

Are we modern-day Pharisees or Saints?

Gen 6:9-22, 7:24
Ps 46

Rom 1:16-17, 3:21-28

16 I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile. 17 For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, [a] just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith."

21-24 But in our time something new has been added. What Moses and the prophets witnessed to all those years has happened. The God-setting-things-right that we read about has become Jesus-setting-things-right for us. And not only for us, but for everyone who believes in him. For there is no difference between us and them in this. Since we've compiled this long and sorry record as sinners (both us and them) and proved that we are utterly incapable of living the glorious lives God wills for us, God did it for us. Out of sheer generosity he put us in right standing with himself. A pure gift. He got us out of the mess we're in and restored us to where he always wanted us to be. And he did it by means of Jesus Christ.

25-26 God sacrificed Jesus on the altar of the world to clear that world of sin. Having faith in him sets us in the clear. God decided on this course of action in full view of the public—to set the world in the clear with himself through the sacrifice of Jesus, finally taking care of the sins he had so patiently endured. This is not only clear, but it's now—this is current history! God sets things right. He also makes it possible for us to live in his rightness.

27-28 So where does that leave our proud Jewish insider claims and counter-claims? Canceled? Yes, canceled. What we've learned is this: God does not respond to what we do; we respond to what God does. We've finally figured it out. Our lives get in step with God and all others by letting him set the pace, not by proudly or anxiously trying to run the parade.

Matt 7:15-19

Be wary of false preachers who smile a lot, dripping with practiced sincerity. Chances are they are out to rip you off some way or other. Don't be impressed with charisma; look for character. Who preachers are is the main thing, not what they say. A genuine leader will never exploit your emotions or your pocketbook.

As with any passage of Scripture that we're going to look at, we need to look at it in its context. When we look at this short passage in the gospels, we see that it's a part of the Sermon on the Mount. And notice what comes before and after this warning about false prophets. Beforehand he says don't give what is holy to dogs, and don't throw your pearls before swine, or they will trample them underfoot and turn and maul you. Then he says enter through the narrow gate - wide and easy is the gate that leads to destruction but narrow and difficult is the way that leads to life. Then we have the passage warning against false prophets. And then he says not everyone who calls me 'Lord, Lord' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only those who do the will of my Father in heaven. Then he finishes off by talking about those who build their house on rock compared to those who build their house on sand. In all of this there is an emphasis on the importance of being committed to Jesus if you want life.

You will know them by their fruits, Jesus says. Don't tell me what you believe, show me your life. Jesus was not impressed by those who insisted they were right; he was impressed by those who were humble and loving and who follow him and do the hard stuff. Too often Christians are known as people who think it's more important to be right than to be loving. The ones who cause the most damage in the church are those who put being right ahead of being loving.

The Pharisees in Jesus' day were just like this, and they were the ones that Jesus had the harshest words for, and they were harsh words. They were the ones he warned about hell and judgment, not the 'unbelievers' out there. And what they said had elements of truth in it. Any heresy always has elements of truth; that's why it can be so deceptive. And that's why the so-called prosperity gospel is so damaging. It's not gospel at all. 'Gospel' means 'good news' and the prosperity gospel is not good news at all. It goes against the very essence of what Jesus was on about and who he is. Its basic ethic is one of self-centredness. In essence it is saying, "what's in it for me?", "what can God do for me?". It's just a reflection of the age we live in, where we are told that we are the most important person in the world. It neglects those parts of the gospels which talk about self-denial and giving, and the very reason that Jesus came, to give himself for us, and that we are to imitate that.

The tragic thing about this sort of teaching is that it actually leads people away from God. The fact that the prosperity gospel is absolutely booming in Africa is going to have terrible consequences because people grab onto it in their desperate poverty in the hope that God will lead them out of their misery, but when it doesn't work, as it doesn't for most, they move away from faith and reject it altogether. But really, the God they are rejecting is not the God of the Bible, but the god of a false understanding. That's why I believe the atheist is often a lot closer to God than those who sit in church on a Sunday, because the god they have rejected is not the God of Jesus at all. Christianity has a terrible history. There have been the crusades and with hunts of the middle ages and in the last 30 years the rise of TV evangelists ripping off vulnerable people. Through it all Jesus stands and weeps. If you've rejected Christianity I don't blame you, because more than likely it's not Jesus you've rejected. He would reject a lot of Christianity as well.

Compare the gospel reading of today with one of the readings in Romans, where Paul makes clear the good news that he is preaching. Listen to The Message version of what he says in Romans 3:21-24:

"But in our time something new has been added. What Moses and the prophets witnessed to all those years has happened. The God-setting-things-right that we read about has become Jesus-setting-things-right for us. And not only for us, but for everyone who believes in him. For there is no difference between us and them in this. Since we've compiled this long and sorry record as sinners (both us and them) and proved that we are utterly incapable of living the glorious lives God wills for us, God did it for us. Out of sheer generosity he put us in right standing with himself. A pure gift. He got us out of the mess we're in and restored us to where he always wanted us to be. And he did it by means of Jesus Christ."

Paul says what the Pharisees don't say. He echoes what Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount - that God's love is all-inclusive. It is open to anyone and everyone.

