



ADULT STUDY

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LEADER'S GUIDE SESSION 1: PHARISEES

Seeing Ourselves in Those Confronted by Jesus: An Adult Lenten Study

Who were the Pharisees then? Who are they now?

Goal for the Session

Participants will learn about the Pharisees in Jesus' day, focusing on what they believed they had to do to be "good" in God's eyes; learn about how Jesus related to them; and consider who the people are in the twenty-first-century church who are Pharisee-like.

Preparing for the Session

- Decide how you will distribute the Participant Handouts during this study. Several options include:
 - Bring copies for the following session and distribute at the end of each session.
 - E-mail the next week's handout at the first of the week.
 - Use a combination of the first two options, especially if some members do not have internet access or cannot print the studies and do not want to read them on the computer.
 - Have a few extra copies available for newcomers and those who leave them at home.
- Read the Participant Handout carefully, marking important points or making notes in the margin about anything you wish to emphasize.

Session at a Glance

OPENING

- Welcome
- Candle lighting and prayer
- Introduction to the study

EXPLORING

- Who were the Pharisees?
- Jesus and the Pharisees

RESPONDING

- Who are the Pharisees today?

CLOSING

- Assignment for next time
- Closing prayer

- Read this Leader's Guide, consider which activities might work best with your group, and consider activities under Teaching Alternatives.
- Place a piece of purple fabric on a table with a

white candle to use at the beginning of each session.

- Consider your meeting space and how you will arrange the space for both small-group and full-group activities. It will be helpful if everyone can be seated at tables.

Materials Needed for All Sessions

- A purple cloth with a white candle set on a table
- Matches or lighter
- Sheets of newsprint created each week that list the characteristics of the group being studied
- Extra copies of the Participant Handout
- Copies of the Participant Handout for the following week

Materials Needed for This Session

- Optional name tags
- Bibles
- Newsprint
- Markers
- Copies of the Participant Handout for this week and next week

Teaching Tip

This first session includes a general introduction in addition to the information on the Pharisees. Be aware of the additional time needed to introduce the course. Begin on time and keep the session running at a good pace in order to complete all activities.

Opening (10 minutes)

1. Welcome

Greet participants warmly as they arrive. If this is a study serving participants meeting together for the first time, plan for a way for participants to introduce themselves to one another. You may want to provide name tags if this is the first time many of the group members have been together.

2. Candle Lighting and Prayer

Call attention to the purple cloth and candle. Remind participants that purple is the liturgical color used for the Lenten season. Go on to describe how the candle is a symbol of the one who was born to be the light of the world. Light the candle as you read the following verse of Scripture: "I am the light of the world. Whoever fol-

lows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life" (John 8:12).

Pray the following prayer or one of your own:

Be present with us, O God, as we gather during this Lenten season to study and learn. Help us to focus on the Christ who suffered, died, and rose for this world. Teach us how to deepen our commitment to following Jesus. Amen.

3. Introduction to Study

Have a volunteer read Mark 10:17–21. Point out that the question the man asks Jesus in the passage is a question many Christians are asking today as they seek to live the Christian life. Inform participants that over the next six weeks your sessions will examine six groups of people who interacted with Jesus and look at how Jesus affirmed or challenged their understandings of what it means to be good and to be a follower of God.

Exploring (30 minutes)

4. Who Were the Pharisees?

Have participants read the material in the Participant Handout on the Pharisees ("The Pharisees," "Who Were the Pharisees?" and "Comparing Scribes and Pharisees"), marking characteristics of this group as they are given in the text. After participants have finished reading, ask them to call out characteristics of the Pharisees. Record these characteristics on a sheet of newsprint that can be displayed over the course of the study.

5. Jesus and the Pharisees

Form two groups. One group will represent the Pharisees. The other group will represent Jesus. Ask someone from each group to read Matthew 12:1–14 as the others listen or follow along in their Bibles. Suggest that healing on the Sabbath is a good test case for discussing Jesus' relationship with the Pharisees. Each group will look for arguments for "his" or "their" interpretation of the Jewish laws regarding Sabbath. Suggest also that group members can find additional help in "Conflicts between Jesus and the Pharisees" in the Participant Handout.

After ten minutes ask each group to respond to the question, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?" Each group should give their top reasons to support their "yes" or "no" answer.

