

Jesus and the Pharisees (part four of a twelve part series)

A self-righteous attitude not only generates a condescending superiority complex, it can also promote a policy of isolationism. Why? Looking down on others can keep us from associating with people whom we consider to be unworthy of our company. The first evidence of this in Jesus' interaction with the Pharisees is recorded for us in Matthew 9:9-13 –

“As Jesus went on from there, He saw a man called Matthew, sitting in the tax collector’s booth; and He said to him, ‘Follow Me!’ And he got up and followed Him. Then it happened that as Jesus was reclining at the table in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and were dining with Jesus and His disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to His disciples, ‘Why is your Teacher eating with the tax collectors and sinners?’ But when Jesus heard this, He said, ‘It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick. But go and learn what this means: ‘I DESIRE COMPASSION AND NOT SACRIFICE,’ for I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”

The Pharisees had convinced themselves that no self-respecting teacher of God's Law would associate with the kind of “low lives” in our Lord's company. They don't directly confront Christ about His behavior. Instead, they pose the question to His disciples; perhaps for the purpose of subverting His credibility with them. In addition, it is clear that this wasn't a sincere question but the query of a troll, designed to bait, entrap and condemn. Jesus obviously overheard what was said and responded immediately in order to overrule its potentially undermining effect. His answer consists of a sarcastic rebuke to these Pharisees who thought they were “healthy,” when they were desperately “sick;” and who thought they were “righteous,” but were in dire need of God's forgiveness.

Throughout the Church Age, whenever the role model for Christian ministry becomes a Pharisee rather than our Savior, it creates a major hindrance to evangelistic outreach. It not only diminishes the motivation of individual Christians toward reaching the lost, but can have the same corrosive effect on an entire church. The end result is that a local church ceases to be a Great Commission church and deteriorates into something that resembles a club. Here's why. Self-righteousness produces self-centeredness. Conversions and baptisms become limited to the children of the members of that club. When a local church functions as God intends, a new generation of adult converts to Christ will emerge, as well as the children who are already part of that church family. The Great Commission is an ongoing challenge which must be fulfilled by the body of Christ in our world. The greatest threat to its realization is the self-righteous leaven of a Pharisee.