

Is it “Pharisaical” to Endorse the Keeping of the Law?

When a Christian endorses the keeping of God’s law, he is oftentimes labeled by critics as being “Pharisaical.” Such critics realize that Christ repeatedly condemned the Pharisees, but they believe that one of the main *reasons* He condemned them was because they kept God’s law.

Most everyone knows that the Pharisees are criticized in the New Testament for being “hypocrites.” Yet, in *addition* to their being hypocrites, many people believe that the New Testament *also* criticizes the Pharisees for keeping the law.

Actually, *just the opposite is true!* Jesus Christ sternly rebuked the Pharisees for **not** keeping God’s law! He condemned them for being *full of lawlessness!* Speaking to the Pharisees, Christ exclaimed, “...you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and **lawlessness**” (Matt. 23:28). Christ further rebuked them, on another occasion, by asking, “Why do you also **transgress the commandment of God** because of your tradition?” (Matt. 15:3). Christ said that the Pharisees were “full of extortion” (Matt. 23:25) ---and we know that “extortion” is *contrary* to God’s law. He also said that they had the same *murderous* spirit of their forbearers who had slain God’s prophets: “you are witnesses against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets” (verse 31).

Let’s now ask the question, “What *is* righteousness?” The Bible shows that the keeping of God’s *commandments* is righteousness! “...all Your commandments **are** righteousness” (Ps. 119:172). The same thing is shown in the *New Testament*---as “lawlessness” and “the righteous” are starkly *contrasted* with *each other* in Matt. 13:41-43.

So, with this understanding that *the keeping of God’s commandments is “righteousness,”* notice what Christ said to those who would be His followers: “...unless your righteousness [your commandment keeping] **exceeds** the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means *enter* the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5:20).

Pharisaical

Let’s now consider where Christ condemned the Pharisees for their propensity to “...strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!” (Matt. 23:24). Why did Christ characterize them this way? Most people would say it was because of their “law-keeping” that He said this. Yet, we’ve already seen that Christ did *not* condemn them for law-keeping---rather, He condemned them for *not* keeping God’s law. So, why did Christ say that they would “strain out a gnat and swallow a camel”?

It was because the Pharisees strove to give the *appearance* of being righteous through their *meticulous* observance of many **man-made** restrictions which had been wrongly **added to** God’s spiritual law. For instance, among these *man-made additions* were some 65 do’s and don’ts concerning Sabbath keeping! (See “Is God’s Law ‘Bondage’ and a ‘Heavy Burden’?”)

Notice now Christ’s condemnation of the Pharisees regarding these “traditions of the elders” and “commandments of men”: “...the *Pharisees* and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands **in a special way**, holding **the tradition of the elders**. When they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash. And there are many other things which they have received and hold, like the washing of cups, pitchers, copper vessels, and couches. Then the Pharisees and scribes asked Him [Christ], ‘Why

do Your disciples not walk according to **the tradition of the elders**, but eat bread with unwashed hands?’ He answered and said to them, ‘Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written: “This people honors Me with their lips, But their heart is far from Me. And in *vain* they worship Me, **Teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.**” **For laying aside the commandment of God, you hold the tradition of men**—the washing of pitchers and cups, and *many other* such things you do.’ He said to them, ‘All too well **you reject the commandment of God, that you may keep your tradition.** For Moses said, “Honor your father and your mother”; and, “He who curses father or mother, let him be put to death.” But you say, “If a man says to his father or mother, ‘Whatever profit you might have received from me is Corban’---“ (that is, a gift to God), then you no longer let him do anything for his father or his mother, **making the word of God of no effect through your tradition** which you have handed down. And *many* such things you do”” (Mark 7:3-13).

By their meticulous keeping of these man-made traditions, and by their hypocritical ways, the Pharisees strove to *appear* righteous---although they weren’t! “For *they loved the praise of men* more than the praise of God” (John 12:43). “**But all their works they do to be seen by men.** They make their phylacteries broad and enlarge the borders of their garments. They love the best places at feasts, the best seats in the synagogues, greetings in the marketplaces, *and to be called by men, ‘Rabbi, Rabbi’* (Matt. 23: 5-7). Christ said that is was “*for a pretense*” that they made *long* prayers (verse 14). In His continued rebuke, Christ declared, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! *For you cleanse the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of extortion and self-indulgence.... For you are like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness.* Even so you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and **lawlessness**” (verses 25-28).

Conclusion

As we have seen, it is totally *untrue* that the Pharisees were criticized in the New Testament for keeping God’s law. In fact, they were repeatedly criticized by Christ for *not* keeping God’s law! Therefore, it is absolutely erroneous to label someone as “Pharisaical” for endorsing God’s law!