



Accidental Pharisees

Vienna Presbyterian Church
The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James
Matthew 5:13-20

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Did you know you can get a drink in northern Germany called a Pharisauer? It's a cup of coffee with a generous portion of rum hidden under the whipped cream. You might be interested in how this coffee got its name.

A peasant, by the name of Peter Johannsen, celebrated the baptism of his 7th child in 1872. He invited his friends and pastor to attend a party to celebrate the occasion. Pastor Gustav Berger was very strict about alcohol consumption. He often berated his flock about what he called "godless drinking." To avoid his wrath, Peter Johannsen camouflaged rum in the coffee with whipped cream on top, to neutralize the rum aroma. Peter served his pastor the plain black coffee minus the rum. But someone in the course of the party mistakenly served Pastor Berger the rum coffee. "You hypocrites—Pharisees!" he shouted. So, the name stuck.

To be called a Pharisee in our day is something of an insult. Pharisee has become synonymous with words like hypocrisy and self-righteousness. We've identified Pharisees as the bad guys of the Bible.

Let me set the record straight. If you were called a Pharisee in Jesus' day, it was a badge of honor. They were considered paragons of virtue. It's our nature to want to neatly categorize people into good guys and bad guys. In truth, the Pharisees, like us, are an amalgam of good and bad qualities.

Where did the Pharisees go off the rails? We turn to Jesus' Sermon on the Mount to find the answer. I'm skipping over a crucial section of today's lesson where Jesus calls his disciples to be salt of the earth and lights to the world (Matthew 5:13-16). Our focus will be a rather dense portion

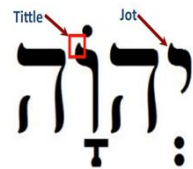
of Jesus' sermon in verses 17-20, which functions as a gateway passage into the balance of Jesus' sermon.

Jesus says, "Do not think I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them" (Matthew 5:17). Jesus' words "do not think" hints at a rumor circulating in those days that Jesus was out to abolish the law. After all, Jesus heals on the Sabbath which is a no-no and is lax about temple practices.

"I have not come to abolish the Law or the Prophets but to fulfill them." Fulfill turns out to be a pivotal word, appearing 16 times in Matthew's gospel alone. Jesus fulfills what Moses delivered in the law. He's not anti-Moses and anti-law. He fulfills the Messianic promises spoken by the prophets. He brings God's law to its fullest expression.

Jesus continues, "Truly, I tell you not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen will disappear from the law until everything is accomplished" (5:18). "Truly, I tell you" are rather jarring words from Jesus' mouth. If you were trying to gain a hearing with people back in the day, you wouldn't appeal to your own authority. You would stand on the tradition of much venerated rabbis. Jesus, however, stands on his own authority.

Then, there is this matter of "the smallest letter and the least stroke of the pen," what the King James Version translates as "jot and tittle." Jot equates to the yod, the smallest letter in the Hebrew alphabet, which looks like our apostrophe. The least stroke of the pen (or tittle) amounts to a small curve or accent mark at the end of a Hebrew letter to distinguish between letters. It's Jesus' way of saying that he upholds the law, down to its smallest letter and most minuscule marking.



Jesus concludes this portion of his sermon with a stunning pronouncement: “For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven” (5:20). This is what sends the Pharisees packing. How is it possible to exceed their righteousness?

The Pharisees were a band of brothers devoted to obeying every law contained in the Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament. There were rabbis who actually took the time to add up every law in the Torah. They arrived at a whopping 613 laws. The Pharisees were committed to obeying every law. No wonder they were held in high esteem.



So, where did they go wrong? The Pharisees determined the only way they were going to maintain fidelity with Biblical law is by making it measurable and obtainable. They came up with an external key called the Talmud to spell out what outward obedience would look like in all 613 laws.

Let me illustrate with a law important to the Pharisees, that of keeping the Sabbath. In the list of 10 Commandments is the 4th command: “Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work but the 7th day is a Sabbath to the Lord. On it, you shall not do any work” (Exodus 20:8-10).

If you were a Pharisee committed to keeping this law, you would want to know what constitutes work in order to refrain from doing it. The question was posed to rabbinic scholars and the result is a collection of rabbinic writings called the Talmud. The Talmud identifies 39 categories of work prohibited on the Sabbath. Included in the list is a ban

on Sabbath travel, buying or selling, lighting or extinguishing a fire. The Pharisees meticulously refrained from all 39 categories of work prohibited on the Sabbath.

Observant Jews still abide by this set of teachings. In 1992, a fire broke out on the Sabbath in the apartment of an orthodox Jewish family living in Jerusalem. They sent word to their local rabbi asking whether it was justifiable to call the fire department to report the fire since a telephone call might be considered work on the Sabbath. In the half hour it took for the rabbi to give them the go-ahead to contact the fire department, the fire consumed their home along with two neighboring apartments.

