

Jesus And The Pharisees

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Primary Texts: Matthew 11:25-12:45, 15:1-20, 21:33-23:39

Introduction:

I. The Pharisees

A. The significance of the name is obscure.

1. “Pharisee” represents Greek φαρισαῖος (*pharisaios*), plural φαρισαῖοι, from Hebrew (plural) *perûšîm* or *perûšîn* or Aramaic *perišayya’*
2. The Hebrew forms are from the root פָּרַשׁ (*prš*)
 - a. *pāraš* can mean “declare” or “make distinct” i.e., “make clear,” as in Numbers 15:34, “They put him in custody, because it had not *been made clear* what should be done to him” (ESV).
 - b. According to TNDT, “*prš*... in Middle Hbr. in the q and pi means not only ‘to separate’ but ‘to separate oneself.’” (TDNT, 9:13)
 - 1) I assume q and pi mean Qal and Pi’el. (But to be sure, ask someone who knows—not me!)
3. One theory is that while some derided the movement that became the Pharisees as “separatists,” they themselves embraced the label as a reference to their “making clear” the law, seeing themselves as “the exponents” of the law. (TWOT, 740)
 - 1) Neh. 8:8 is cited as an example of the word being used with the possible meaning “translating.” Cf. Ezra 4:18 where the Aramaic פִּרְשָׁא *p^oraš* is translated “plainly read” in the ESV. (TWOT, 740)
 - 2) This theory has the appeal of being consistent with Josephus’ characterization of the Pharisees as the “most accurate interpreters of the laws” (BJ ii.162)
4. Then again, they may have styled themselves “separatists,” aspiring to follow in the steps of the Chasidim, who most likely were the antecedents of the Pharisees.
 - a. According to Jeremias, “their name means ‘the separate ones’, i.e., the holy ones, the true community of Israel.” (Jeremias, 246)
 - b. Jeremias cites Baeck as giving “convincing proof” of separateness as the significance of the term Pharisee based on the use of *pārūs* and *qādōš* (“holy”) as synonyms in the Tannaitic *madrishim*. (Jeremias 246 n. 2; 249)

B. Their History

1. The Chasidim were allied with the Hasmoneans in the days of Mattathias and Judas.
2. However, the Chasidim did not accept Jonathan’s taking the role of high priest because he was not a descendent of Zadok. (Jonathan was the son of Mattathias, brother of Judas)
3. Over the next decades the Chasidim sometimes opposed the Hasmoneans, and sometimes supported them.
4. The Pharisees seem to have grown out of the Chasidim movement.

C. Their Society

1. “The Pharisaic communities of Jerusalem...had strict rules of admission, which again show their character as a close society.” (Jeremias, 251)
2. Before admission there was a period of probation, one month or one year, during which the postulant had to prove his ability to follow the ritual laws.” (*Ibid.*)

D. Their Character

1. Josephus’ characterizations of the Pharisees are very positive.
 - a. They are the “most accurate interpreters of the laws.” (*BJ* ii.162)
 - b. They are the “leading sect.” (*BJ* ii.162)
 - c. Regarding free will, Josephus characterized their view in terms that his audience would see as similar to the Stoics, while the view of the Sadducees was represented in terms the audience would see as similar to that of the Epicureans. (*BJ* ii.162-165, cf. *Ant* xviii.12 n. b; *Vita* 12)
 - 1) Knowling described the Stoic and Epicurean respectively as “the Pharisee and Sadducee of the world of philosophy.” (Knowling, 366)
 - 2) The Stoic, “wrapped up in the cloak of his own virtue he justified, at least from an ethical point of view, the description which classed him as the Pharisee of Greek philosophy.” (*Ibid.*)
 - d. They were “affectionate to each other.” (*BJ* ii.166)
 - e. They “cultivate harmonious relations with the community.” (*BJ* ii.166)
 - f. Contrast the foregoing with Josephus’ description of Sadducees: “The Sadducees, on the contrary, are, even among themselves, rather boorish in their behaviour, and in their intercourse with their peers are as rude as to aliens.” (*BJ* ii.166)
 - g. Many believe Josephus himself was a Pharisee.
 - 1) Josephus wrote, “Being now in my nineteenth year I began to govern my life by the rules of the Pharisees, a sect having points of resemblance to that which the Greeks call the Stoic school.” (*Vita*, 12)
2. NT characterizations of Pharisees are mostly negative.
 - a. They are “lovers of Money.” (Luke 16:14)
 - b. They are “hypocrites” (Mt 23)
 - c. They (along with Sadducees) are “offspring of vipers.” (Mt 3:7)
 - d. They “trusted in themselves that they were righteous.” (Luke 18:9ff)
 - e. There is a trend in scholarship to view the NT negative portrayal of the Pharisees as overly harsh and too broadly brushed.
 - 1) In fact, the NT makes note of Pharisees who became believers.
 - a) Nicodemus (John 3:1)
 - b) Saul of Tarsus (Acts 23:6; 26:5; Phil. 3:5)
 - c) There were those “of the sect of the Pharisees who believed.” (Acts 15:5)
 - 2) The NT acknowledges some among the Pharisees who saw Jesus’ signs as evidence of his righteousness.

- a) John 9:16, “Therefore *some of the Pharisees* were saying, “This man is not from God, because He does not keep the Sabbath.” *But others* were saying, “How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?”
 - b) The natural inference is that the “others” mentioned in John 9:16 were other Pharisees.
- 3) I think part of what lies behind criticism of the NT portrayal is that our culture is overly sensitive about generalizations.
- a) Paul generalized: “One of them, a prophet of their own, said, ‘Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons.’” (Titus 1:12)
 - 1. There is a logical problem if we take this to be literally true, without exception.
 - 2. Paul wrote this to Titus whom he left in Crete to appoint elders there, from among those who were “blameless”!
 - b) A generalization about a group of people becomes problematic when we prejudicially assume a given individual in the group necessarily conforms to the generalization.
 - 1. The generalization may be *generally* accurate but inapplicable in the case of an individual.
 - 2. Love requires that I see any given individual as an individual without assuming the generalization fits.
 - a. In Mark 12:34, Jesus could see something different in the scribe, who was a Pharisee (Mt 22:34-35), who had asked about the greatest commandment.
 - b. Jesus said, “You are not far from the kingdom of God,” a very different characterization compared to what Jesus said of the scribes and Pharisees generally (cf. Mt. 23:15, *etc.*)
 - 3. But love does not require that I be blind to general truths about cultures or populations.

Body:

I. Matthew 15

- A. Some find fault with Mark’s assertion that “all the Jews” followed the “tradition of the elders” regarding hand washing.
 - 1. *R T. France*: “The inclusion of πάντες οἱ ἰουδαῖοι in this description along with the Pharisees is more impressionistic than historically exact, since there is no evidence that the sort of precautions described were yet observed by Jews in general, if indeed they ever were.” (*France, Mark*, 281)
 - 2. Booth says Mark 7 “raises an acute conflict of evidence between the NT and the Talmud on at least one point of Jewish legal history... The Talmudic evidence as interpreted by Büchler indicates that only priests had cause so to wash, and only before eating holy food. Is, then, the statement in Mark inauthentic or inaccurate, or is the conclusion of Büchler, founded on Talmudic research, defective?” (*Booth*, 15)
- B. In response to this criticism, we should consider two factors: (1) The relevance of the Talmud as an accurate record of early first century practice, and (2) the degree to which Pharisaic standards influenced the whole population.

1. The relevance of the Talmud.
 - a. The Talmud, including the Mishna, was not put into writing until near the end of the second century.
 - b. In general, it may be supposed that what we see in the Talmud is an accurate representation of the *general character* of the traditions of the elders as they existed orally in the first half of the first century.
 - c. However, it cannot be said that every passage in the Talmud, including the *Mishna*, accurately reflects early first century practice.
 - 1) "...our knowledge of the state of Jewish law in the time of Jesus is limited. We know the state of the law in the fifth century BC when the Priestly Code was written, and we have a knowledge of its state at c. 200 AD when the Mishnah reached final form, but between these two poles we have to plot an uncertain course of development." (Booth, 14f)
 - 2) "It is a matter of extreme difficulty to decide what historical value we should attach to any tradition recorded in the Mishnah. The lapse of time which may have served to obscure or distort memories of times so different; the political upheavals, changes, and confusions brought about by two rebellions and two Roman conquests; the standards esteemed by the Pharisean party (whose opinions the Mishna records) which were not those of the Sadducean party (whose standards chiefly prevailed during the century before the destruction of Jerusalem)—these are factors which need to be given due weight in estimating the character of the Mishnah's statements. Moreover there is much in the contents of the Mishnah that moves in an atmosphere of academic discussion pursued for its own sake, with (so it would appear) little pretence at recording historical usage." (Danby, xiv-xv)
 - 3) See my comments on the gratuitous assumption that the Talmudic discussion of causes for divorce necessarily reflects a debate that existed between Hillel and Shammai in Jesus' time. (Smelser, 32)
2. The Pharisees' broad influence.
 - a. Josephus comments regarding the Sadducees yielding to Pharisaic norms:
 - 1) "For whenever they assume some office, though they submit unwillingly and per force, yet submit they do to the formulas of the Pharisees, since otherwise the masses would not tolerate them." (*Ant.* xviii 18)
 - 2) "And so great is their influence with the masses that even when they speak against a king or high priest, they immediately gain credence." (*Ant.* xiii 288)
 - 3) "...the Sadducees having the confidence of the wealthy alone but no following among the populace, while the Pharisees have the support of the masses." (*Ant.* xiii 298)
 - b. Talmudic evidence of Sadducees yielding to Pharisaic norms.
 - 1) Apparently, Pharisaic rules were that the incense was lit only after entering the sanctuary, whereas Sadducees thought the incense should be lit before entering the sanctuary.
 - 2) However, there is evidence of Sadducee capitulation on this point: "There was an incident involving a certain Sadducee who was appointed as High Priest, who prepared the incense outside and then brought it into the Holy of Holies. Upon his emergence he was overjoyed that he had succeeded. The

father of that Sadducee met him and said to him: My son, although we are Sadducees and you performed the service in accordance with our opinion, we fear the Pharisees and do not actually implement that procedure in practice.” (*Yoma* 19b)

- c. Even Jesus’ disciples seem to have been wary of offending the Pharisees. (Mt. 15:12)

C. We may also note that the Essenes also observed strict washing rules

1. They bathed their bodies before the midday meal, as well as the evening meal, if Josephus’ *δειπνοῦσι δ’ ὁμοίως* includes the preliminary procedure. (*BJ* ii.129-130)
2. If an Essene of senior status was touched by an Essene of lower status, he was required to bathe. (*BJ* ii.150)

D. So while it may be that evidence runs counter to the notion that “all the Jews” required the ritualistic hand washing mentioned by Mark, it could nonetheless be true that “all the Jews” felt pressure to conform to Pharisaic expectations on this point as well as others.

E. In any event, Mark’s statement regarding the practice of “all the Jews” should be accepted as the most contemporaneous and best evidence we have.

F. “Corban”

1. The Mishna has a lengthy discussion that begins with the formulas for declaring something “Corban.”
 - a. Synonymous terms are explained: “If a man said to his fellow, *Konam* or *Konah* or *Konas*, these are substitutes for *Korban*, an Offering.” (*Nedarim* 1.2)
 - b. Designating something in this manner constitutes a vow such that the thing is “forbidden to him for common use as a Temple offering.” (Danby, 264, n. 6)
 - c. “In rabbinic literature the term recurs frequently as a formula used when making an offering (whether of food, money, or property), as a result of which the thing dedicated becomes unavailable for normal use; in practice the formula seems to have been used primarily for the negative purpose of excluding a particular person from the use of the property.” (France, *Mark*, 286)
 - d. The Mishna indicates some diversity of opinion among the rabbis regarding a potential conflict between such a vow and one’s duty to father and mother under the fifth commandment.
 - 1) In the following passage, “they may open for men the way” seems to be a phrase meaning, “relieve him of his obligation under a foolish, now regretted, vow.”
 - 2) “R. Elieaer says: They may open for men the way [to repentance] by reason of the honour due to father and mother. But the Sages forbid it. R. Zadok said: Rather than open the way for a man by reason of the honour due to father and mother, they should open the way for him by reason of the honour due to God; but if so there could be no vows. But the Sages agree with R. Eliezer that in a matter between a man and his father and mother, the way may be opened to him by reason of the honour due to his father and mother.” (*Nedarim* 9.1)
 - e. The case of a man who dedicated his courtyard to exclude its use by his father, and then wished to retract his vow, is instructive.

- 1) One could get around his own vow (the purpose of the vow having been to exclude someone else from being profited by a particular item) by giving that item to a third party who could then make it available to the originally excluded person. (*Nedarim* 5.6)
- 2) Such a work-around was the intention of a man who wished to escape his vow for the purpose of allowing his father to attend a wedding feast in his courtyard: “It once happened that a man at Beth Horon, whose father was forbidden by vow to have any benefit from him, was giving his son in marriage, and he said to his fellow, ‘The courtyard and the banquet are given to thee as a gift, but they are thine only that my father may come and eat with us at the banquet’. His fellow said, ‘If they are mine, they are dedicated to Heaven’. The other answered, ‘I did not give thee what is mine that thou shouldest dedicate it to Heaven’. His fellow said, ‘Thou didst give me what is thine only that thou and thy father might eat and drink and be reconciled one with the other, and that the sin should rest on his head!’ When the case came before the Sages, they said: Any gift which, if a man would dedicate it, is not accounted dedicated, is not a [valid] gift. (*Nedarim* 5.6)
 - a) The original dedication was designed to cut off the father from the son’s things, and yet the son retained the use of them, including the courtyard.
 - b) When the son had a change of heart, he tried to get around his vow by giving the courtyard to a friend, which apparently would leave the son guiltless if the vow were violated, though his father would be culpable.
 - c) When the friend attempted to thwart the machination by dedicating the same courtyard himself, the matter had to be resolved by the sages.
- 3) Jesus’ charge (“you no longer suffer him to do aught for his father or his mother” Mk 7:12) must have in view either those whose view was similar to that of R. Zadok, or He may have had in mind a court of sages who perhaps had a track record of rulings that held up the vow to the disadvantage of the parents in cases similar to the one described in the courtyard scenario.

G. The quotation from Isaiah 29:13, the MT vs. LXX

1. In Isaiah, according to the MT, the words “commandment of men” serve to identify the source of the motivation for the people’s reverence.
 - a. The people go through the motions of reverence in accordance with the rituals they’ve been taught.
 - b. However, their hearts are not in it; their hearts are far away.
 - 1) “Because this people approaches Me with their words
And honors Me with their lips,
But their heart is far away from Me,
And their reverence for Me consists of the commandment of men that is taught.” (NASB)
 - 2) “...Forasmuch as this people draw nigh unto me, and with their mouth and with their lips do honor me, but have removed their heart far from me, and their fear of me is a commandment of men which hath been taught them.” (ASV)
 - 3) “Forasmuch as this people draw near me with their mouth, and with their lips do honour me, but have removed their heart far from me, and their fear toward me is taught by the precept of men.” (KJV)

- 4) Because this people draws near with its mouth, and with its lips they honour me, and its heart it puts (or keeps) far from me, and their fearing me is (or has become) a precept of men, (a thing) taught. (Alexander, 466)
- 5) Because this people draws nigh with its mouth, and with its lips it honoreth me, and its heart is far from me, and their fearing me is a precept of men, which hath been taught. (Young, 314)
2. In the LXX, ἐντάλματα ἀνθρώπων καὶ διδασκαλίας (“commandments and teachings of men”) is the object of the participle “teaching,” and it is the vainly worshipping people who are teaching these commandments and teachings of men.
- LXX: Καὶ εἶπεν κύριος Ἐγγίξει μοι ὁ λαὸς οὗτος τοῖς χεῖλεσιν αὐτῶν τιμῶσίν με, ἡ δὲ καρδία αὐτῶν πόρρω ἀπέχει ἀπ’ ἐμοῦ, μάτην δὲ σέβονται με διδάσκοντες ἐντάλματα ἀνθρώπων καὶ διδασκαλίας. = “This people draws near to me, with their lips they honor me, but their heart keeps far away from me, and vainly do they worship me, teaching commandments and doctrines of men.”
 - Jesus’ words do not precisely follow the LXX in either Matthew or Mark. Both omit the introductory phrase “draw near to me,” and both have singular τιμῆ (honors) rather than plural τιμῶσιν (they honor).
 - In both Matthew and Mark, the middle part of the quotation perfectly accords with the LXX.
 - But at the end of the quotation, in both Matthew and Mark, the “teaching commandments and doctrines of men” has become “teaching (as) doctrines commandments of men.” While this is a change in the wording, the meaning is essentially that of the LXX.
 - Matthew 15:8-9 has Ὁ λαὸς οὗτος τοῖς χεῖλεσίν με τιμῆ, ἡ δὲ καρδία αὐτῶν πόρρω ἀπέχει ἀπ’ ἐμοῦ· μάτην δὲ σέβονται με, διδάσκοντες διδασκαλίας ἐντάλματα ἀνθρώπων.
 - Mark 7:6-7 has Οὗτος ὁ λαὸς τοῖς χεῖλεσίν με τιμῆ, ἡ δὲ καρδία αὐτῶν πόρρω ἀπέχει ἀπ’ ἐμοῦ· μάτην δὲ σέβονται με, διδάσκοντες διδασκαλίας ἐντάλματα ἀνθρώπων.
 - The only difference between the quotation as found in Matthew and Mark is the order of the first three words: “The people, this one” (Mt) vs. “This, the people” (Mk).
3. Possible explanations for the discrepancy between Jesus’ quotation and the passage as found in Isaiah 29:13 include the following:
- While the LXX represented a departure from the MT, the difference did not materially affect Jesus’ overall point.
 - The LXX has the more accurate record of Isaiah’s words, and more explicitly served the purpose of indicting the Pharisees for exalting the tradition of the elders to a position equal with or superior to the word of God.

II. Matthew 23

A. The relationship between “Pharisees” and “scribes.”

- Many of the scribes, though not necessarily all, were Pharisees.
 - The lawyer of Matthew 22:35 was a Pharisee: “One of them,” referring to “the Pharisees” in verse 34.

- b. And the parallel account in Mark shows that he was a scribe. (Mk 12:28)
2. France speaks of the scribes and the Pharisees as “two groups who belong naturally together and probably in fact overlapped to a large extent, most scribes being Pharisaically inclined.” (France, *Matthew*, 858)
 3. “[I]t is generally agreed that scribes were professional students and teachers of halakhah, the elucidation and practical application of law..., while “Pharisee” was the title of a reformist movement or school within Judaism to which individuals voluntarily adhered, and which was devoted to the meticulous practice of the law, with special emphasis on such matters as ritual purity, tithing, and sabbath observance. The two terms thus represent distinct categories, but in practice the aims and lifestyle of the two would coincide closely, with many professional scribes also being members of the Pharisaic movement.” (France, *Matthew*, 189)
 4. While drawing a clear distinction between scribes and Pharisees, Jeremias nonetheless says, “the *leaders* and influential members of Pharisaic communities were *scribes*.” (Jeremias, 254)
 5. At Mark 2:16, some manuscripts have “the scribes of the Pharisees” while others have “the scribes and the Pharisees.”
 - a. The ESV, NASB, NIV, CSB, HCSB, and ASV all follow the reading, “the scribes of the Pharisees.”
 - b. Witnesses for “the scribes of the Pharisees”...
 - 1) P⁸⁸, 4th c., appears to support this reading. This is the only papyrus extant for the passage.
 - 2) \aleph , Codex Sinaiticus, 4th c.
 - 3) B, Codex Vaticanus, 4th c.
 - 4) W, Codex Washingtonianus, 4th/5th c.
 - 5) L, Codex Regius, 8th c.
 - 6) Δ , Codex Sangallensis, 9th c.
 - 7) Minuscule 33, 9th c.
 - 8) Veronensis, an Old Italian ms, from the 5th c.
 - 9) Some manuscripts of the Bohairic Coptic version, a 3rd c. work, though the extant manuscripts are much later.
 - 10) Minuscule 28, 11th c.
 - 11) Lectionary 547, 13th c.
 - c. Witnesses for “the scribes and the Pharisees”...
 - 1) Everything else (several uncials, the earliest being Codex Alexandrinus; many minuscules, lectionaries, and early versions in various languages.)
 - d. The editors of the UBS GNT favor the reading, “the scribes of the Pharisees” but without much confidence, giving it only a “C” rating meaning “the Committee had difficulty in deciding which variant to place in the text.”
 - 1) Metzger offers a rationale for favoring “the scribes of the Pharisees”: “The more unusual expression οἱ γραμματεῖς τῶν Φαρισαίων is to be preferred, since the tendency of scribes would have been to insert καὶ after οἱ

γραμματεῖς under the influence of the common expression ‘the scribes and the Pharisees.’” (Metzger, 78)

- e. The readings in the parallel accounts:
 - 1) Matthew 9:11 has “the Pharisees”.
 - 2) Luke 5:30 has “the Pharisees and the scribes”.
6. Scholars quibble that Matthew 23:2 should refer only to scribes for, they say, it was the scribes who sat on Moses’ seat.
 - a. Jeremias says, “It is disastrous” that Matthew puts the scribes and Pharisees together as objects of Jesus’ denunciations in Mt. 23. (Jeremias, 253)
 - b. “[T]he charge should properly refer to scribes (γραμματεῖς) and teachers of Law (νομικοί). For it was these two groups who were in fact sitting on Moses’ seat, rather than all the Pharisees” (Weinfeld, 53)
 - c. Luke 11 is cited as evidence that Matthew conflated the character of the Pharisees with that of the scribes.
 - 1) “Luke 11, which contains a parallel to the woes passage, reflects some awareness of this distinction. There the first three “woes” are addressed to the Pharisees (verses 42, 43, 44), but the other three to the teachers of Law (verses 46, 47, 52). Thus in Luke the charge of loading people with burdens hard to bear is directed at the latter group and not at the Pharisees in general.” (Weinfeld, 53)
 - d. The quibbling often includes characterizations of the criticisms of the Pharisees in Matthew as overly broad.
 - 1) “Criticism of some of the Pharisees some of the time, or even of aspects of the Pharisaic movement in general is easily turned into a portrait of all the Pharisees all the time.” (Nolland, 921)
 - e. Naturally, this quibbling arises among scholars who do not see our text as a reliable representation of Jesus’ own teaching.
 - 1) *Nolland*: “Because of the unfortunate caricature of first-century Pharisaism to which the material has contributed, most scholars are not prepared to trace much of it to the historical Jesus.” (Nolland, 921)
 - 2) Even though R.T. France gives credence to theories that attribute the tone of Matthew 23 to a later Church vs. Synagogue context, he pushes back on the idea that Mt. 23 does not accurately reflect Jesus’ own teaching: “In such a section it is probably not exegetically profitable to try to distinguish the polemic of Jesus against the scribes and Pharisees of his day from Matthew’s attitude to the Judaism of his own period, in which Pharisaism was increasingly becoming the dominant strand.” (France, *Matthew*, 854)

III. Matthew 12:1-8 (parallels, Mark 2:23-28; Luke 6:1-5)

A. Luke’s account specifies that they were “plucking” and “rubbing”

1. Some have seen in these two words a reference to categories of work itemized in the Mishna.
 - a. “The main classes of work are forty save one.” (*Shabbath* 7.2)
 - b. Among the thirty-nine itemized classes are “reaping,” “threshing,” and “winnowing.”

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- c. Plucking would be an example of harvesting. Rubbing could be construed as threshing, and as a result of rubbing, the disciples must have discarded the husks which would be construed as “winnowing.”
 - d. None of the accounts are explicit in making the connection to these three of the thirty-nine categories of work, but Luke must have had a reason for mentioning the “rubbing” in addition to plucking; and certainly, construing the disciples’ activities in such a manner would have been consistent with typical Pharisaic expansions on the law.
- B. A popular interpretation of Matthew 12:1-8 sees a basis for setting aside God’s explicit law in situations of dire necessity; essentially, situation ethics.
- 1. Problems with the popular interpretation.
 - a. Dire need was not an acceptable excuse in other situations.
 - 1) Uncompromising faithfulness even when one suffers for it is a constant theme through the Bible. To offer just a few examples...
 - a) Daniel 1:8
 - b) Daniel 3:18
 - c) Matthew 4:3-4
 - 1. Kenneth Chumbley points to Jesus’ own refusal “to go beyond His Father’s word to satisfy His hunger.” (213)
 - d) Matthew 16:24-26
 - e) 1 Peter 2:21-23
 - f) Revelation 12:11
 - 2) Saul saw his situation as a matter of life or death (1 Samuel 13:5ff), and yet he was rebuked, and the throne was taken from his progeny.
 - 3) The hungry thief of Proverbs 6:30-31 elicits compassion but is not guiltless
 - b. A violation of the law of Moses on the part of David is not parallel to the present circumstance because Jesus’ disciples did not violate the Law of Moses by plucking grain as they walked. Jesus describes them as “guiltless.” (Matthew 12:7)
 - c. This interpretation sets the appeal to David and the appeal to the priests (Mt. 12:5) on divergent footings, one justified though contrary to God’s instruction and the other justified in accordance with God’s instruction.
- C. The correct interpretation of Matthew 12:1-4 is consistent with and illuminated by the themes of the overall context, Matthew 11:25-12:45.
- 1. Jesus had said “My yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (11:30), a statement connected with 12:1-8 by the introductory “On that occasion” (12:1).
 - a. We should see the ensuing conflicts as examples of the “heavy burdens” of the Pharisees (Mt. 23:4) in contrast to the light burden of Jesus.
 - 2. Jesus’ promise of “rest” (11:28) is followed by two incidents wherein the Pharisees fault Jesus and/or his disciples for violating the Sabbath rest (12:2, 12:10ff)
 - a. Jesus is the giver of the ultimate rest which was foreshadowed by the seventh day Sabbath

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- b. In like manner, Jesus is the “Lord of the Sabbath” (12:8), including the seventh day Sabbath, and is the ultimate authority as to what is and isn’t a violation of the Sabbath.
 3. Two ideas seen elsewhere in this context are especially relevant to the exegesis of Matthew 12:1-8...
 - a. The Pharisees’ hypocrisy: Jesus highlighted the Pharisees’ hypocritical inconsistency in that they attributed his casting demons out to Beelzebub but did not do the same for their own “sons,” i.e., disciples (12:27)
 - b. Jesus is Greater: Three times, Jesus makes the point that something/someone “greater is here” (12:6, 12:41, 12:41).
 4. What I believe to be the correct interpretation:
 - a. Jesus makes two different points, one from David and one from the priests.
 - 1) The first argument, the appeal to David’s eating the shewbread, does not pronounce David guiltless, whereas the second argument does pronounce the priests guiltless.
 - 2) The point from David is an argument *ad hominem*.
 - 3) The point from the priests is an argument *a fortiori*, “something greater is here.”
 - b. The first point, the *ad hominem* point from David’s activity.
 - 1) Pharisaic tradition apparently exonerated David’s eating of the shewbread
 - 2) According to the Gemara concerning David’s eating of the shewbread: “This is because he is, i.e., I am, dangerously ill, being utterly famished, and a non-priest may eat sacrificial food in a life-threatening situation.” (*Menachot* 96a)
 - 3) So then the Pharisees’ criticism of Jesus’ disciples was hypocritical.
 - a) Note again that later in this same chapter, Jesus will again make an argument *ad hominem*: “If I by Beelzebub cast out demons, by whom do your sons cast them out?” (Matthew 12:27)
 - 4) Rather than pronouncing David guiltless, Jesus clearly says David ate that “which was not lawful for him to eat.”
 - a) Notice the contrast between David on the one hand, who is not said to be guiltless, and on the other hand the priests and Jesus’ disciples who are described as “guiltless.”
 - c. The second point, the *a fortiori* argument concerning the priests.
 - 1) In service of the temple, priests were allowed to carry out their duties on the Sabbath.
 - 2) One greater than the temple is here, one who is Lord of the Sabbath and can tell you what is and isn’t a violation of the Sabbath law.
 - a) Note again, that three times in the overall context, Jesus makes the point that something/someone “greater is here” (12:6, 12:41, 12:41).
 - 3) The Pharisees did indeed acknowledge that the priests were permitted to perform their tasks on the Sabbath. “The Baken Cakes of the High Priest were kneaded, rolled, and baked within [the Temple Court] and the making of them overrode the Sabbath.” (*Manahoth* 10.3)

