

Jesus Against the Pharisees -- Love verses Law

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Photo date and location unknown

Jesus' desire to do God's will sprang not from mere duty but from faithful and loving obedience to a Father whom he knew intimately. Each of us longs for the same inner relationship with our Father. But in our ignorance of the working of love, we too often run aground in obedience to the letter of the law. Till we make the inner spiritual transformation to allow God to dwell within us we will not be able to obey from love.

To see the problem more clearly, let's contrast the Pharisees' attitude towards God with Jesus' attitude. The Pharisees were the most powerful religious influence among the masses during the time of Jesus.

They could be viewed as Israel's progressive party, basing their faith and practice not only on written scripture but on the oral tradition as well. They had absorbed the ideas of the generation immediately preceding Jesus: the existence of the angelic and demonic worlds; the resurrection of the dead; and the hope of a coming Messiah who would redeem Israel. Devoutly faithful to the law, the Pharisees developed its applications, struggling to make the law relevant to their people's changing lives. The Pharisees were popular because they tried to alleviate too strict interpretations and enforcements of the law.

There were many points of agreement between the Pharisees and Jesus. Jesus' words, "Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished," (Matthew 5: 17-18) are good Pharisaism.

Yet as a party the Pharisees rejected him. He was careless with the distinctive practices of the Jewish religion. He didn't wash his hands before eating, he ate with sinners, and he didn't observe the Sabbath. So many nations had been absorbed by Persian and Greek conquerors, and lost their separate identity. The fact that the Jewish nation remained unassimilated was due to the Pharisees.

To the Pharisee, religion was not merely a matter 'of belief but of every aspect of life. From circumcision to kosher food, from the tassels on their garments to observance of the Sabbath, obedience to the law distinguished the Jews from others. Without these laws, the Jews would have been absorbed into the powerful Hellenistic culture. To study and obey the law, and thus to preserve the distinctive identity of the Jewish people was the central aim of the Pharisees. They were not quibblers over trivialities. They were fighting to save their people from assimilation by the Gentiles and Pagans. This demanded not just faith and ethic but outward practices and observances that would assure the Jew of standing out unmistakably as a Jew.

Then came Jesus. In minimizing the legalistic customs which the Pharisees had painstakingly developed, he was breaking down the barriers that separated the Jews from other people. The Pharisees were in agreement with Jesus over so many points, yet they were angered at his failure to understand the need for these distinctive practices. His desire to allow faith in God and a resulting ethic towards one's fellow men govern one's life, anticipated Paul's statement: "Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is of any avail, but faith working through love." (Galatians 5:6) Jesus, criticized because his disciples on the Sabbath picked and ate corn in the fields, answered the critical Pharisee with an appeal to scripture: "Have you not read what David did when he was hungry and those who were with him: how he entered the house of God, and ate the bread of the Presence, which was not lawful for him to eat nor for those who were with him, but only for the priests?" (Matthew 12: 1-4) It was frustrating enough to face Jesus' laxness, but to receive his defense of it from scripture was infuriating. He was using scripture against scripture.

The controversy between Jesus and the Pharisees didn't remain only in the theoretical realm of teaching against teaching. Jesus was not primarily a teacher. He was a reformer.

He came not just to speak but to act: to call his nation to repentance and faith, to gather a band of disciples loyal to him as the Messiah, to purify the synagogue of its sterility and conventionality and the temple of its abuses, to bring salvation to those who were despised, to initiate a new age of righteousness. Jesus was thus not a rabbi founding a school to perpetuate his ideas, but an active reformer insisting on changed quality of life.

And what he did as reformer was unacceptable. He actually broke the Sabbath, ate with the unclean, defied the laws of purification, and called on the people to live by his radical suggestions. He was gathering disciples, sending them out on missions, attracting a popular following, launching a movement.

