

They were a fascinating group. They were a group that has much in common with us.

They valued scripture immensely yet refused to take it absolutely literally. Instead, they also placed a high value on human reason. And they could argue and debate the meaning of a particular passage of scripture while still being in relationship with their opponents.

They believed in social justice. They taught that all people were brothers and sisters.

Their central religious questions centered on how one could be faithful to God in a faithless world, how one could maintain one's religious identity in a diverse and pluralistic culture.

They wanted to help ordinary people deepen their faith. They tried to promote spiritual disciplines for ordinary people, not just clergy. They were fervent about prayer, praying three times a day

They looked for the coming of the Messiah, the Christ. They believed in the resurrection of the body. They believed that God would one day judge the living and the dead.

Of all the groups in Israel during Jesus' time, they were probably the very closest to Jesus theologically. They were the Pharisees.

Now you may be thinking, "Now wait a minute. The Pharisees? All of that stuff sounds pretty positive. Aren't the Pharisees the bad guys in the Gospels?"

Well, yes, it's true, Jesus often clashed with the Pharisees. Perhaps that's because they did have so much in common. Thus, when they disagreed, those arguments were pretty sharp.

But the Pharisees were not evil. They were trying to do their best to follow God, and to help others follow God. They just got off track a little bit. We'll get to that in a minute.

When you think of the Pharisees, don't caricature them. Don't think of them as villains in black hats. Instead, maybe you should think a likeable character, like Tevye from *Fiddler on the Roof*. Tevye would have been a perfect Pharisee. At the beginning of the play, Tevye sings,

"Tradition."

And then he adds,

"Because of our traditions, every one of us knows who he is and what God expects him to do."

That's the Pharisees to a "T". The Pharisees' traditions defined them individually, and as a group. Tradition gave them their sense of identity.

Remember, the Jews were a minority. They were a small nation of monotheists in the midst of powerful pantheistic pagan empires.

They wanted their distinct traditions to keep them distinct as a people. Only eating kosher food; dressing a certain way. We might find this a little silly. But to them it was like a football game. If you're playing a game, you don't put both teams in identical uniforms. If you do, you can't tell which side was which. There would be pandemonium on the field. We know that in a game, each team needs to be distinct from the other in order for the game to go on.

Thus the Pharisees relied upon their traditions to give them identity and cohesion and distinctiveness as a people.

And they were very successful in this endeavor. In the past two-thousand six-hundred years, the Jews have only had an independent nation-state for about 10% of that period. No other people in the history of the world has been able to stick together as a people without a homeland for millennia at a time. It was their Tradition that kept the Jewish people together and distinct. That's the legacy to Judaism from the Pharisees.

Tradition gave the Pharisees identity. And they looked to tradition to help them know how God expected them to act.

All Jews acknowledged that God gave them the Torah, the Law. All Jews agreed that God wanted them to follow the Law. But the Pharisees took a special interest in trying to find practical ways to live with the Law, to keep the Law. God said, "Don't work on the Sabbath." So the Pharisees spent considerable effort trying to determine what constituted work and what didn't.

In fact, the Pharisees had a guiding principle. They wanted to keep all of God's Law. They didn't want to violate a single precept. And so they sought to erect protective barriers around the Law. In their words, they tried to put a "hedge around the Torah," basically a protective fence around the law.

The hedge around the Torah was like guard rails on a mountain highway. There are few things more disconcerting to me than driving on a mountain road with a steep drop off and no guard rails. You don't want to cross the line. You don't want to accidentally put your wheels on the narrow shoulder, because the next thing you know you may be past the shoulder and your car will be tumbling down the mountainside. On a curvy mountain road, you want that guard rail to be there. A guard rail gives you a sense of security. It helps prevent you from leaving the road.

The same with the Law. If crossing this line <<gesture make line>> means violating the Law, then the Pharisees would say, let's put a guard rail up. Let's put up a barrier to keep you from getting too close to the line, so that you don't inadvertently go over it. And for the Pharisees, that guard rail, that barrier, was their Traditions.

In theory that sounds great.

The only problem was that, in Jesus' time, the Pharisees often forgot what the barrier was for—to protect God's Law. In Jesus' time, the Pharisees often began equating Traditions with the Law itself. They started protecting the hedges, protecting the guard rails, instead of letting the guard rails protect the Law.

Back to Tevye. Late in *Fiddler on the Roof*, there's a statement from Tevye as he's trying to defend his tradition in the face of pushback from the world. And defending tradition is hugely important for Tevye.

One of his daughters has eloped with a gentile boy. And as Tevye is wrestling with the situation he asks,

"Can I deny everything I believe in...  
how can I turn my back on my faith, my people?  
If I try and bend that far, I'll break."

This gives us an insight into the Pharisees' greatest fears. Protect the Law by protecting the traditions that have grown up around the Law. Because if the traditions don't hold, then the Law itself will be threatened. That's what they're most afraid of.

And that fear that puts them into a place where they clash with Jesus. And that's where Jesus often clashes with them.

Case in point is today's Gospel lesson from Mark 7. The Pharisees are upset that the disciples haven't washed their hands properly. Why is this a big deal? After all, we tell our kids, "Wash your hands" before a meal.

Well, for the Pharisees, this is not about hygiene. This isn't cleanliness for cleanliness' sake. This is about ritual purity. You want to follow the Law and be ritually pure and ceremonially clean when you eat a meal? That's the line. Then we'll put up a hedge. Make sure you symbolically wash your hands in order to maintain a state of ritual purity.

Well, Jesus takes them to task by quoting Isaiah: "This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines."<sup>1</sup>

Jesus' message: 'You're stressing going through the motions on the outside, observing your traditions without even thinking about them. But you're missing the point.'

Jesus is saying, 'It's not the stuff outside you that'll trip you up.'

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<sup>1</sup> Is 29:13

Instead, he says, "It is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."<sup>2</sup>

Bottom line, Jesus is telling them it's not about what you do, but why you're doing it.

Note: he never says what they're doing is wrong. But he's jumping on them for doing these things without having the primary motivation of trying to serve God.

The Pharisees' traditions have become ends in themselves. Not only that, they've also become weapons, ammunition for attacks against Jesus. It's no longer about washing your hands to symbolize a pure heart. It's become, 'We can now jump down your throat because you haven't observed all the traditions we have made customary.' And Jesus has no patience with such attacks. And he calls them on it. They need to have the proper motivation. Religious observance is not so much about what you do, but rather why you're doing it.

It's a good reminder to us. Doing good things is never an end itself. We have to be doing them with the right motivation.

Am I doing this so I can make a good impression? Am I doing this so that people will see what I'm doing and praise me?

Or am I doing it because it's the right thing to do? Am I doing it because I love God, and I want to serve him and his people?

This is especially important for Episcopalians. We have lots of traditions. And that's wonderful. But traditions are never ends in themselves. They are simply tools that can help us draw closer to God if we view them correctly. So, we have to be careful not to let our traditions become stumbling blocks. We have to be careful not to focus on our traditions in an automatic or knee jerk way, forgetting the whole purpose for their existence.

It's ultimately not about choirs or prayer books or vestments or standing or kneeling or bowing. It's all about worshipping the living God. That's the whole purpose of all of our traditions, and we forget that at our spiritual peril.

It's not so much about what you're doing.

It's about why you're doing it.

If we can keep that in perspective, everything else can fall into place.

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<sup>2</sup> Mk 7:21-23