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- a) Jesus' "profane the Sabbath" is probably an instance of couching his point in their language, not an acknowledgement that what the priests did was actually profaning the Sabbath.
 - b) Evidence that this was their way of speaking is seen in the discussion of childbirth on the Sabbath: "They may deliver a woman on the Sabbath and summon a midwife for her from anywhere, and they may profane the Sabbath for the mother's sake and tie up the navel-string." (*Shabbath* 18.3)
- 4) There is a parallel to the structure (argument *ad hominem* followed by a declaration of truth) in Paul's discussion of meat sacrificed to idols in 1 Corinthians 8-10.
- a) First, in chapter 8, Paul does not absolutely prohibit the participation in the idol feast, but makes an argument *ad hominem*, challenging the Corinthians' lack of love and speaking in terms of the effect their actions could have on others.
 - b) Second, in chapter 10, Paul absolutely forbids the activity, saying they cannot participate in the table of demons and participate in the Lord's table.
- d. Finally, Jesus appeals to Hosea 6:6.
- 1) The context is Israel's unfaithfulness.
 - 2) Their "loyalty" (NASB) is like a morning cloud that quickly disappears (Hos. 6:4)
 - 3) Where the NASB has "loyalty," other versions have "goodness," "faithfulness" or simply, "love."
 - 4) In Psalm 136, the same word is repeatedly translated either "lovingkindness" (as in the NASB) or "mercy" (as in the KJV).
 - 5) This same word is used in Hosea 6:6 where God says, "I desire *steadfast love* and not sacrifice."
 - a) The "steadfast love" represents the same word as in Hosea 6:4, but is contrasted with that love that disappears as the morning cloud, hence the translation, *steadfast love*, or *loyalty*.
 - b) This is what God desires rather than superficial devotion expressed through meaningless sacrifices.
 - c) The point is the same that we see in Hosea's contemporary when through Isaiah, God deplores "worthless offerings" and calls upon the people "learn to do good, seek justice." (Isaiah 1:10-16)
 - 6) In the LXX, this word, *chesed*, is translated ἔλεος (*mercy*) in both Hosea 6:4 and 6:6.
 - 7) Jesus' quotation is verbatim from the LXX.
 - 8) While it is certainly true the Pharisees' attitude toward Jesus and his disciples was anything but merciful, I am inclined to think the original thought of Hosea 6:4-6 is not completely absent.
 - a) The Pharisee's preoccupation with their Sabbath traditions stood in the way of steadfast love for God.
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- b) But it is not beyond the realm of possibility that even as Hosea's meaning is not lost, Jesus also sees in the rendering of the LXX an opportunity to comment on the Pharisees' unmerciful attitude.

Conclusion: Self-righteousness, Legalism, Superficiality, and Hypocrisy

I. Self-Righteousness

- A. "Then it happened that as Jesus was reclining at the table in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and began 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 collectors and sinners?'" (Matthew 9:10)
- B. "Now He also told this parable to some people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt..." (Luke 18:9)

II. Tradition & Legalism

- A. I can see three possible meanings of the term "legalism," two of which we should avoid.
1. First is the sort of legal justification such as Paul teaches is impossible for us, Romans, Galatians (*Abtoh* 6.6-11 p. 460f)
 - a. Trusting in such justification is self-righteous, and futile. "If Thou LORD, shouldst mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?" (Psalm 130:3)
 - b. Paul sought to be found in Christ, "not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith"
 2. The second is preoccupation with man-made rules.
 3. The third isn't really a proper use of the word legalism, but I sometimes hear someone who is careful to obey God described by others as "legalistic."
- B. In our texts (Matthew 12:1-8 and 15:1-20), the Pharisees are shown to be legalists in the second sense, and Luke affirms that many of them were also legalists in the first sense. (Luke 18:9)
1. Legalism in the second sense above naturally inclines toward the self-righteousness that "views others with contempt."
 2. How "tradition" comes about
 - a. The aim was to "make a fence around the law." (*Aboth* 1.1)
 - b. "The Mishna, in other words, maintains that the authority of those rules, customs and interpretations which had accumulated around the Jewish system of life and religion was equal to the authority of the Written Law itself." (Danby, xvii)
 - c. Inevitably the inference follows that the living tradition (the Oral Law) is more important than the Written Law, since the 'tradition of the elders', besides claiming an authority and continuity equal to that of the Written Law, claims also to be its authentic and living interpretation and its essential complement" (*Ibid.*)
 - 1) "Greater stringency applies to [the observance of] the words of the Scribes than to [the observance of] the words of the [written] Law." (Sanhedrin 11.3)
 - 2) Compare Jesus' rebuke (Matthew 15:6, Mark 7:9).
 - d. "Since written laws cannot anticipate all possible contingencies, or embrace every detail, or deal in advance with each possible case, it can be assumed that, in applying the Mosaic code to daily life and to the Temple worship, to domestic relations and trade and to the administration of justice, a multitude of usages