Jesus intended insurrection against the cherished customs of his people, and he said so: "And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; if he does, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins; but new wine is for fresh skins." (Mark 2:22) From the day he first broke the Sabbath laws to the day he cleansed the temple in Jerusalem he acted, not only spoke. As a reformer of Israel, he had to attack the way of thinking and living, deeply entrenched in the most influential religious group among his own people.

The cause of this difference between Jesus and the Pharisees runs deep. They thought mainly of saving Judaism in general and the nation in particular; Jesus thought mainly of saving individuals. The Pharisees would have accepted that the Jewish nation and religion could not be saved without devout and faithful individuals, and Jesus of course would have accepted a changed nation and world as a result of changed persons. The main emphasis in each case was distinctive.

Both wanted right living, but the Pharisees, focusing on the protection of Judaism and its people from pagan and Gentile influence, saw its achievement mainly in terms of legalistic discipline, rules and regulations externally imposed; while Jesus, focusing on individual persons, thought in terms of inner transformation.

If one is aiming mainly at the preservation of a people and a religion from the influence of surrounding nations and ideas, the Pharisaic method is logical and useful. In fact, their mission was to preserve the chosen people for the Messiah's coming. Distinctive customs, rigidly defined, insisted on as the absolute will of God, and imposed on a loyal nation, will protect and did protect the Jews from assimilation. If one, whoever he may be, is working from the other direction, seeing transformed persons as the only way to a transformed nation, such a method is self-defeating. The Pharisees should have realized the new way God was working through Jesus and united with him. Far from making bad people good, rules and regulations externally imposed, as religious history demonstrates, commonly lead to mere external conformity, the outside meticulously correct while the inside is all wrong.

Here was the deepest source of conflict between Jesus and Jewish legalism: "You blind Pharisee! First cleanse the inside of the cup and of the plate, that the outside also may be clean." (Matthew 23:26) The reason for this conflict lay in a radical difference of intent. Legalism might save a nation, but it never saved a person. Persons to be good must be inwardly transformed. Because this transformation was Jesus' central interest, he rebelled against the whole Pharisaic system.

Far from inwardly resurrecting persons to a good life, Jesus saw the Pharisaic method issuing in what he called hypocrisy. That word has come to mean conscious pretense, deliberate insincerity, but this was not Jesus' meaning. The Pharisees, as a whole, were obviously sincere, ready to sacrifice life for their law; but they were, said Jesus, "Blind," self-complacent about their meticulous observance of the law, depending on obedience to the letter to do what only inward, personal rebirth can do. Inwardness was at the heart of Jesus' ethics.

When Dr. Manson says, "For Jesus good living is spontaneous activity of a transformed character; for the scribes and Pharisees it is obedience to a discipline imposed from without" (The Teaching of Jesus, T. W.

Manson, p. 300), he conveys the essence of the conflict. Those two approaches are not easily reconcilable. Hence, the Pharisees were right in thinking that Jesus was a mortal enemy to their whole system.

There are two ways of fulfilling the commandments of Judaism. One the Pharisees tried. They drew out rules and applications from major laws, deduced specific regulations from general principles, created detailed precepts applying to endless concrete situations, and so built up their complicated legal system.

Jesus, however, used another method. If a man does not hate, he will not kill; if he does not lust, he will not commit adultery; if evil thoughts do not come from his heart, he will do no evil; if he is a fig tree, he will bear no thistles. Jesus did come to fulfill the law, but by a method that could not be reconciled with Pharisaic legalism.

He had pondered deeply the meaning of the law, as interpreted by the prophets, and with all the passionate devotion of a true Pharisee he wanted the law fulfilled.

But was it being fulfilled by multiplication of rules and insistence on their meticulous observance? Did not the fulfillment of the law demand a different method entirely inward transformation, spiritual rebirth, the purification of motive, the creation of a quality of life that prevented the evils which the law prohibited? Not legalistic regulation but inward regeneration was the way he chose to the law's fulfillment, and he stated the contrast between the two with merciless clarity.