

The Pharisees Encounter Jesus

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[0 : 0 0] As we mentioned earlier, we're starting a new series, and yet again, for some reason, I find myself being the first person in the series. Not quite sure if that's an accident or the elder's choice or God's choice or what.

But here I am, the start of a new series. And as has been mentioned, the title of the series is Encounters with Jesus. And later on in the series, we're going to be hearing from people talking about Jesus' encounter with Jairus and Jairus' daughter.

Jesus' encounter with Samaritan woman at the well. Zacchaeus' encounter with Jesus, and as we know, Zacchaeus is a tax gatherer and a man of short stature, was looked down upon both literally and figuratively by everyone else.

But this is pantomime season still. So why not go, oh yes it is, with the people in the Bible that even Jesus was tempted to boo and hiss?

The Pharisees. When I was thinking about this topic, someone suggested the Magi or the Three Kings. It didn't sort of engender any sort of epiphany in me, so I decided to stick with the Pharisees.

[1 : 1 4] I've also chosen to cheat a bit because the title of the series is Encounters with Jesus, not an encounter with Jesus.

So I have gone with a group of people, and also I'm not going to concentrate on just one encounter, but have an overview of many of the encounters that they had with Jesus, and Jesus had with them, and the people, and the disciples.

So I've chosen them, despite the bad press they get in the Bible, not least from Jesus himself. But if we just think about how much time we have spent in the last two, three weeks, four weeks, month, looking at the Christmas story in particular, which only appears in two Gospels, and yet the Pharisees go across all four Gospels, and are mentioned quite a number of times.

So how much more should we maybe paying attention to what can come out of Jesus' relationship and talking and discussions with the Pharisees? Before I go any further, I'm going to have a short quiz.

But don't worry, this does not require any unusual or specialist or obscure knowledge of history, literature, media, or the arts.

[2 : 3 7] So hopefully everyone can be included in this. So what I'd like you to do is, if you're able to, is to stand. And if you're not able to stand, but are able to put your hand in the air instead, just put your hand up in the air.

And this is an elimination, elimination, a get rid of you quiz. So, I want you to say or indicate by staying standing or keeping your hand up, if you can say yes to any of the following.

Do you believe in the resurrection? Not necessarily specifically Jesus' but the resurrection for all believers. If you do, stay standing or keep your hand up.

Do you believe in one true God? The God of Abraham as revealed in the Old Testament? If you do, stay standing, keep your hand up. Do you believe God created the universe and everything in it?

Stay standing, yes, everyone. Do you believe that God originally selected Israel to be his chosen people? Okay, everyone's still standing?

[3 : 50] Everyone's all got their hand up. Thank you. If you said yes to all of the above, which you have because you're all still standing, you're well on your way to being a Pharisee. So do please sit down.

So, who were the Pharisees? And why was Jesus so hard on them? Do we want Jesus to be so hard on us? I would suggest not. Particularly, as surprising, if we've declared all that to be our beliefs, we know those were Jesus' beliefs, so he had a lot of beliefs in common with the Pharisees.

But it's easier, possibly, to say what the Pharisees weren't than to define them in a way that can put a label on them.

So they weren't a political party, although they tried to exert political pressure. They weren't a formal religious group, their own constitution or self-governing assemblies, but they were strongly religious.

They weren't part of the priesthood. They weren't a secretive society, say, like Freemasons. They weren't a community or trade group like the WI or the Round Table.

[5 : 07] They did, though, as the quiz has just illustrated, have a number of beliefs in common with each other and with the wider religious groups, including, for the Pharisees, the assertion that the oral tradition passed down from generation to generation was as important as the written word.

That religious rules and regulations that originally applied only to the Levite priests and the temple courts should be extended to everyday life.

And that associating with people that they considered to be unclean automatically made them unclean. So, in effect, or in a way, the Pharisees were a group of people who held some properly orthodox beliefs, but had managed to add so much extra to the fundamentals that the faith had been submerged and almost hidden so much that all they were doing was following a religion of rules and regulations in a sense of legalism.

So, the Pharisees, they started off orthodox and with good intentions. And reading slightly wider, but not especially wider, when the Israelites were exiled, it was the people that we ended up being called Pharisees were the ones that helped carry on the religious ceremonies and the religious beliefs out in the places of exile.

