

Jesus and the Pharisees: (part two of a twelve part study)

The initial interaction between Jesus and the Pharisees is indirect, in that Christ refers to them in the Sermon on the Mount, and says this in Matthew 5:20 –

“For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.”

In making such a dramatic statement to the Jewish audience of His day, our Savior reveals the two fatal flaws of Pharisaic teaching. First, this group of Jewish religious legalists had become guilty of diminishing the true intent of God’s moral law. No one exemplified adherence to the letter of the law, while neglecting the spirit of the law, more than the Pharisees. This is confirmed in Christ’s discourse immediately following the indictment of Matthew 5:20. Jesus wanted His disciples to know, in contrast to the teaching which they had heard from the Pharisees; that murder was a sin, but so was anger held in one’s heart indefinitely. The act of adultery is a sin, but so is a lustful thought. To be sure, the act is more serious in degree than the thought, yet both are sins in God’s sight.

Second, the Pharisees were also guilty of developing a system of self-righteousness, which unbeknownst to them, fell far short of gaining entrance into the kingdom of God. Judaism, under the guidance and direction of these legalistic religionists, had gone astray from its roots in Abrahamic justification by faith (Genesis 15:6). This is why God the Son became God the Man, in order to fulfill the standard of God’s moral law during His earthly life. This in turn qualified Him to become a substitutionary sacrifice for sin, paying the penalty of sin for all of us; making acceptance with God a gift to be received by faith in Christ, rather than a reward to be earned by means of good works.

If you have been trying to gain acceptance with God by being good enough, stop! God doesn’t grade on a curve. He demands sinless perfection, which places every one of us permanently behind, and eventually crushed by that curve. Instead, what you need to do is place your faith in Jesus Christ, and become justified in God’s sight, as a free gift of His grace, which Jesus earned through His death, burial and resurrection, on your behalf. This is Plan A in God’s plan of salvation, and there is no Plan B. There is no better example of a self-righteous Pharisee who came to this profound realization and responded accordingly than Saul of Tarsus, who became the apostle Paul, and who wrote this in Philippians 3:9 –

“. . . and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith . . .”