

The Pastor's Pen

“A Pharisee is hard on others and easy on himself, but a spiritual man is easy on others and hard on himself. An honest man with an open Bible, a pad, and a pencil is sure to find out what is wrong with him very quickly.” ~ A.W. Tozer

Over the last 2,000 years of Church History, we in the Church have developed something of a sour taste for the word “Pharisee.” However, in the days when Jesus physically walked the earth, the Pharisees were *actually* the spiritual leaders that everybody looked up to. Why? They *said* the right things, *did* the right things, *looked* good, and *smelled* good.

If this is true (and it is true, by the way), then why was Jesus constantly nailing the Pharisees to the proverbial wall? Was it because of *what* they did? No, it was because of *why* they did *what* they did. The Pharisees attempted to construct a system of their own righteousness in order to make themselves acceptable to God. In addition to this, they added literally hundreds of little rules to the Word of God, by which they judged the authenticity of other people's spirituality.

Most of us tend to think that by this, the Pharisees made God's Law *more difficult* to keep. But, in fact, the *opposite* is true – they were attempting to make God's Law “doable.” How? Think about it. Is it more difficult to truly “*love the LORD our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength*,” or is it more difficult to keep a checklist of 613 (that is literally the number of rules the Pharisees had compiled) boxes? At first, it would seem like 613 rules would be the more impossible – but it is not. Trying to keep 613 little rules would be burdensome, no doubt.

But, on the other hand, to “*love the LORD our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength*” may be simple to recite, but it is utterly impossible for a sinful human being to actually obey. How? To obey this would mean that we never (even once) allow anything or anyone to compete with our utter and pure devotion to the Lord our God. None of us has kept that a day in our lives. At the Protestant Reformation, John Calvin observantly noted that, “*the heart and mind of man is a perpetual forge of idols*” (Institutes of the Christian Religion 1:11:45).

You see, Pharisaism actually attempts to avoid the *impossibility of obedience* to God's righteous standard, and also the *inescapability of failure*. The reason A.W. Tozer points out that “*a spiritual man is easy on others and hard on himself*” is because, if we honestly face God's standard of righteousness, we are forced to face the fact that we fail every hour of every day of every week of every month of every year...of our entire lives to “*love the LORD our God with all our heart, soul,*

mind, and strength.”God’s Law forces us to see the utter repulsiveness of the filthy rags of our own righteousness and to cling to His mercy and grace – *alone*.

How does this affect how we see others and how we view *their* failures? Well, to borrow the words of an old adage, “*people who live in glass houses don’t throw rocks.*” We become compassionate toward others in *their* failures – because we are so very aware of *our own* failures. Here’s a question to consider – what *keeps us from* being honest about our sin, and what *would enable us to* be honest about our sin? The answer to both questions is *our view of the Gospel*. If we are dependent on our own righteousness for our identity and our standing, *we cannot afford to fail...*and we can afford *even less to admit our failure*. If our identity and our standing is tied to our performance, we will inevitably attempt to diminish the gravity of our sin in any given situation. Why? Because if we are reliant on our own righteousness, we are simply not safe to admit our lack of it.

On the other hand, if we are convinced at a heart level that, because we are in Christ, every single bit of Jesus’ righteousness *actually belongs to us*, that infinitely changes things. The reality is, our success or failure in a given situation *cannot alter* our identity or standing before God, and therefore, *we can afford to be honest*. This is why, as we grow in Christ and the Gospel grips our heart at a deeper and deeper level, we become more “*hard on ourselves.*” This does not mean that we become perfectionists, but it does mean we become more and more brutally honest with ourselves (and others) about the reality of our own sin. What *enables us* to become more and more honest? This – as we grow to know Jesus at a deeper and deeper level, we become more and more *convinced* that Jesus *truly does know us* – yet for reasons known only to Himself – He nonetheless *truly loves us*. When that grips our hearts, it does two things. First, it makes us want to honor Jesus because we truly know that He loves us so very much. Second, it makes us “*honest men (and women) who are easy on others and hard on ourselves.*”

I pray that the Lord blesses you this week with the Holy Spirit’s presence filling your hearts to overflowing. If you need me, please know that my door and my heart are always open to you.

Your brother in Jesus,

Heath