

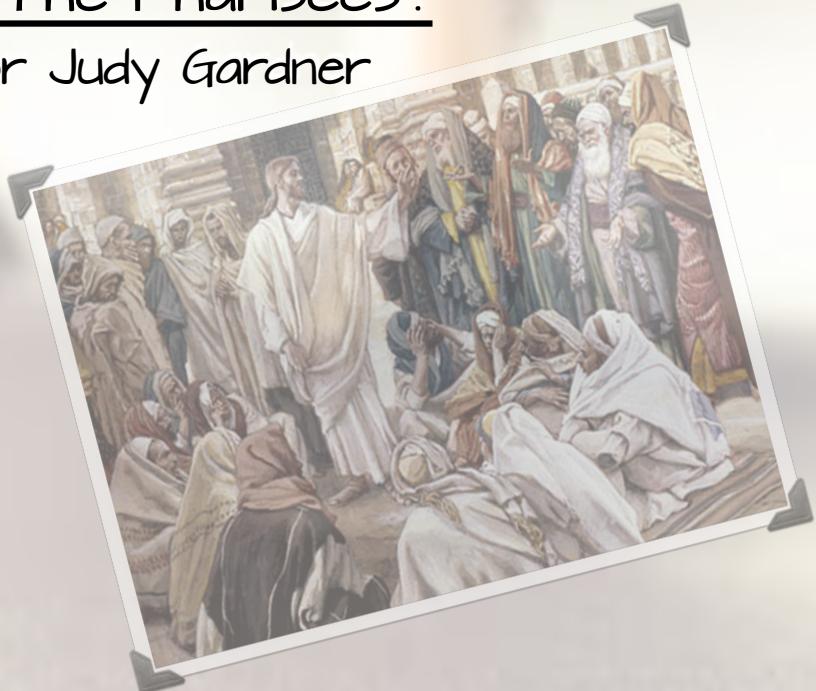
March 20-24, 2023 Edition

The Year_(s) Of ^{Following} Jesus Part 64

Who Were The Pharisees?

By: Ed &/or Judy Gardner

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When you read the Bible ask yourself if there's anything you're reading where God is speaking to you personally... anything that you need to start applying in your own life. Then try to reflect on what you read... what you heard from God throughout the day and we know you'll be blessed.

*** These are EXTREMELY rough drafts so if you see typos... well you knew the rest ;0) These are essentially the ramblings of thoughts running through Ed or Judy's mind the week before Ed teaches a lesson on these concepts. They are pretty much how Ed gets ready for the weekends. They are not necessarily coherent so if they don't make much sense... sorry about that.

**** Also these devotionals are the product of both Judy & Ed's experiences and education. Figuring out which are from Judy and which are from Ed (sometimes both are contained in a single day) is half the fun.

You can also get these devotionals on Riverside's Facebook page (www.facebook.com/EagleRiverside). You don't have to have a FB account to read them but if you do have an account if you "like" the Riverside page and click the box to get updates the devos will show up on your wall every weekday (along with other news and event updates).

Monday: So the Pharisees and teachers of religious law asked him, "Why don't your disciples follow our age-old tradition? They eat without first performing the hand-washing ceremony." Mark 7:5 (NLT)

Reflection: We've been talking a lot about the Pharisees during this year long series on the life of Jesus. But who were the Pharisees? Why did they always seem to be getting in trouble with Jesus? And maybe the most important question of all, how can I make sure I don't fall into the same trap they did?

In our modern times the word, Pharisee, has taken on a negative connotation. But it wasn't like that in the first century. The Pharisees were respected, looked up to, and feared. The Sadducees (made up of the priests) controlled the Temple but the Pharisees and the scribes controlled the Scriptures and the synagogues (the local places of worship). Get on the wrong side of the Pharisees and you would be unable to go to worship every Sabbath and that was a HUGE deal in first century Israel. The Temple was important to the people... but since there was only one Temple and it was in Jerusalem, the synagogue was more important to a Jewish persons day to day life.

The word Pharisee means, "separate one". They felt like the Temple had been made impure by the political dealings of the Sadducees. And so they led a life where they "separated" themselves from the things that would make them impure. Their goal was to create a sort of mini temple in their homes and in so doing please God.

