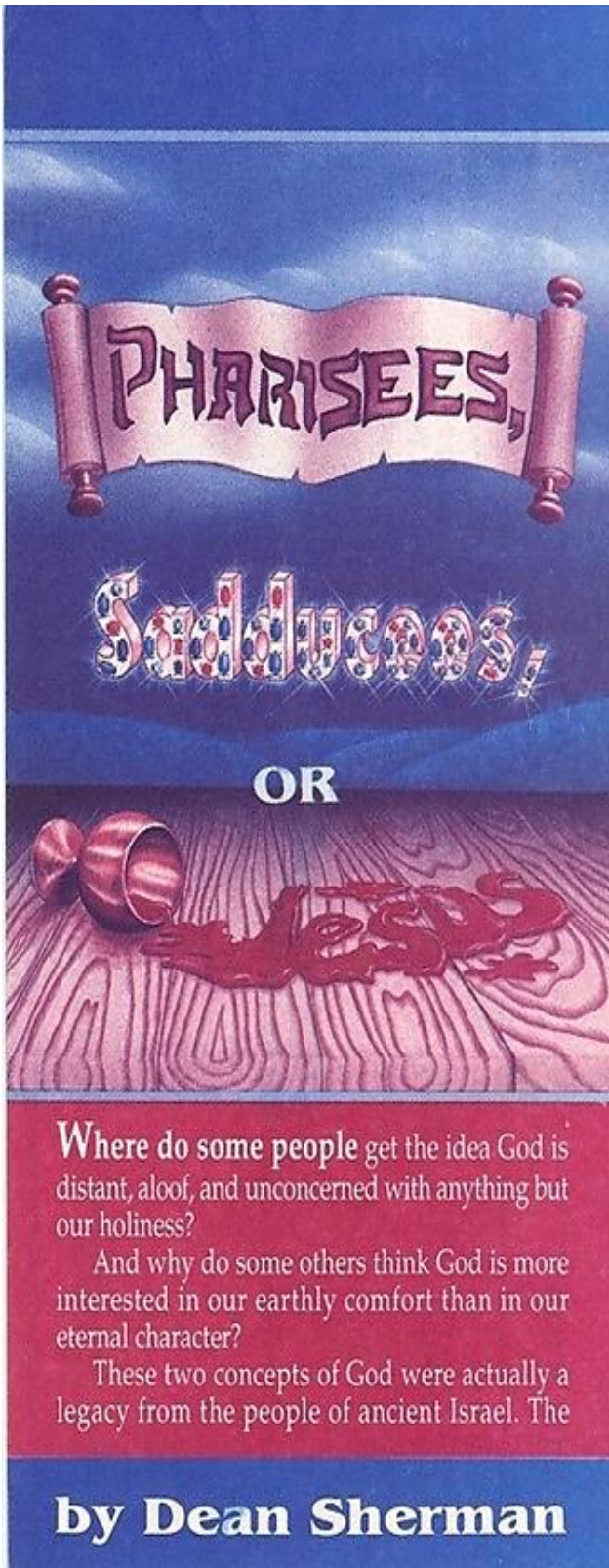




Pharisees, Sadducees, or Jesus

By Dean Sherman

And why do some others think God is more interested in our earthly comfort than in our eternal character?

These two concepts of God were actually a legacy from the people of ancient Israel. The Pharisees preached a God of judgment and wrath, whereas the Sadducees worshipped a God of pomp and circumstance. Two thousand years ago, the Jewish people were hopelessly locked into a religion made up of these two radical extremes.

But when Jesus arrived on the scene, something incredible took place. Not only did He free men from the law of sin and death, He also set people free from the religious seesaw they'd been chained to by the Pharisees and Sadducees. He gave the human race something they'd been lacking for a long, long time: an accurate picture of what God is really like.

Who Were The Pharisees?

Let's look at the Pharisees - a group of men balanced on one end of this religious seesaw. The most important thing you need to remember about the Pharisees is that they were truly men of the Word. These men committed to memory all 39 books of the Old Testament, including the full texts of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Deuteronomy!

But despite all their knowledge, they missed Jesus. They were committed to the truth of God yet they somehow missed the living *Christ* walking right beside them in the streets of Jerusalem. They missed Jesus because of the attitude in which they held truth. The Bible talks in Ephesians 4:15 about "*speaking the truth in love.*" Although the Pharisees excelled in "truth," they fell sadly short when it came to love.