Teaching Tip

If your group is larger than ten persons, consider forming multiple small groups of Pharisees and Jesus so that all may full participate.

Responding (5 minutes)

6. Who Are the Pharisees Today?

The author suggests in “What Can We Learn?” that Christians today are sometimes as guilty of legalism as the Pharisees were. Ask for specific examples of legalism identified by participants from your own church, denomination, or daily life. Ask for suggestions about how we might temper the legalism in ourselves and in others in our church.

Closing (5 minutes)

7. Assignment for Next Time

Distribute copies of the Participant Handout for the next session. Commit as a group to read the Participant Handout prior to coming to the session each week.

8. Closing Prayer

Close with the following prayer or a prayer of your own:

We, like the Pharisees, O God, seek to do good and to live our lives in faithfulness to you. In our

efforts to do good and to do what we think you expect of us, help us never to forget to be loving, kind, and compassionate to those around us. For we pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

Teaching Alternatives

- As an alternative to Activity 5, after the reading and reflection have been done, ask for volunteers to role-play a conversation between Jesus and the Pharisees on whether or not it is lawful to heal on the Sabbath.
- Look through several recent issues of your denominational magazine and find examples of the work of twenty-first-century Pharisees in your denomination. Share one or more of these examples and ask participants to begin a possible letter (which will not be mailed) to the person or groups involved asking them to be more open and tolerant.

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PARTICIPANT HANDOUT Session 1: Pharisees

Seeing Ourselves in Those Confronted by Jesus: An Adult Lenten Study

Who were the Pharisees then? Who are they now?

Introduction

As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: 'You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.'" He said to him, "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth." Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." (Mark 10:17-21)

During the Lenten season, many Christians seek out Jesus and ask some version of the question found in this biblical passage: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Like the man who approached Jesus in Mark 10:17-21, we want to know what to do to be "good."

Jesus tells the man that no one is truly good but God

alone and reminds him of God's commandments that were given to Moses on Mount Sinai (Exod. 20). The man, perhaps seeking to justify himself or perhaps just wanting to be sure about what Jesus means, says he has always kept the commandments. Then Jesus looks at him—really looks at him—and loves him. Christians reading this story may resonate with this man's experience: we want Jesus to look at us and love us too. The hard part is what follows.

It is precisely because Jesus and the Pharisees were so similar in their passion for discerning God's will and interpreting God's word for everyday people that they clashed so often and so bitterly.

"You lack one thing," Jesus tells the man. "Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me" (Mark 10:21). Jesus first affirms the traditional Jewish standard of being good, which is to keep the commandments, but then he adds a radical new imperative: change your life completely and follow him.

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Seeing Ourselves in Those Confronted by Jesus | Session 1: Pharisees

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Stay Connected! Follow us on:



Over six weeks, we will examine six groups of people who encountered Jesus: the Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, Zealots, the disciples of Jesus, and the women who followed Jesus. No doubt Jesus loved many of these people, but only a few of them completely turned their lives upside down to follow him. The ones who followed him did so imperfectly.

Jesus said, “No one is good but God alone,” but Jesus still expects his followers to try. The studies will explore ways Christians can identify with the groups who encountered Jesus, from opponents to followers. What can we learn from what Jesus said to them? Do any of Jesus’ corrections and suggestions apply to us? Throughout, we will attend to the historical and religious context of first-century Judaism, in which these people struggled to discern the will of God.

The Pharisees

Legalistic. Self-righteous. Judgmental. Hypocritical. When Christians hear the word “Pharisee,” they tend to think of sticklers for detail, dogmatic bureaucrats, and pietistic people who have a holier-than-thou attitude. The New Testament is filled with stories of Jesus in conflict with these Jewish leaders. Some of Jesus’ criticism is very harsh: “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! . . . you brood of vipers!” (Matt. 23:29–36). It is no wonder that Christians have a very low opinion of the Pharisees.

A closer study of the Pharisees reveals a surprising insight: Jesus actually has more in common with the Pharisees than these blistering biblical confrontations reveal. It is precisely because Jesus and the Pharisees were so similar in their passion for discerning God’s will and interpreting God’s word for everyday people that they clashed so often and so bitterly. This session will examine what we know about the group known as the Pharisees, what they believed they had to do to be good in God’s eyes, what Jesus and modern Christians have in common with them, and how he criticized them.

