into life by love; born in love, informed by love, inspired by love, motivated by love and carried out in love.

God is love! He rules not by coercion or intimidation but by invitation. Instead of relating to him woodenly, slavishly; by means of dogged acquiescence to strict regimes and narrow minded traditions, we are free to respond to him creatively, imaginatively, adventurously. Because he is our father; we are his children, and his love for us is everlasting. 

SAINT OR PHARISEE?

In general there are two key religious mind-sets: those of the 'saint' and those of the Pharisee. We all have something of each in us, and the potential to be either. Both may be 'orthodox' theologically, even 'evangelical.' Both pursue goodness, but by different means, for different ends. (Someone said Pharisees were good people in the worst sense of the word.)

Saints (like Jesus) emphasize love and grace, Pharisees, law and (their interpretation of) truth. Saints are comfortable with doctrine but for the Pharisee, doctrine becomes dogma, law becomes legalism, ritual (the celebration of belonging) becomes ritualism. The saint lives easily with questions, paradox, antinomy (contradictory facts), mystery; Pharisees try to be wiser than God and resolve all mysteries into neat formulae. They want answers now.

The saint listens in solitude and silence; the Pharisee fills the void with sound. For the saints, it's 'rising by dying', for the Pharisees, 'rising by doing'.



With Jesus, acceptance preceded repentance, with the Pharisees it was the other way round. The saint, like Jesus, says first, 'I do not condemn you.' Pharisees find that difficult: they prefer, 'go and sin no more.' Jesus welcomes sinners. Sinners get the impression they're

not loved by Pharisees. For the Pharisee, 'sins of the flesh' and 'heresy' are worst, and they are experts on the sins of others. For the saint, 'sins of the spirit' (one's own spirit) are worst. Saints are 'creation-centered,' Pharisees are 'fall-centered.'

For the Pharisee, 'my people' = people like me, for the saint, 'my people' = all God's people. Pharisees are insecure (needing God plus other things); the saints are secure (needing God only). The Pharisee's audience is other people: their kudos provides a measure of security (psychologists call it impression management, Jesus calls it hypocrisy); the Saints only audience is God; their inner and outer persons are congruent.

Pharisees hate prophets (noisy saints) and their call to social justice; saints love justice (saints aren't into writing creeds very much, which is why the two things most important for Jesus—love and justice—don't appear in them).

Saints remind you of Jesus, the Pharisees of the devil (demons are orthodox). Saints see Jesus in every person: they haven't any problem in believing we're all made in the image of God, although they're realistic about that image being marred by sin. Saints are spread through all the churches. The closer they are to Jesus the more accepting they are of others. Ambition, for them, means union with Christ: they call nothing

else success. In their prayer, they mostly listen, wait on the Lord; the Pharisee needs words, words, words. Pharisees have a tendency to complain about many things; the saint's life is 'serendipitous,' they have a well-developed theology of gratitude.

Pharisees are static, un-teachable, believing they have a monopoly on truth; saints are committed to growing. Jesus was full of grace and truth. Peter says, 'grow in grace and knowledge.' Pharisees aren't strong on grace, but for saints, grace is everywhere.

Only one thing is important: to be a saint.

-John Mark Ministries 

EXTERNAL FORMS, Or Faith, Hope and Love.

By Desmond Ford

So now the chief leaders of Israel bustle Christ into the presence of Pontius Pilate. He has come up from the seaside, something he does not often do. Jerusalem was too grey a place, too dull a place for the Roman governor. He preferred a society more flamboyant, more exciting. When he did come, he stayed in the palace of Herod. This is where Christ is taken.



But the Jews have a problem. They are afraid of being defiled. Their traditions, not Scripture, created the problem. So they arrive at the great estate with its many parks, a beautiful broad way, and little lakes surrounded by beautiful trees. After going down the main concourse, they knock on the door of an impressive building and push their prisoner through into the house of the heathen. Now, they will be able to keep the Passover.

This is typical of all false religion, which concerns itself more with externals than internals. One can know whether one has the real thing by searching one's heart to see whether there is more concern with faith, hope and love, rather than outward forms. Outward forms have their place when they reflect the heart, but otherwise they are useless, and worse than useless. They can be destructive.

-Desmond Ford. JESUS ONLY, p. 155.

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