The Pharisees were harsh. They continually misrepresented God as a "can't wait to rain fire and brimstone on you" type of deity. They were men that Jesus said would strain at a gnat, but then swallow a camel. In other words, they *major*ed on *minor* points. They made a big deal about things that really didn't matter. They were committed to truth at any cost, and they didn't care who they destroyed in order to protect that truth.

Even the disciples battled that attitude. When Samaritans in a certain town refused to receive Jesus, two disciples went to Him and said, "*Lord, do You want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?*" (Luke 9:54) But Jesus answered, "*You do not know what kind of spirit you are of; for the Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them.*" (Luke 9:55-56)

I don't know exactly what to call that spirit, but it's still alive in America today. Remember when heretics were burned at the stake during the Middle Ages? Well it isn't socially acceptable to burn people at the stake today, so now we just write books against them! Call it what you will, friends, but I call that a pharisaical spirit.

And that spirit is widespread in the body of Christ right now. There are books being written today on things that *really don't matter*. It just is not that big a deal to prove yourself right on minor points of theology when billions of people are

perishing without Jesus!

But the Pharisees taught us all a valuable lesson:

that it is entirely possible to be committed to the truth of the Word, and yet not be walking in the greatest of all God's commandments - love.

Who Were The Sadducees?

In contrast, the Sadducees were a very wealthy group of guys who sat around and dialogued on philosophical ideas - sort of a wealthy and powerful men's

club. They had a "let's not rock the boat" mentality which caused them to live a life of compromise.

They were the ones who held most of the power - and all of the money. They were more concerned with outward appearance than with eternal values. A Sadducee's reputation in society was more important to him than a personal relationship with God.

If you look at the Body of Christ today, you'll see we have both Pharisees and Sadducees resident in abundance. We have people who will kill you for what they consider to be "incorrect doctrine." And then we have others saying, "Hey, let's just embrace everything and reach the lowest common denominator. If you sin a little, what difference does it make? We're just human after all!"

Well, 2,000 years ago Jesus Christ walked right into the middle of this same religious situation. Here was God in human form, walking upon the earth for the first and only time in history - and guess what? He was not a Pharisee or a Sadducee!

God's True Representative

Before Jesus came on the scene, there was *no* accurate representation of God. God had been misrepresented by the legalism of the Pharisees, and His character had been watered down by the compromising philosophy of the Sadducees. You might think, "What a sad situation those people must have been in!" But, I'm sorry to say, many Christians today are in that same situation.

The Body of Christ is plagued by extremes. Sometimes new Christians who've just come out of sinful lifestyles tend to be hard-line and Pharisee-like. Or young people who have come to Christ after being raised in a harsh or legalistic home may tend more towards being like the Sadducees: "Hey, everything's cool. Let's just get rid of all the nuclear warheads and fundamentalists - then we can fully enjoy the earth experience."

The Pharisees and Sadducees were the opposite extremes - but is it *possible* to hate sin and not be a Pharisee? Is it *possible* to be compassionate and not compromise like the Sadducees? YES! It must be possible - because Jesus did it! He is our perfect example. He hated sin yet majored in love and compassion. And He never compromised. He was never a Pharisee, and never a Sadducee. He was the true representation of the character of God.

The Unchangeable Character Of God

Many times we interpret God's character on the basis of what we think or what we've experienced in our own lives. But here's a little principle to keep in mind: never interpret God by circumstances. Always interpret circumstances in the light of what you *know* the unchangeable character of God to be.

Let's take a look at Matthew 9:9-13: *"And as Jesus passed on from there, He saw a man, called Matthew, sitting in the tax office; and He said to him, 'Follow Me!' And he rose, and followed Him.*

"And it happened that as He was reclining at the table in the house, behold many tax-gatherers and sinners came and were dining with Jesus and His disciples.

"And when the Pharisees saw this, they said to His disciples, 'why is your Teacher eating with the tax-gatherers and sinners?'

"But when He heard this, He said, 'It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick. But go and learn what this means, 'I desire compassion, and not sacrifice,' for I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners.'"

Now Jesus Christ did some pretty unusual things. First of all, He called Matthew, a hated tax collector, to be His disciple. Not only did He call him, He went to eat at his house!

Think about Jesus, the holiest man who ever graced a human body, eating with tax collectors and notorious sinners. That would be today's equivalent of Jesus sharing a pizza with drug dealers and pimps! But Jesus gained this reputation for being the friend of sinners, and the Bible says they came to eat with Him. He didn't have to persuade them to come, they just enjoyed being near Him.