Who Were the Pharisees?

“Pharisee” comes from the Hebrew root word *prs*, meaning “separate” or “set apart.” The Pharisees worked hard to keep the holy (things having to do with God) separate from the profane. They did this by adhering to biblical laws that described how Israel

should remain a holy nation set apart for God. In its purest form, keeping the law was not an end in itself, but a means of thanking God for God’s relationship with Israel. However, for some people, the law became a means of appeasing God or an end in itself.

The Pharisees had a reputation of being quite liberal-minded (certainly more so than other religious leaders of their time). The Pharisees were well liked among the common, everyday Jewish population because they themselves were from common stock. Unlike the elite Sadducees and Essenes, who descended from priestly families and commanded a certain upper-class respect, the Pharisees claimed a nonhereditary status as teachers, and they espoused more progressive views of Judaism, including a belief in the resurrection of the dead. They elevated certain traditions of the ancestors to the same level of importance as biblical injunctions to give Judaism a richer texture.

Comparing Scribes and Pharisees

The Gospels sometimes mention the “scribes and the Pharisees” in the same breath. Both the scribes and Pharisees were interpreters of the law, so there was some overlap in their functions. However, a scribe’s duty was more akin to a modern-day lawyer’s: they drafted legal documents like deeds, documents for the sale of land, marriage contracts (*ketubahs*), bills of divorce (*gets*), and wills. The Pharisees, on the other hand, were scholars and teachers who interpreted biblical law and the traditions of the ancestors. It is quite possible that some Pharisees were also scribes.

The Pharisees saw it as their duty to help common folk transform their everyday lives into holy enterprises dedicated to God, no matter where they lived, just as many Christians today spend time in daily prayer or practicing certain spiritual disciplines outside the supervision or rites of the church. For centuries, the center of Jewish practice had been located at the Temple in Jerusalem. But many Jewish families living far from Jerusalem could not afford to make regular trips to sacrifice at the Temple in Jerusalem—in fact, for some people a pilgrimage to Jerusalem might be a once-a-year or even a once-in-a-lifetime event. (In the Gospel of Luke, there is a story about Jesus’ family making such a pilgrimage from Galilee [Luke 2:41–42].)

The Pharisees helped Jews interpret the many biblical laws and commandments in such a way that they could

practice them in their daily lives as *mitzvot*, religious disciplines or duties, so that they could respond to God with gratitude and devotion. In Jewish tradition, “holiness” has to do with being set apart as a people for the service of God, to serve the world in God’s grace and justice. When the Pharisees fuss over purity or clean vs. unclean, they are reminding people of a higher religious calling. Purity was not just about avoiding dirt and contamination, disease and death, but striving to keep what is pure, good, and living at the forefront of all actions and thoughts. When they were at their best, the Pharisees helped ordinary Jews find deeper purpose in their lives. Many of the common people loved the Pharisees for helping them bring a more meaningful and intentional Jewish faith and practice into their homes and communities.

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In Jewish tradition, a *mitzvah* (plural *mitzvot*) is a religious duty or discipline, though it sometimes refers to a good deed, something done without expecting anything in return. The *mitzvot* are interpretations of biblical laws. A twelfth-century Jewish scholar named Maimonides constructed a list of 613 *mitzvot*. Not all of the 613 commandments listed by Maimonides can be followed today due to changes in historical and geographic circumstances, but many still function in the lives of devout Jews, such as the injunction to circumcise males on the eighth day after birth (Gen. 17:10–12). Orthodox Jews follow the practice of binding the arm and head with phylacteries in prayer (Deut. 6:8), putting a *mezuzah* on the doorpost (Deut. 6:9), and wearing fringes (Num. 15:38). Among the 613 *mitzvot* are practices Christians also follow, such as daily prayer, study, giving to charity, and performing acts of justice and compassion. For Jews and Christians alike, these actions ideally should be done with a joyful and grateful heart, not out of the expectation of reward or recognition. The highest form of *mitzvah* is the one seen only by God.