One of the things they focused on to make their homes a mini temple was the ritual purity laws of the Old Testament. There were tons of rules concerning how someone was to wash themselves and the implements used in the worship of God. Those laws weren't for every Jew to follow... they were for the priests. But the Pharisees wanted to create these mini temples in their homes so they instituted the ritual washing ceremonies into their everyday lives.

Which is fine... until they started putting those same restrictions on everybody else. And when everybody else couldn't live up to the Pharisees standards they were made to feel like second class citizens. Like God was displeased with them because they weren't washing the way the Pharisees said they should be washing. It made the average person's life in first century Israel a kind of living hell. They were constantly terrified they were going to do something the Pharisees disapproved of and get themselves into trouble.

The Pharisees became the self appointed hall monitors of holiness in first century Israel.

And it really got under Jesus' skin. In fact Jesus was always getting into trouble with the Pharisees. Picking grain to eat on the Sabbath, healing on the Sabbath, eating with "disreputable" people, and not following their hand washing laws.

And the fascinating thing is, of all the different factions that existed in first century Israel (Pharisees, Sadducees, Scribes, Levites, Essenes, Herodians, etc...) Jesus probably had the most in common with Pharisees. And yet of all those groups it was the Pharisees who were constantly getting laid into by Jesus for their misunderstanding of God and the way that misunderstanding impacted the lives of every day people who genuinely wanted to honor

God with their lives but were constantly unable to live up to the Pharisees standards. Standards that the Pharisees said were actually God's standards.

And so Jesus won't let it go. It's almost like He's purposely trying to do anything He can to create conflicts with them.

So what was it about these guys that drove Jesus nuts? That made His blood boil? That made Him decide that He would use them as object lesson in how not to follow God? That's what this week is all about.

Tuesday: So the Pharisees and teachers of religious law asked him, "Why don't your disciples follow our age-old tradition? They eat without first performing the hand-washing ceremony." Jesus replied, "You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you, for he wrote, 'These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship is a farce, for they teach man-made ideas as commands from God.' For you ignore God's law and substitute your own tradition." Mark 7:5-8 (NLT)

Reflection: Ok... so we know what a Pharisee is now (at least you do if you read Monday's reflection). What was it about them that drove Jesus nuts?

In a nutshell it was the way they handled the scriptures and by extension how that made them treat people. One thing I notice when I read Jesus' run ins with the Pharisees is that He never tells them to stop doing what they're doing to honor God. He never says, "stop washing your hands" or "stop tithing to meticulously" or "stop doing your best to honor the Sabbath by resting". What He tells them is, stop judging other people who have different ideas about what it means to wash, tithe or rest when it comes to living a life that honor God.

When I was growing up I heard all about these showdowns Jesus would have with the Pharisees. I knew the problem the Pharisees had with Jesus is that they believed He was breaking God's law. I always figured Jesus was breaking the law but since He was God... then He could get away with it. I didn't know why He'd want to break His own laws but I was sort of given the impression that you don't question the Big Guy unless you want to burn for all eternity in the Bad Place. And I didn't want to burn for all eternity in the Bad Place so I kept me questions to myself and tried to bury them the best I could.

I remember my "aha" moment. I was listening to a preacher talk about the Sabbath laws the Pharisees accused Jesus of breaking. He told about the Mishna (a Jewish commentary that had come to have the same weight as the actual Old Testament scriptures in first century Judaism). The Mishna expanded upon and explained the laws of God. In other words, if one of the 10 commandments says to rest on the Sabbath and never work on the Sabbath... well then what constitutes work and when is a person crossing the line from rest to work? Who was going to decide what was "lawful" and what was "unlawful"?

Over the centuries the religious leaders would debate and vote on what was work and what wasn't work. They had hundreds of statutes that dealt with this one law. One such statute dealt with walking. How far could you walk on the Sabbath and not be "working"?

I don't know who came up with the number but it was something like the number of paces that would equal about a half mile. So ordinary people couldn't walk more than a half mile from their homes without being law breakers. But the Pharisees had been to law school. They had spent years learning not just the specific laws but also the "loopholes" that ordinary people didn't know about.

