**BIBLE TALK Radio Broadcast**

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**Errors of the Pharisees (Legalism)**

Have you ever heard anyone say, “that’s Pharisaical,” or “you are a present day Pharisee”? What do they mean by “Pharisaical,” or “Pharisee”?

When Jesus was born, the Jews of Palestine were divided into sects or parties. Two of the leading sects were the Pharisees and Sadducees. The Pharisees were the stricter of the two. In some ways they were more sound doctrinally than were the Sadducees. They believed in a resurrection of the dead, in the immortality of the soul, in angels and spirits, while the Sadducees did not. But there were some terrible errors among the Pharisees, and the Lord aimed some of His strongest denunciations at them. For the next few weeks I want to talk about some of the errors of the Pharisees. What was it that led the Lord to speak so strongly against them? There are some misconceptions in the minds of some people today concerning what it was about the Pharisees of which the Lord disapproved. We want to clear up those misconceptions. But it is also our purpose in this series of lessons to observe these errors so that we might avoid them in our own lives.

Today we begin with the problem of “legalism.” The Pharisees were legalists, but it is very important that we define what we mean by legalism. In Funk & Wagnalls The Pratical Standard Dictionary, vol 2 it gives the following as one of its definitions, “The doctrine of salvation by works, as distinguished from that by grace.” And so a legalists is a person who believes he is justified before God by his strict conformity to the law of God and not by God’s grace. He believes he is righteous by his strict observance of the law and does not need the grace of God. The Pharisees were legalists in this sense.

Now let me emphasize here before we go on any further that when we use the world legalism or legalist in this lesson we are not talking about strictness toward keeping God’s law. We are not talking about having a strict attitude toward the scriptures. Occasionally we hear people scoff at those who try to be strict in the keeping of God’s law and label them “legalists” or “present day Pharisees.” The Lord never did condemn the Pharisees for their strictness toward God’s law. Let me say that again. The Lord never did condemn the Pharisees for their strictness toward God’s law. In fact, it was the opposite. In Matthew 23:23-24, Jesus said, *“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone. Blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!”* Jesus is not condemning the Pharisees for their being strict about tithing, but rather because they had left undone weightier matters of the law, justice, mercy and faith. He said to them, *“these you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone.”* In other words, Jesus is saying all of God’s law is important to observe. It was wrong for them to emphasize one part of the law and leave the other part undone. They were not as strict toward keeping God’s law as they should have been.

Jesus Himself emphasized the importance of keeping His commandments. He said in John 14:15, *“If you love Me, keep My commandments.”* In Luke 6:46 He said, *“But why do you call Me 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do the things which I say?”* A disciple of Christ will be strict about doing what He says, and all that He said. And so again I say, strictness toward God’s law is not what we mean by legalism.

The Pharisees were legalists because they sought to be saved or to be righteous on the merit of their strictness, and failed to recognize their need for the grace of God. The legalist then places before himself a code of conduct, he sets out to live strictly by that code, and strives to be saved on the merit of this strict following of that code.

One of two things will happen to the legalist. We might call these the “fruit of legalism.” Either (1) he will deceive himself into thinking that he is actually living by the code, which results in self-righteousness and despising all those weaklings who are not as good as he is, OR (2) the more honest and realistic person will recognize how far short he is falling, becomes discouraged, and gives up. Well, the Pharisees fell into the first of these two categories. In their legalistic attitude, they were self-righteous, believing they were righteous on their own merits, and they despised all who did not come up to their supposed level of righteousness.

Let us look at some examples in scripture. First of all in Luke 18:9-14, Jesus tells the parable of the Pharisee and tax collector who went to the temple to pray. Verse 9 says, *“…He spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others.”* He said, *“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11 The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, 'God, I thank You that I am not like other men -- extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.' 13 And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me a sinner!' 14 I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”*

Notice the Pharisees’ code of conduct, “I do this and that, and I’m not like other men who do this or that.” In his mind he was observing the code perfectly. Notice that he does not ask for one thing. No forgiveness is sought. He was righteous on his own merits. He doesn’t need God’s grace. Notice also how he despised the tax collector. But the very one he despised is the one who went to his house justified. The tax collector was justified, made righteous, and the Pharisee was not. Why? Because the tax collector acknowledged his sin, repented and sought for God’s mercy, and the Pharisee did not.