This strikes you as ludicrous, I know. You would have called the fire department. But it was a higher value to this family to keep the law than save their apartment.

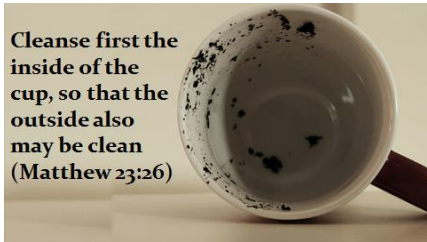
You can imagine the Pharisees' surprise when Jesus blasts their external measurement to kingdom come. Guys, you're missing the point. If you are going to use the law to measure behavior, you'll need to swim farther upstream to deal with your attitudes and thoughts. Obedience is not merely a matter of external compliance. It's about what's on the inside, what we call matters of the heart.

Jesus illustrates his point in the section that follows, in verses 21-48. He makes six antithetical statements characterized by the words, "You have heard that it was said...but I tell you." Next Sunday, we'll look at the first antitheses in verses 21-26, which correlates anger with murder. Then he connects lust with adultery in verses 27-32. I tell you, nobody is left standing when Jesus gets done with his sermon.

6 Antithesis in Matthew 5

Murder & Anger	21-26
Adultery & Lust	27-30
Divorce & Remarriage	31-32
Oaths & Truthfulness	33-37
Retaliation & Nonresistance	38-42
Hate & Love	43-48

Do you see what Jesus is doing here? He goes beyond external behavior to address inward motivation. Obedience is not merely a matter of surface compliance. Following Jesus cannot be reduced to simple check-the-box practices.



That's why, later in Matthew, Jesus lets fly with a scathing critique of these Pharisees: "Woe to you, Pharisees, you hypocrites. You clean the outside of the cup but inside are full of greed and self-indulgence. First, clean the inside of the cup and then the outside will be clean also" (Matthew 23:25-26). Jesus isn't recruiting followers who only look righteous. He's instructing his disciples on how to actually *become* righteous.

Before we come down too hard on these Pharisees, let me remind you of our own proclivity to measure ourselves against standards we set for ourselves. We create arbitrary standards and then measure ourselves against them. Well, what do you know? I look pretty good.

The standard to which I adhered growing up went something like this: I haven't murdered anyone. I have never committed adultery. I don't lie, steal or slander people on a regular basis. I'm a pretty good person by the standards I've set for myself. I set the bar low enough so that I can pass. But who am I kidding? Certainly not Jesus!

The charge often levied against people like us is that the church is full of hypocrites. I agree. This church *is* full of hypocrites. We promise things but we don't always follow through. We espouse principles that we vow never to violate, yet we defy these same standards. Religious people are particularly susceptible to hypocrisy and self-righteousness. It seems to go with the territory.

Actually, I stand corrected. This church is not full of hypocrites. There's always room for one more! You see, hypocrisy is endemic to the human condition. What is it that Buzz Lightyear said to Woody? "Hypocrites are everywhere!"



Jesus tells a memorable parable about a prodigal son. Actually, the story is misnamed. It's really a story about two lost sons. The younger son wanders far from home and spends his time in "dissolute living." I'm not sure what Jesus meant by dissolute living, but I know it isn't good. But this son came to his senses and returned home to be warmly received by his waiting father. The elder brother in the parable who never strays far from home demonstrates his lost-ness by becoming self-righteous and hypocritical when his brother is received back into the family.

I was the prodigal in the early part of my life. I spent my time in dissolute living. Then, like the prodigal, I came to myself and went home to God. Now, my temptation is in the opposite direction. I am tempted to become the elder brother. I become critical of people who don't go to church. I sit in judgment of those whom seem to live frivolous lives. Do you see what has happened? I have slid into becoming an Accidental Pharisee. I didn't set out to become a Pharisee. I fell into it rather accidentally.

By the time Jesus finishes this sermon, we're all brought to our collective knees. Who among us isn't guilty of anger, lust and hating one's enemies? Perhaps, this is precisely Jesus' point. If we think we can create a measure of righteousness where we can come out on top, guess again. Nobody, except Jesus, is able to fulfil the law down to its smallest letter.



*Jesus teaches an impossible ideal.
-Martin Luther*

Martin Luther concludes that Jesus teaches an impossible ideal in his Sermon on the Mount. Jesus deliberately sets the bar high to show us our inability to keep his righteous standard. Yet, this realization serves a positive benefit. It throws us back on Christ's mercy and our need for God's grace.

But Martin Luther is not one to let us off the hook. He goes on to challenge us to live this impossible ideal. It's an ideal that can never be perfectly realized in our lifetime, yet Jesus meant it to be taken seriously. He calls us to lean into it. Maybe it all comes down to how badly we want it in the end!