For instance... if you weren't supposed to walk more than a half mile from your home then most people didn't. But the Pharisees reasoned that if they carried a piece of broken roof tile with them, then when they got a half mile away from their home they would stop, bury the broken tile and figure they now could walk another half mile and still be "technically" within a half mile of their home. Archaeologists have dug up intricate maps that identified every place a Pharisee had buried part of their home in a village. One map had so much broken tiles from a Pharisees home buried that there was no place this guy couldn't go on the Sabbath and still be no more than a half mile from "home".

This is what drove Jesus nuts. Because if an ordinary person needed to go further than a half mile in an emergency that person was condemned.

So when Jesus is accused of breaking the "law" it's not God's law that they are saying He's breaking... it's there traditions about what constitutes work. He walked too far or picked grains when He was hungry or healed someone who was sick or paralyzed or blind or deaf (what kind of sick individual would think it was ok to heal someone on the Sabbath?!?!?!) ;o)

When I realized that was what Jesus was doing I had a startling moment of clarity. It's as though the clouds parted and the sun shone into my heart in a way it never had before. Why? Because I was doing the same exact thing. And it stunned me. I'll explain more about that tomorrow...

Wednesday: Instead, be filled with the Holy Spirit, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, and making music to the Lord in your hearts. Ephesians 5:18-19 (NLT)

Reflection: (I apologize in advance... this one is REALLY long... sorry bout that)

I know what you're thinking... I thought we were talking about the Pharisees... what do these scriptures have to do with the pharisaical mind set?

Let me explain (and I want to be VERY careful here... I'm not saying that people who hold the views I'm about to talk about are always viewing the Bible with a pharisaical mindset... I saying that I was viewing the Bible with a pharisaical mindset when I believed and taught these things and Jesus made it clear to me in no uncertain terms that that was who I was becoming... this is all about ME, ok? Ok.)

In the church I grew up in there were two issues that seemed to me to be the most important: instrumental music in worship and baptism. We would go to war with people who loved and trusted Jesus with their lives but saw these two issues differently than we did.

Growing up I realized that we didn't have guitars or pianos in our church... we sang "acappella". I had no idea why... it was what I grew up with so it seemed normal. I also

knew that when someone got baptized (including me when I was 12) it was full immersion dunking. I didn't know why... it was just the way it was. I noticed that sometimes people came into the church as adults from another tradition and universally these people were baptized again... even if they were coming from another church and had already been baptized. Again... I didn't know why, I just knew that's the way things were.

When I was 20 I got serious about my faith. I wanted to know why we did what we did. I was recovering from alcohol and drug abuse and what I did to deal with cravings was read the Bible. I carried a HUGE NIV Bible with me everywhere I went (this was LONG before the advent of smart phones with Bible apps that you could carry in your pocket) and whenever I was tempted I would open it up and read. Consequently I read through the entire Bible several times the first year alone (I got tempted a lot ;o)

Pretty soon I started to notice the Bible didn't seem to say anything about instrumental music. Actually it did... it talked about using trumpets and harps and drums to praise the Lord. It never seemed to say anything about not using instruments. So why was this issue so important to us? I asked around and this is what I was told.

Did you read the first scripture for today? Ephesians 5:18-19... It says:

Instead, be filled with the Holy Spirit, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, and making music to the Lord in your hearts.

Do you see it? Do you see the injunction against instrumental worship there? No? Neither did I. It had to be explained to me and this was the explanation:

Ephesians 5 says to make music in your HEARTS... not to make music with guitars or pianos or drums. Ok... so? So if it doesn't say we can use an instrument then God will get mad if we do use one. There were some of us who even wondered if clapping while we sing was wrong? Maybe if we made sounds with our voices that sounded like instruments (a popular thing to do in the early 1980's in our tradition) we were going too far?

That was the argument. And when I was just starting out as a young man I accepted it. I mean, what did I know? These people who were telling me this had been doing this for a lot longer than I had. And instrumental worship was just the tip of the ice berg. Baptism, the end times, women's roles in the church, drinking alcohol, watching TV, going to movies, playing little league baseball, celebrating Christmas & Easter... we had a rule that made very little sense along with a complicated explanation/argument to back it up (sort of) for all of these things.