Let us look at another example. In Luke 15:11-32 Jesus tells the parable of the prodigal son. A man had two sons and the younger of the two wanted his father to give him the share of the estate that fell to him. His father gave him what he requested and the son went into a far country and there wasted his possessions with prodigal living. Later the son repented and returned to his father and sought forgiveness. The father forgave him and ordered that the fatted calf be killed, and he said, *“let us eat and be merry; for this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' And they began to be merry.”* Now Jesus goes on in the story to tell how the older son felt about all of this merry making over the return of his younger brother. When he learned what the merry making was all about it says, *“28 But he was angry and would not go in. Therefore his father came out and pleaded with him. 29 So he answered and said to his father, 'Lo, these many years I have been serving you; I never transgressed your commandment at any time; and yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might make merry with my friends. 30 But as soon as this son of yours came, who has devoured your livelihood with harlots, you killed the fatted calf for him.'”* The older son represents the Pharisees and scribes. Notice how in his self-righteousness he despised his penitent brother, refusing to accept him. Did he not care that his brother had repented and was forgiven? This describes the legalistic attitude of the Pharisees. Rather than seeking the salvation of the sinners, they despised them and wouldn’t have anything to do with them. Mercy and forgiveness was not a part of their vocabulary.

What attitude does God want us to have before Him? God does place before us a standard for us to live by, and it is a perfect standard. A holy God would not give any other standard than a perfect standard. God demands a strict attitude toward the standard. Jesus says, *“Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven.”* (Matt. 7:21) We must do the will of the Father if we enter the kingdom of heaven. Jesus said in John 14:15, *“If you love Me, keep My commandments.”* One who loves Christ will have a strict attitude toward keeping the commandments of Christ. God does not allow us to commit sin, not even one sin. Peter said, *“but as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, because it is written, ‘Be holy, for I am holy.’”* (1 Peter 1:15-16) We must be serious about living a holy life.

But, we also must acknowledge that we all have sinned and fall short of that standard (Rom. 3:23). 1 John 1:8 says, *“If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.”* We all sin. When we sin we cannot blame anyone but ourselves. It was not God’s fault. He did not make us sin. We sin because of our own choices and weaknesses. And we are held accountable for our sins. Paul says that God *“will render to each one according to his deeds.”* (Rom. 2:6) Sin is serious. Rom. 6:23 says, *“For the wages of sin is death…”* If we die in our sins, we are lost eternally. We will be separated from God for all eternity.

And so we as sinners are in need of forgiveness. To be saved from sin and its consequences we need God’s forgiveness. But how can God forgive us of our sins and be just in doing it? That is accomplished through the death of Christ. In His death on the cross, Jesus paid the price for our sins, thus satisfying the demands of justice and making it possible for God to forgive us. Because of God’s grace and mercy, expressed in the death of His Son, we now can be saved from sin and stand justified in His sight. Whether one falls little short of God’s standard or far short, he still is dependent on the grace and mercy of God for forgiveness. No one can be saved on his own merits.

The tax collector who went into the temple to pray was in need of God’s mercy and he sought God’s mercy, and found it. The Pharisee was also in need of the same mercy for his salvation. His problem is that he didn’t see his need for it and didn’t seek it. Let us not be like the Pharisees. We must humble ourselves and recognize we are sinners, we cannot save ourselves by our own merits, we are in need of God’s mercy and grace. And when we see our need for the grace of God, we will not despise other sinners, but do what we can to bring them to repentance so they can be saved just as we have.

But to access God’s grace and be saved from sin we must come to Christ and obey Him. Hebrews 5:9 says that Jesus “*became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him*.” Obeying Christ includes repenting of our sins. Repentance means we turn from sin and strive to be holy as He is holy. Coming to Jesus means we love Him, and so we strive to keep His commandments. Being saved by God’s grace does not mean we cease to be strict about keeping His law. We just know that when we do transgress His law, that forgiveness is available through the death of Christ when we do what He tells us to do to be forgiven.

Our time is gone for today. We thank you for listening.

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