arising out of practical necessity or convenience or experience became part of the routine of observance of the code, and, in the course of time, shared the sanctity and authority which were inherent in the divinely inspired code itself.” (Danby, xvii-xviii)

3. Oral traditions that have been treated as authoritative
 - a. Tradition reasons from what we find in the NT about congregational use of its money and imposes additional regulation...
 - 1) It’s for the church’s work
 - 2) The church’s work requires a meeting place
 - 3) We can use the money to build a building
 - 4) But satisfying hunger isn’t the Lord’s work
 - 5) Therefore, we can’t satisfy hunger in the church building
 - 6) Therefore, we must step outside and eat our lunch in the church’s parking lot.
 - a) What about the preacher who brings his sack lunch to the office?
 - b) Some would find this problematic because of the tradition.
 - b. The written word teaches “singing and making melody with your heart.”
 - 1) Tradition says that excludes playing.
 - 2) This means it’s wrong to have a piano in the church building.
 - a) What about the church that rents a hall wherein a piano is parked?
 - b) Some would find this problematic because of the tradition.
 - c. Please note:
 - 1) I do believe that if we use money collected on the first day of the week to build a building, we need to be careful that we build a building for the purpose of doing things God gave the church to do and not for general recreation. I am opposed to using such money to build basketball courts, dining halls, etc.
 - 2) I do believe man-made instruments of music belong to the Old Testament worship, and we should see that as a physical representation of what we are to do spiritually, i.e., make a joyful sound to the Lord. I believe we should not use instrumental music.
 - 3) But is it not clear that there is a tendency to reason our way to traditions which evolve to have the force of law in areas not specifically addressed in the written word?

III. Superficiality

- A. Man-made traditions are always about outward things.
- B. Preoccupation with traditions will always lead to focus on outward things, whereas God is concerned about the inward things.
- C. Jesus used the occasion of the Pharisees’ complaint concerning unwashed hands to talk about what is truly defiling—the things that come out of the heart (Matthew 15:18).
- D. Notice the pattern of superficiality in our three texts:

1. In Matthew 12, the Pharisees needed to learn that the Lord desires “mercy and not sacrifice.”
2. In Matthew 15, the Pharisees needed to learn that what is truly defiling is what is in the heart, not what is in the cup.
3. In Matthew 23, Jesus accuses the Pharisees of cleaning the outside of the cup while inwardly being full of extortion, of white-washing the tombs that are full of dead men’s bones and uncleanness

IV. Hypocrisy

- A. Self-righteousness based on superficial things naturally results in hypocrisy.
- B. Convoluted traditions aimed at addressing minutiae inevitably lead to inconsistencies.
- C. A self-righteousness that justifies oneself while navigating technically acceptable ways around the requirements of the tradition (managing to go three times the distance of a Sabbath day’s journey), and at the same time condemns someone else whose violation of the tradition was effectively less significant (goes slightly more than one Sabbath day’s journey) is hypocrisy.
 1. Matthew 7:1-5
 2. We can become preoccupied with the minutiae of tradition and neglect to be the kind of people we ought to be. (Matthew 23:23-24)
- D. Consider the preacher who cautions others against eating a sandwich in the church building but doesn’t lift his finger to feed a hungry person because he needs to save money to make his BMW payment. (I have nothing against owning a BMW. I might buy one someday.)

V. Party Spirit

- A. The Pharisees fostered a climate wherein their own agenda was more important than truth. (John 12:42-43)
 1. On at least two occasions, the Pharisees acknowledged Jesus’ miracle, but attributed it to Beelzebub. (Mt 9:34, 12:24)
 2. On one occasion, seeing the sign led them to respond by planning to destroy Jesus. (Mt 12:14)
- B. Why does Luke mention that those brethren insisting on circumcision and keeping the law were Pharisees? (Acts 15:5)
 1. It’s relevant.
 2. There’s a party spirit at work, an expectation that initiates conform to the traditions that identify “us.”
 3. The very notion of an “us” defined by anything other than being a child of God through Jesus Christ smacks of partyism.
- C. In their enthusiasm for separateness, they identified themselves as the standard, developed a party spirit, and ended up in a state of self-righteousness that blinded them to their own errors as well as the righteousness of the only One who was truly righteous.

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