Then I took a group of teens to a youth gathering at a friend's church one Sunday night. We were going to go to church with them and then have a bon fire/volleyball night afterwards. All I remember from that night was the sermon the preacher gave. He talked about the Pharisees (we dealt with the story yesterday so I'm not going to go into as much detail today) and how they accused Jesus of breaking the law. Like I said yesterday, I always thought Jesus was breaking the law... but since He was Jesus He could get away with it whereas we can't.

But that night the preacher showed me something I had never noticed before... in Mark 7:

Jesus replied, "You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you, for he wrote, 'These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship is a farce, for they teach man-made ideas as commands from God.' For you ignore God's law and substitute your own tradition." Mark 7:5-8

I. WAS. STUNNED.

Jesus was saying to the Pharisees, I'm not breaking God's laws... I'm breaking your silly explanations/arguments about what that law means. And I am not going to be bound by your silly interpretations of God's law. The Pharisees were taking one of God's actual laws like the second commandment:

Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work; but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord God; in it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your manservant, or your maidservant, or your cattle, or the sojourner who is within your gates; for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and hallowed it.

That was God's law. Then the Pharisees came along and described what constitutes work. They said you couldn't walk more than a half mile on the sabbath. They said you can't heal on the sabbath. They said you can't pluck grains of wheat while walking through a wheat field and eat if you're hungry on the sabbath. And anytime Jesus did one of these things (which He did all the time... especially healing on the sabbath) they accused Him of breaking the law.

But it turns out... He wasn't.

I realized I was doing the same thing as the Pharisees. With instrumental music, with baptism (we don't have time to get into that right now ;o), with Christmas and Easter and what women could/couldn't do in church...

I told people that if they used instruments in their worship services then they were breaking the law... they were making God mad... and they would go to Hell (yes... I actually said those words out loud... many, many times). They would always ask why I thought that? Because of Ephesians 5:18-19 of course. It says make music in your heart... not with an instrument. They'd always say, "but it doesn't say you can't use an instrument..." But it didn't matter in my mind. I had interpreted Ephesians 5:18-19 and if they broke my interpretation then they were breaking God's law.

Or were they? Maybe they weren't. Maybe I was being a Pharisee. Maybe I was putting the same weight on my interpretation of God's word as God's word itself. I started to do my own research and study on that particular issue. Turns out one of the reformers in the 1500s (Zwingli was from Switzerland and was a musician himself) interpreted Ephesians 5:18-19 even stricter than I did... he looked at that scripture and reasoned that it didn't say to make music with your voice... but with your heart. Therefore, you could not sing out loud. You had to keep the music within your heart or you were a law breaker. Can you imagine a church service at Zwingli's church? Everyone open to page number 34... and let's begin (nothing but the sound of silence... people making music in their hearts).

I started talking with people in my tradition that I trusted and admired. I told them about Zwingli's interpretation that not only could an instrument not be used but you couldn't even sing out loud. You know what response I got every time?

"That's ridiculous!"

I agreed. But wasn't it just as ridiculous for us to take that same verse and claim that we could use our voices but to go any further was going to anger God so much that it was a matter of Heaven and Hell?

Nope. That's not ridiculous at all. Our interpretation is correct. Everyone else's is wrong. That's why we will be the only ones in Heaven. Everyone else who believes differently will go to Hell.

Now please don't get me wrong... I'm not saying it's wrong to sing acappella. If that's what you want to do to honor God then by all means... sing acappella. The problem comes when we start pointing out fingers at others whose interpretation of how to live a life that honors God is different and bind out interpretations on them. I did a lot of that as a young man... I'm done with that now.

Now I hold on loosely to my interpretations and understanding of the Bible. Not because I don't believe the Bible... I absolutely do. I doubt my own ability to always accurately interpret what it means. When I look back over the last 30 years of my life with God and His Word I see how my maturity (or lack thereof) impacts my interpretation of the scriptures. I keep doing my best but the older I get the less sure I become of just about everything except for Jesus Himself. Through all of it He has been the constant... guiding me through the pitfalls and snares I seem to fall so easily into.

