

The Sin of the Pharisees

Rod shared this at our recent gathering.

“Far from tiptoeing around them, Jesus sometimes seemed to go out of his way to confront religious leaders who lived from a religious variety of the forbidden fruit. While he demonstrated only compassion toward ordinary folk, and especially toward those ostracized and/or judged by the religious establishment, Jesus publicly expressed anger toward self-righteous religious leaders – the Pharisees, scribes, and Sadducees. Though these people were “the most moral of people, lived the best lives, and [were] perfectly obedient and virtuous”, Ellul wrote, they “substituted their own morality for the living and actual Word of God that can never be fixed in commandments”.¹ They were experts on eating from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

Jesus aggressively intended to stop these leaders because they shut the door of God's gracious kingdom on people, placed heavy loads on people's shoulders, and lured people down their own religious path of destruction.² With their highly refined moralism, they incarnated the serpent's lie about how to be God-like. Consequently, Jesus had to publicly confront these religious forbidden-fruit-eaters.

Jesus exposed the self-serving nature of their moral system by calling attention to the fact that they did not practice what they preached and made demands of others that they themselves wouldn't do.³ He exposed the idolatrous nature and shallowness of their moralism by calling attention to their concern to have their works noticed.⁴ Their religion was centered on exterior things rather than the heart⁵. For example, they obsessed over paying tithes while they “neglected the more important matters of the law – justice, mercy and faithfulness”.⁶ Hence, Jesus warned them, and others, that these leaders were “whitewashed tombs” that “look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean”.⁷

Despite their good appearance, the hearts of these religious leaders were far from God. indeed, they were so far gone they mistook the power of God for the power of Satan, a fact that led Jesus to warn them about a state of sin that would never be forgiven.⁸ They were in danger of going to hell,⁹ and they were endangering others with this same fate.”¹⁰

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1 – J. Ellul (2001) “Subversion of Christianity” Eerdmans pub. p:70

2 – Matthew 23:4,13-17

3 – Matthew 23:3-4

4 – Matthew 6:1-8, 16; 23:5-7

5 – Matthew 23:25-26

6 – Matthew 23:23 (NIV)

7 – Matthew 23:27 (NIV)

8 – Matthew 12:24-32

9 – Matthew 23:33-35

10 – Gregory Boyd (2004) “Repenting of Religion: Turning from Judgement to the Love of God” Baker Books p:201-202