Today, if you walk out on the streets of any city in this nation and ask non believers what they think about Christians, you'll usually get a response like, "They're self-righteous and legalistic. They stab each other in the back." *But Jesus wasn't like that!* He couldn't have been, otherwise sinners wouldn't have come near Him! Jesus was every thing the Pharisees *claimed* to be, yet sinners liked to be around Him.

Do sinners like to be around us? It's easy to be loving at church, but could we sit at the same table with a pimp or a drug dealer? It's a hard call, friends - but Jesus did just that. And the fragrance of Christ overwhelmed the stench of sin.

Jesus Was Not Threatened By Sinners

Jesus absolutely hated sin, but isn't it interesting that He was relaxed in the presence of sinners? This is almost impossible for us to imagine! The "norm" for Christians has too often been to totally withdraw from the world for fear of it wearing us down or overwhelming us. We've repeated that behavior over and over again in church history, even to the point where believers have totally withdrawn themselves from the world in order to be free of its stain. Strangely enough, Jesus Christ (who is in *you*, by the way!) never had to do that.

Jesus' response to humanity was to show compassion. Everything He did in the Gospels was to exemplify the Father (John 14:9) and to serve the needs of

humanity. This is portrayed in John 13:3-5 when Jesus washed the disciples' feet during Passover. The disciples had a hard time grasping what Jesus was doing when He took off His outer garment (which basically meant He stripped down to His underwear!), girded Himself with a towel, filled a basin with water, knelt down and started washing their feet.

Now you may not be able to sense the intense emotion of this moment but you ought to see the eyes of people when I teach this message in Thailand! In the Oriental culture, the foot is the lowest part of the body - the dirtiest and most unmentionable part. Do you get the picture? Now let's go back into the room and watch as this man stands in His underwear, fills a basin with water, kneels down, and starts washing feet. This is Jesus - the One who walks on water, raises the dead, heals blind eyes, and multiplies a boy's lunch to feed 5,000. This is the eternal Messiah who is going to rule the universe forever! How could He pull a stunt like this?

Peter wouldn't let Jesus touch his feet because the only people who ever touched feet in that culture were slaves! By washing Peter's feet Jesus wasn't just teaching servanthood and total loss of reputation -He was fully *identifying* Himself with the lowest human beings on the social ladder.

Jesus knelt down and held in his hands one of the dirtiest and most unmentionable parts of a human being - then He washed it clean. Many people probably thought, "Holy men don't touch feet! There's no way anybody's ever going to think He's the Son of God now!"

Jesus knew He was blowing their neat concept of holiness, yet He simply acted with compassion in response to a human need. Friends, if we do not meet the needs of humanity, who cares if there is Christianity? Who cares if there is a church on every corner? Jesus Himself reminded us in Matthew 9:13: "*I desire compassion and not sacrifice...*" Have we really grasped what Jesus was saying here? Why are so many of us still concentrating on how "sold out" and spiritual *we* can be - even if that has nothing to do with compassionate concern for the needs of other human beings?

Jesus Is Secure

Jesus was always compassionate - and always holy But how was He able to sit at the same table with tax-collectors without fear of compromising His holiness? How was He able to sit relaxed among sinners without falling apart?

Jesus could sit with sinners, hating their *sin*, but not be threatened by them as people. He could have compassion on them, and not compromise on truth - because *He was secure!* And Jesus drew that security from three things He knew about Himself:

1. Jesus knew He was from the Father, and His identity was in the Father. He said, "*...the Son can do nothing of Himself, unless it is something He sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, these things the Son also does in like manner.*" (John 5:19) If your identity is in *anything* other than the Father, you will be insecure. If your identity is in your ministry, your church, your job, your abilities and talents, or even in your doctrine - I can promise your security will be threatened.

Did doctrine matter to Jesus Christ? of course it did! But somehow He was different from the "doctrinal killers" called the Pharisees. Jesus believed the same Bible verses they believed, but with one remarkable difference: the Pharisees and Sadducees knew *about* God, but Jesus knew the *Father*. He was not frightened or threatened by the thought of losing anything here on earth, because His security came from knowing that He Himself was *in* the Father.

2. Jesus knew He was going back to the Father. He was motivated by eternal values. What will be important in the light of eternity? Try and live your life with that thought in mind. Things that seem like a big deal to us now will not seem nearly as big in ten million years. Ten million years from now we're going to be terribly embarrassed that we let so many little things ruin our peace of mind!