How about you? Got any pharisaical tendencies/beliefs? Are you holding on tightly to your interpretations of the scriptures and using that interpretation to judge/condemn others? More on the Pharisees tomorrow.

Thursday: Jesus replied, "You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you, for he wrote, 'These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me'" Mark 7:6-8 (NLT)

Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it. Proverbs 4:23 (NIV)

Reflection: We've been talking about the Pharisees this week and how conscientiously they observed the external letter of the law. But they had one major problem with Jesus. It wasn't that they were too serious about applying the law of God to their own lives. It was that they missed the point of what the law was really all about.

The law was nothing more than a vehicle to draw the human heart closer to the heart of God. Every provision, every command, every guideline exists to make us more like our Creator. And since the Pharisees missed that... they had missed everything as far as Jesus was concerned.

See... the point of external compliance is to develop a heart that is in step with God's heart. He is generous to us... He wants us to learn to be generous too. The external law of tithing

was a way of God teaching us to be generous too. But the Pharisees turned it into something else... they turned it into a way to show God how good they were at following the rules and they created loopholes that drove God nuts... but they were loopholes that completely missed the spirit of the law. It created stingy, greedy people filled with self righteous, smug superiority.

The law was never meant to do that... what it is supposed to do is bring freedom by developing within us a heart that beats with God's heart. I have grown to love this verse:

I run in the path of your commands, for you have set my heart free. Psalm 119:32 (NIV)

Growing up I NEVER would have put "freedom" and "God's Commands" in the same sentence together. I thought God's commands were there to hedge me in. To put me in a sort of religious prison cell where people were safe and didn't have to worry about going to the hell, but they couldn't have any fun either. All the fun was being had outside the constraints of religion (at least that's what I thought then). The only truly free people in this life were doing all the forbidden fun stuff and the prisoners of religion were trapped in church... the only silver lining was that in eternity the roles would be reversed.

So when I was old enough I broke out. I thought I was running to freedom but it turned out I wasn't. The day soon came when the very thing that represented freedom to me, enslaved me. I was no longer free... what I was doing was no longer fun.

Like I said earlier, I never would have put freedom and God's commands in the same sentence... but I would now. It was God's way of living life that allowed me to break free from the slavery of addiction. I see now that when God tells us to stay away from certain behaviors, attitudes, thoughts and actions it's not to keep us from having fun... it's to keep us free.

And when we run in the path of God's commands... it not only brings freedom but it develops within us a heart that beats with God's heart. It draws us closer to Him. The Pharisees missed that. Consequently, God's laws made their hearts cold and stony.

What's the moral of all this? Do your best to understand God's plans for your life. Do your best to live a life that honors Him in how you act, how you think, how you live. Apply His plan to your life the way you see Him asking you to apply it. But be very careful in how you treat others that apply His plan for their lives differently than you do.

Friday: Then Jesus took them through the writings of Moses and all the prophets, explaining from all the Scriptures the things concerning himself. Luke 24:27 (NLT)

Then he said, "When I was with you before, I told you that everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and in the Psalms must be fulfilled." Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures. Luke 24:44-45 (NLT)

Reflection: Yesterday we talked about how the purpose of the Bible is to develop within us the heart of Jesus. The big problem Jesus had with the Pharisees was that the scriptures didn't reveal the heart of God in their lives. Not in the way they saw God, not in the way they treated others, not even in the way they saw and treated themselves.

As it turns out... the Bible has a beating heart. I love what Hebrews 4:20 says,

"For whatever God says to us is full of living power: it is sharper than the sharpest dagger, cutting swift and deep into our innermost thoughts and desires with all their parts, exposing us for what we really are." Hebrews 4:12 (TLB)

The Bible is more than a book. It is more than just words on a page. It is the only book ever written where the author is in love with the reader. It was written over a period of 1,600 years by 40 different authors. God spoke wisdom and truth into the hearts of farmers, peasants, kings, warriors, fisherman, doctors, lawyers, shepherds & priests. He decided to make Himself known through this amazing book and in so doing He changed the course of all of human history. The Bible is truly a book unlike none other. But even this unique book could never accurately convey to human beings Who their Creator is and How the words He gave them should be interpreted.