But clearly, they moved too far from their original position. As Ecclesiastes reminds us, there is nothing new under the sun.

[6 : 56] And, as often said in one form or another, those who fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it. Or, as I might have titled my sermon this morning, those who fail to learn from the Pharisees are doomed to become Pharisees themselves.

So, it's a warning to ourselves this morning. Now, there's more than enough, as I said, going on in the Gospels between Jesus and the Pharisees to probably produce quite a decent-sized book of analysis.

So, I'm only going to pick a few. We had one passage read. I'm not actually going to refer directly to that passage, but some of what happened in there is reported in other Gospels as well.

I'm going to run briefly through a number of passages where the Pharisees are in dialogue with Jesus or his disciples. So, these passages aren't going to be shown overhead.

And I will read through each of them in turn, but just for quick reference, and for giving them a hopefully catchy little title. From Matthew 15, the Pharisees offended.

[8 : 11] Matthew 11, the Pharisees' stupidity? Luke 7, John's baptism and the Pharisees. John 3, the rebel.

John 7, the self-assured. And Mark 12, it's a trap. And very briefly after that, some of the specific criticisms that Jesus levelled at the Pharisees in a succinct way.

So, a number of passages just to briefly, some I might make mention of, some I might just read and leave as read. So, from Matthew 5, the Pharisees offended, which is similar to the passage that we had read for us by Liz Eames earlier.

So, some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law came to Jesus and asked, why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? Not break the written law, break the tradition of the elders, and not wash their hands before they eat.

And Jesus said, why do you break commands of God for the sake of your tradition? You've got it the wrong way around. And he quoted to them the Isaiah passage.

[9 : 24] And then it said, the disciples came to him and asked, do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this? Like, yeah, I'm not surprised they were offended when they heard that. I think I'd be offended if I heard that.

And it's like the Pharisees. Everything you could see about the Pharisees was designed to make them look good. To make them look important.

To make them look like they were okay. But to mix the picture up slightly, it's a bit like a Fabergé egg. But when you open up, you find that it's got the contents of Pandora's box.

It looks beautiful on the outside. It's crafted wonderfully. A lot of effort has been put in to making it look perfect. But inside, there's a load of horrible rubbish going on.

From Matthew, the Pharisees' stupidity. Therefore, many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary and had seen what Jesus did, so that's raising of Lazarus and all the different miracles and healings he performed, believed in him.

[10 : 36] Some of them went to the Pharisees and told him what Jesus had done. There's always one sneak in the class, isn't there? Then the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin.

What are we accomplishing, they asked. Here is this man performing many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him. And then the Romans will come and take away both our temple and our nation.

What are we accomplishing? Implication, from the question, the way it's put, not a lot. What's Jesus doing? Miracles, healings, raising people from the dead.

That's embarrassing. We better stop it happening. Rather than thinking, maybe this is a man of God. Maybe this is something we should take a closer look at, rather than shutting out.

And of course, later on, Jesus, the ultimate miracle, his resurrection from the dead, proves that he actually was in the right, and they were stupid to be blind to him.

[11 : 41] John's baptism. When all the people, when John was preaching in the Jordan, came and repented and were baptised.

Even the tax collectors, when they heard Jesus' word, acknowledged that God's way was right, because they had been baptised by John. But the Pharisees and the experts in the law rejected God's purpose for themselves, because they had not been baptised by John.

I'm going to leave that one as it is, not go into that in too much. John 3, the rebel, the very well-known rebel, Nicodemus, who came to Jesus at night, a Pharisee, obviously beginning to see that maybe there was more to this Jesus than someone who was actually just deliberately trying to stir up trouble, which obviously wasn't what Jesus was trying to do.

But obviously afraid of what the reaction might be to his peers, to the Pharisees, if they knew that he had gone and spoken to Jesus. So he came at night, and he spoke to him.

And Jesus said, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again. And later on, those famous words from John 3, 16, for God so loved the world that he sent his only son.

[13 : 07] And he tells Nicodemus that you must be born again. The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going.

So it is with everyone born of the Spirit. How can this be? Nicodemus asked. You are Israel's teacher, said Jesus, and you do not understand these things.

Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen. But still, you people, Pharisees in particular, do not accept our testimony.

So the Pharisees heard the teaching. They knew the teaching. As we had from the very first reading this morning, they understood the Scriptures because they knew where the birth of the Messiah was going to happen.

But somewhere along the way, they'd lost the plot. In a similar way, there was another Pharisee who felt perhaps a bit more comfortable with Jesus than some of the others, and a man called Simon.

[14 : 17] One of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him. And Jesus went to the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. So a Pharisee who was perhaps a little bit more confident, a little bit more self-assured.

Maybe he didn't feel threatened so much by Jesus as maybe some of the others did and very more comfortable. But a woman in that town who lived a sinful life heard that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house and came in with her alabaster jar of perfume.

She stood behind him, she wept, and she wiped his feet with her tears and poured perfume on them. And Simon the Pharisee was aghast. Does Jesus not know what sort of person this is?

The sort of person as a Pharisee he didn't want there near him because they would have made him unclean. And Jesus said, Simon, I have something to tell you.

Tell me, teacher, he said. Still very respectful. Two people owed money to a moneylender. One owed him 500 denarii, the other just 50. Neither of them could pay him back.

[15 : 25] So he forgave the debts. Now, which one of them will love him more? I suppose the one who had the bigger debt. You have judged correctly, Jesus said.

Then Jesus turned to the woman and said to Simon, Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair.

You did not give me a kiss, a proper greeting, but this woman from this time I entered has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet.

Therefore I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little.

I wonder how Simon felt after that, thinking how much this woman had done meant she had been forgiven lots and then thinking, actually, how little I have done and yet I actually deserve as much forgiveness if I really think about it.

[16 : 32] the trap. The Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap him in his words.

They sent their disciples to him along with the Herodians. Teacher, they said with great flattery, we know you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth.

You aren't swayed by others because you know pay no attention to who they are. Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not?

And these were people who wanted nothing to do with the Romans at all and felt it was wrong that they should be in their country and that they should be part of their culture. But Jesus, knowing that evil intent, said, you hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me?

Show me the coin used for paying the tax. They brought him a denarius and he asked them, whose image is this and whose inscription? Caesar's, they replied. Then he said to them, we'll give it back to Caesar then.

[17 : 42] And then, what is God's? Give back to God. And in a sense, he trapped them with their own words and their own question. Some of the specific criticisms that Jesus laid at the floor at the feet of the Pharisees are summed up in what is known as the woes, the seven woes.

I'm not going to read all of them, but the particular ones I felt to highlight this morning. The Pharisees, they denied that Jesus was the saviour and they tried to, and they worked hard to try and make sure others didn't believe that Jesus was saviour either.

When they had converts, they led their converts into a heavy legalism of rules and regulations of a burden of faith, if you like.

Whereas Jesus' yoke is light and easy. They couldn't discern the truth even when the truth was walking there in front of them.

and so they couldn't leave other people into the truth either. And although they upheld the law and made much of the law, they were hypocritical even their approach to that.

[19 : 00] They made sure that even in their tithing, the smallest part of their wealth, they did it correctly. But they ignored the bigger parts of the law, of mercy and justice.

And they were so tied up in making sure that their religious practices hid their true nature, that their true nature never changed.

So I've got a few questions for us in conclusion. And I would ask that in your studies of the Bible, in your listening to sermons, even this one, maybe even especially this one, in the words of worship songs that we absorb, in listening to the beliefs of others as they talk or as we chat with them, ask yourself these questions.

Am I drawing the right conclusion from what I'm hearing? Am I open to change? Or do I think that because we've always done it one way, we should always do it that way?

Because I've always believed it, it must be true. Is this tradition helpful or has it become a meaningless routine?

[20 : 14] Am I confident enough to step out of the crowd or to think differently to the crowd? Am I still curious about Jesus?

Am I still curious about faith? Or have I become closed to the new? Have I accepted the wrong? Have I rejected the good?

And as Jesus said, there is but one who is good, God himself, our heavenly father. A final encouragement, make sure that you have accepted the good and that you have accepted the one that he sent to us, our Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.