3. Jesus knew that the Father had given all things into His hands. He was here to die on a cross and save the human race from eternal damnation. He never let that thought stray from His mind. He had a purpose and a sense of being.

Friends, when are we going to be convinced that God has given us incredible purpose here on earth? We are the people God has commissioned and ordained to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. We're the ones He has chosen to pray His Kingdom come and the will of God to be done on earth as it is in heaven. We are the people of God, folks, and we can take *security* from the fact that we are ordained of God.

The God Of All Comfort

In 2 Corinthians 1:3 it says, "*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort.*" He is not only God, but He's also the Father - the Father of all comfort. Not only does God save, not only does God speak - He comforts us.

We need to be comforted by God *daily* in our spirit and in our emotions. If we do not receive comfort from God the Father, we will seek false comfort. fleshly indulgences are simply false comforts. Self-discipline may lead you to give up two or three bad habits, but if you're not being comforted by the Father, fleshly indulgences will simply break out in other areas. We know that smoking, drinking, and illicit sex are false comforts, but do you realize that gossip and criticism are in that same category?

Ever notice how relieved you feel when you've unloaded anger on someone? You think, "Well, at least I got that off my chest. I feel good now!" That's the false comfort the Pharisees lived by. They were comforted by their self-righteous anger. And friend, if you're not being comforted by the Father in your emotional life, and if your Christianity is just a "belief," you're in danger of turning into a Pharisee or a Sadducee.

If you're not being comforted by the Lord, I guarantee you will seek comfort from another source. If you are a harsh, "kill-you-for-the-Word" Pharisee,

the uncomforted desert in your heart is simply blowing dust straight out of your mouth. Have you ever heard someone say, "How can such a man of God, so committed to the Lord, go out and blast someone like that?"

Friends, it's not a mystery to me at all! Those whose emotional lives are a desert will always show forth either harshness or compromise. These are uncomforted individuals who, despite their outward form of godliness, have no real relationship with the Father. Jesus called these Pharisees *"whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness."* (Matt. 23:27)

The *only* way to be like Jesus Christ and to let the true Jesus within you shine forth is to let the Father comfort your heart in every area of your life. When you find yourself acting in a harsh, unloving manner, or when you feel yourself tempted to compromise, that's when you need to look to God and say, "Father, I need Your comfort right here and now!"

Daily Dependence On God

Christianity was never meant to be anything other than a daily dependence upon the Lord Jesus Christ. It's not designed to pump up your spiritual muscles so that you get so strong nothing bothers you - that's pride! Being strong in the Lord simply means, "I depend on You, Lord, and I need Your comfort - *right now*."

But I think what we *really* want is to be so strong in the Lord and so filled with His Word that we don't need God anymore!

Think about it - isn't that true? We want to be so strong in the Lord that we become spiritual athletes able to leap tall churches in a single bound!

Well, let me tell you the truth: that will never happen. What God really wants us to be is children who say, "Father, I am in an intense situation here. I need Your comfort to sustain me, or I'm not going to make it."

That's not weakness - it's dependence! And Jesus was our shining example of a man fully dependent on the comfort of the Father.

Will The Real Jesus Please Stand Up?

Most of us have never shown this planet who Jesus really is: a totally pure and holy man who was so *secure* in the Father and so *motivated by love* that He wasn't afraid to dine with sinners. Instead of wrapping Jesus in the clothing of a harsh Pharisee or a compromising Sadducee, we need to throw off those misrepresentations and let the true, living Christ shine forth from our lives.

I remember the first time I went to see the movie "Ben Hur." Although Jesus was an important part of the story, you never really saw Him on the screen. But every once in a while the camera would focus in on one of the characters, and just by the look on their face you knew the Son of God had just passed by.

Believe me, when the love and righteousness of God in human form passes by - *everyone* notices. It's a moment they'll never forget.

What kind of look crosses the faces of sinners when they encounter us? Are we reflecting religious pride, worldly compromise - or are we reflecting the unconditional love of Christ?

We need to throw off the proud robe that is the mark of a Pharisee. Get rid of the rich outer garments that identify the Sadducee. Let's ask the Lord for the courage to throw off these trappings and kneel down to wash the feet of sinful men. My friends, it's not too late. Let's set our hearts to be like Jesus.

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