So He sent His Son to show us.

It is true that Jesus' number one priority on this earth was to live the life we could never live and die the death we should have died. He came to this earth and passed every test that we humans had failed. Failures documented quite clearly in the pages of both the Old and New Testaments. And because of He passed all of those tests He deserved an amazing reward. But what did He get? He took the penalty we deserved and now we get to share in the reward He earned.

But closely following that all important mission objective was to show us the very heart of God. To show us how God would handle the commandments and rules and guidelines handed down in the pages of the Old Testament. And as it turns out, the way God viewed those commands, rules and guidelines was completely different than any human would have imagined. How is that possible?

Because Jesus was able to do something nobody else ever could... whenever He looked at the law He always found the path of mercy and grace even for those who were law breakers. The woman caught in adultery in John chapter 8 seems like a straightforward case. The law says she's guilty, she was caught in the very act, so is she guilty?

Jesus says, "yes".

Should she be punished (which the law quite clearly seems to say she should be)?

Jesus says, "no".

Huh? Why not? Seems pretty straight forward to me (turns out it wasn't but it took Jesus to show us that). You see, Jesus was the missing part of interpreting the scriptures. He is the heart that beats within the pages of the best selling book of all time, the best selling book of every year. And without a proper understanding of Jesus and how He handled the scriptures and how He viewed His Father and how He treated people we will never be able to accurately interpret the meaning of the Bible.

Look at what He says after His resurrection. He spent 3 1/2 years with the apostles. He told them over and over again that He would be handed over to the religious leaders, tried,

executed and buried. He said He would be raised to life after three days so don't be troubled or afraid. But did the apostles get it? No. Were they troubled and afraid as the very thing He said was going to happen, happened? That would an understatement (although to be fair, who could blame them? I don't think I'd have done half as well as they did).

But after His resurrection when He saw them again and they still didn't get it, what did He do? He went back into the Old Testament, to the law of Moses, the Psalms and the prophets and He pointed out everything that was there, in the pages of the Bible, about Himself.

Then Jesus took them through the writings of Moses and all the prophets, explaining from all the Scriptures the things concerning himself. Luke 24:27 (NLT)

And suddenly it was all a lot clearer to them. It turns out, that without a proper understanding of Who Jesus is, the Bible is impossible to understand. If you try to read the pages of the Old Testament without the foundation and understanding of Who Jesus is, how He say His Father and how He treated people the Bible will always be a crushing, defeating, frustrating, confusing book.

So for goodness sake, never start with the Old Testament when reading the Bible. Start with the gospels. Matthew, Mark, Luke & John. And when you get done reading them, start all over again. Become so familiar with Jesus (His life, actions, thoughts, the stories He told that were a snapshot into the heart of God, the way He treated people, who He got frustrated with, who He was merciful to...) that when you read something in the Old Testament or in the pages of the New Testament that doesn't make sense you can easily stop and ask yourself, "how would Jesus handle this situation?"

Let's face it, there are a lot of things in the Bible that when you read them you just say, huh? What's up with that? I don't get it? That doesn't seem like something God would do? Why does it say that? What do I do with that? When that happens always default back to Jesus. And if looking at that scripture through the lens of Jesus' life and teaching on this earth still doesn't make what you're reading clear then move on and figure either He'll make it plain to you later. But never stray from your number one goal in life, learning to imitate Jesus. In how He saw His Father, in how He treated other people... and let that spill over into how you see yourself and how you treat yourself. You will never go wrong defaulting to the image and imitation of Jesus in your life. It turns out it's what the entire Bible is about... whether you knew it or not.

PS: If you have a tough time seeing Jesus in the pages of the Old Testament do yourself a favor and read the Jesus Storybook Bible by Sally Lloyd-Jones. I love the tag line of the book- Every Story Whispers His Name. It's a bit elementary in the way the stories are told (it is a children's storybook Bible after all) but she does what I consider to be a masterful job of weaving Jesus into the stories of the Old Testament in a way that will make understanding the Bible a lot easier for children (even big kids like you and me ;o)