A couple of weeks ago I was privileged enough to attend a seminar by a guy called Dave Andrews. You may have heard of him. He wrote a book called 'Can You Hear the Heartbeat?' many years ago. He said to us not to look to Christianity, but to Christ. We can't look at fundamentalist Muslims and see how terrible Islam is because of it, because the history of Christianity is exactly the same. The letter to the Hebrews tells us to look to keep our eyes on Christ. Don't look at me it says, I'm just a broken vessel. I'm just one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread. I can point you to Christ. As Dave taught us over those few days he would regularly say, "oh by the way, don't believe anything I say. Look it up for yourself. Follow the example of the Berean Christians in the book of Acts who listened to what was said and then went away and searched the Scriptures to see if what they had heard was true." That's how we can protect ourselves from being misled by people who sound great but who are actually full of rubbish.

What Paul is saying in his letter to the Romans is that it is not just Israel that has the monopoly on God's favour. That's why he says that bragging about it is out. He says that it is now through faith in what Jesus has done that brings everyone into God's family. God's family is a totally inclusive one. Everyone is welcome, not just a privileged few. And that is why anyone claiming to profess Christ who says that their way of doing it is the only way is wrong.

Remember that the 12 disciples were the last people you would have together in a group. They included tax collectors, freedom fighters and fishermen. And that's why it's so crucial that anyone and everyone are made to feel welcome when they are amongst the Christian community. It's what living out faith is all about. And it doesn't even matter if they haven't got their doctrine right before they are to be accepted into the Christian community. Remember that Jesus chose his disciples before they even realised who he was. Even after his resurrection some of them still didn't have a proper under-

standing of who he was.

A famous preacher called John Claypool said that “with Jesus, acceptance preceded repentance; with the Pharisees - ancient and modern - it's the other way around.” Jesus accepted people first. He warned people who say “Lord, Lord” but don't do what God wants. It's doing the will of God that is what matters, not getting the name right.

Beware those who say that you can't be a Christian unless you have your doctrine absolutely perfect and watertight. Now, I'm aware as I say this that there is great scope for me to be misunderstood. I am not saying that doctrine is not important. Personally I believe for example that believing in the physical bodily resurrection of Jesus is crucial to a proper understanding of who Jesus is. It concerns me when people say it's ok just to be loving. The true follower of Jesus will always want to do what is loving by realising that their own way of life doesn't work and that they need Jesus to guide them. After all, Jesus said, in John's Gospel, “without me you can do nothing”. But it also concerns me when people insist on getting your doctrine right before you can be right with God.

We must never claim to be the only ones who know the truth. That is first of all arrogant and secondly it's just wrong. What these passages in Matthew's gospel, and the ones in Paul's letter to the Romans, are saying is that we are to test what is said - ‘by your fruits you will know them’. That's why I love the way the Message puts it - “Be wary of false preachers who smile a lot, dripping with practised sincerity. Chances are they are out to rip you off some way or other. Don't be impressed with charisma; look for character. Who preachers are is the main thing, not what they say. A genuine leader will never exploit your emotions or your pocketbook.”

And those of us who are teachers and get up in the pulpit have an awesome responsibility. I am just a broken vessel. It is Jesus himself who is the only one we can ultimately trust. A former pastor said to me once that he didn't trust me, but he trusted God working in me. And this is the message that comes out of these passages today. God is to be trusted and those who claim to be proclaiming his message need to be tested. Don't just blindly believe what they say; go and check it out for yourself.

Let me finish off by reading something from Rowland Croucher about Pharisees and Saints. As I read this, think about which one you might be. If you're like me you'll probably find traits of each in you.

'Christian' sinners come in two varieties, very broadly, 'Pharisees' and 'Saints'.

'Pharisees' are good people (in the worst sense of the word). They do not know they are in need of grace (despite their protestations to the contrary). They know what's/who's right, and despise heretics and the sort of riff-raff Jesus mixed with (especially sexual sinners).

'Saints' are sinners who are ready to admit to being such, and who know their need of grace. The term 'saint' has been used to describe people who want to be holy.

Pharisees think they've 'arrived' - they know it all. They have nothing to learn from those not-like-them.

Saints know they haven't arrived and know that they don't know it all. They are maturing, growing, in faith, hope and love. They discover God's truth and God's will in all sorts of unlikely places.

An easy way to pick a modern Pharisee is that they emphasise 'truth' over love. Their creeds and systematic theologies have it all nailed down.

An easy way to pick someone who wants to be a saint is that they emphasise love over 'truth'.

Pharisees hardly ever preach about social justice. When saints read Jesus' attacks against the Pharisees their first questions are: 'What is social justice?' 'How can I be faithful to these emphases of Jesus, which the Pharisees have neglected?'

You'll hardly ever hear a Pharisee apologise for being wrong. They can't be wrong - they're too insecure to admit they're ever wrong. Their gut-instinct is to justify themselves (Luke 18:9) and pour scorn over anyone who might teach them something different/new.

The saint's prayer is constantly 'Lord be merciful to me, a sinner!' (Luke 18:9ff). And regarding 'truth' they believe that 'God has yet more light and truth to break forth from His Holy Word'.

Pharisees have a pathological need to be 'right'. Saints want desperately to be 'holy' - to be more like Jesus.

But let's remember, the Pharisees aren't all bad, and the saints aren't all good. It's what they're doing about their badness/goodness that's important.

In the end it is only Jesus who can be trusted ultimately. Jesus walked his talk, and he shows us grace when we fall. It is when we see and acknowledge our need of him and humbly follow him that we know what life is all about. Amen.

*by Nils von Kalm
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