

PHARISEES



(Separated ones)-a religious and political party in Palestine in New Testament times. **The Pharisees were known for insisting that the law of God be observed as the scribes interpreted it and for their special commitment to keeping the laws of tithing and ritual purity.**

The Pharisees had their roots in the group of faithful Jews known as the Hasidim (or Chasidim). The Hasidim arose in the second century BC when the influence of HELLENISM on the Jews was particularly strong and many Jews lived little differently than their Gentile neighbors. But the Hasidim insisted on strict observance of Jewish ritual laws.

When the Syrian King ANTIOCHUS IV tried to do away with the Jewish religion, the Hasidim took part in the revolt of the MACCABEES against him. Apparently from this movement of faithful Hasidim came both the Essenes-who later broke off from other Jews and formed their own communities-and the Pharisees, who remained an active part of Jewish life. Indeed, during the period of independence that followed the revolt, some of the Greek rulers who controlled Palestine favored the Pharisaic party.

As a result of this favoritism, Pharisees came to be represented on the SANHEDRIN, the supreme court and legislative body of the Jews. At times, the Pharisees even dominated the assembly. In New Testament times, Pharisaic scribes, though probably in the minority, were still an effective part of the Sanhedrin.

One distinctive feature of the Pharisees was their strong commitment to observing the law of God as it was interpreted and applied by the scribes. Although the priests had been responsible for teaching and interpreting the Law (Lev 10:8-11; Deut 33:8-10) in Old Testament times, many people had lost all respect for the priests because of the corruption in the Jerusalem priesthood. They looked to the scribes instead to interpret the Law for them. Some scribes were priests; many were not. Still, they lived pious, disciplined lives; and they had been trained to become experts in the Law. It was natural, then, for people to follow their leading rather than that of the priests.

The way in which the scribes spelled out the meaning of the Mosaic Law, the ways in which they adapted that Law to suit the needs of their day, the time-honored customs which they endorsed-all these became a part of the "tradition of the elders" (Mark 7:3). Although these traditions were not put into writing, they were passed on from one scribe to another and from the scribes to the people. From this tradition, they claimed, the Jewish people could know the way God's law should be observed. The Pharisees agreed, and they were known for supporting and keeping the *"tradition of the elders."*

The Pharisees also believed it was important to observe all the laws of God. But **they were especially known for their commitment to keep the laws of tithing and ritual purity.** These were the laws that other people were less careful about observing.

According to the New Testament, the Pharisees were concerned about strictly interpreting and keeping the law on all matters (Acts 26:5), including the Sabbath (Mark 2:24), divorce (Mark 10:2), oaths (Matt 23:16-22), the wearing of PHYLACTERIES and FRINGES (Matt 23:5), and so on. But they showed special zeal in

insisting that laws of tithing and ritual purity be kept (Matt 23:23-26; Mark 7:1-13; Luke 11:37-42; 18:12).

Since Pharisees found that other Jews were not careful enough about keeping the laws of tithing and ritual purity, they felt it was necessary to place limits on their contacts with other Jews as well as with Gentiles. For example, they could not eat in the home of a non-Pharisee, since they could not be sure that the food had been properly tithed and kept ritually pure.

Unlike the SADDUCEES, the Pharisees did believe in the resurrection of the dead. On this point, they were on common ground with the early Christians (Acts 23:6-9). The scribe in Mark 12:28 who thought that Jesus had answered the Sadducees well concerning the resurrection was probably a Pharisee.

The Pharisees and their scribes enjoyed a good deal of popular support. In one way this is surprising, since the Pharisees kept apart from other Jews. They always seemed to be ready to criticize others for not keeping the laws, and they often looked down on "sinners" who showed no interest in God's law (Mark 2:16; Luke 7:39; 15:2; 18:11).

Still, unlike the Sadducees, who were mostly rich landowners and powerful priests, many Pharisees were ordinary people. And even though other Jews could not be bothered with observing all the details of the law, they respected the Pharisees for making the effort. Even Paul credited unbelieving Jews with having a "zeal for God" (Rom 10:2)-even though it was misguided. He probably was thinking primarily of the Pharisees when he wrote these words.

In the New Testament, the Pharisees appear frequently in the accounts of Jesus' ministry and the history of the early church. In these passages a number of the typical failings of the Pharisees are evident. Of course, not all Pharisees failed in all these points-and the same failings can be found among religious people of any age.

Pharisees observed the Law carefully as far as appearances went, but their hearts were far from God. Their motives were wrong because they wanted the praise of men (Matt 6:2,5,16; 23:5-7). They also had evil desires that were hidden by their pious show (Matt 23:25-28). That is why Pharisees are often called hypocrites: their hearts did not match their outward appearance.

The Pharisees thought they could match God's standards by keeping all the outward rules. Luke 18:9 says *they "trusted in themselves that they were righteous."* This can easily happen when people think God's will is the same thing as their list of what they can and cannot do. Their desire to keep all of God's laws was commendable, but sometimes they put the emphasis on the wrong places. Minor details became a major preoccupation, and they forgot the more important things (Matt 23:23).

Finally, because Pharisees thought they were doing their best to keep God's laws while others were not, they often looked down on such "sinners"-especially people like tax collectors and prostitutes. Religious people need to remember that they, too, are sinners in God's eyes, and that Christ died for everyone.

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