Conflicts between Jesus and the Pharisees

Jesus had several things in common with the Pharisees. He came from the lower classes, not from priestly lineage. He was zealous for the law of God (Matt. 5:17–20) and wanted to bring a fresh view of the kingdom of God into the everyday lives of ordinary people. Like the Pharisees, Jesus was a teacher, and he affirmed the resurrection of the dead. In the Gospels, several people refer to Jesus as “rabbi,” which means “teacher” (for example, Matt. 23:8; Mark 9:5; John 1:38). Rabbinic Judaism is a direct descendant of the Pharisaic movement of Jesus’ time and still holds to the ideal of helping Jews express their devotion to God and live out God’s justice, no matter where they live in the world.

If Jesus had so much in common with the Pharisees, why did Jesus have so many harsh things to say about them?

While Jesus probably did have intense debates with the Pharisees and other Jewish religious leaders in his time, the intense exchanges between Jesus and the Pharisees that we find in the Gospels are reflections of a much later conflict. The Gospels were written thirty to sixty years

after Jesus’ resurrection at a time when the church was beginning to separate from Judaism and find its own path. Jewish followers of Jesus were being thrown out of synagogues because they insisted that Jesus was the messiah (John 9:22). In addition, the Gospels reflect the Gentile mission, heavily influenced by Paul, who questioned the Jewish law. Some of the strong language Jesus uses against the Pharisees (as in Matt. 23:29–36) makes it appear as though Jesus himself is separating from Judaism, but this perception is mistaken.

Christians today sometimes have the impression that Jesus was against Judaism, but in fact Jesus was a devout Jew. In Jesus’ time, no one questioned Jesus’ Jewishness. It was not until a generation after Jesus, when Paul became an apostle to the Gentiles (non-Jews), that the efficacy of Jewish law and practice for Gentiles come under closer scrutiny and a separate standard was set for non-Jews. Though Jesus may have reached out to Gentiles during his ministry, we need to be careful not to read Paul’s abrogation of the law back into the time of Jesus and retroactively condemn Jewish

practices as antithetical to who Jesus was and what he stood for. *The Misunderstood Jew* by Amy-Jill Levine is a helpful book for understanding Jesus in the context of Judaism.

We know that Jesus could not have disagreed with all the obligations the Pharisees discussed because there is evidence Jesus followed some of them. For example, Jesus was circumcised (Luke 2:21; see Gen. 17:10–12), he prayed regularly (Luke 5:16), he wore fringes (Luke 8:44; see Num. 15:38), and he was immersed in Jewish Scripture. Christians may be surprised to hear that Jesus actually made the commandments of God even more strict in some cases: “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder,’ . . . But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment” (Matt. 5:21–26). Jesus wanted people to be even more perfect and righteous than the Pharisees (Matt. 5:20).

On the other hand, Jesus’ debates with the Pharisees indicate that he thought they were missing some deeper insights into the reasons for these laws. Perhaps not all of the Pharisees were legalistic and self-righteous, but Jesus saw these tendencies and tried to remind them that it was the spirit of the law that counted for more in God’s eyes than the letter of the law.

Two Famous Pharisees: Nicodemus and Paul

Among the Pharisees in the New Testament is a man named Nicodemus, who came to talk to Jesus by night (John 3:1–21). Nicodemus wanted to learn from Jesus, but perhaps he was afraid of what his fellow Pharisees would think of him if he visited this controversial teacher.

Another famous Pharisee was the apostle Paul (Phil. 3:5; see also Acts 23:6; 26:5 and Gal. 1:14), who once was zealous for the law but who later said that it was not necessary for Gentile converts to be circumcised or follow dietary laws in order to be Christians. It is a mistake to claim that Paul completely threw out rules; he also taught strict moral guidelines for the Gentiles that chose to follow Jewish law.

The Sabbath as a Test Case

The difficulty in Jesus’ time, as in ours, is that people wanted to be good and to follow God’s will, but they disagreed about how best to do that. For example, God

commanded that the people keep the Sabbath day holy (Exod. 20:8–11). But what did keeping it holy mean, specifically? The commandment stipulates that they were not supposed to do any work, but what constituted “work”? There was little doubt that plowing a field and cooking a meal were work, but what about lighting a fire? Might this seemingly harmless activity tempt people to do more work (like putting a kettle on the fire and then cooking or washing)? Jesus and the Pharisees, along with many others, debated the best way to go about keeping the Sabbath and other laws that God gave. They wanted to understand what God really intended.

The Pharisees confronted Jesus because he healed someone on the Sabbath (Matt. 12:10–12). For the Pharisees, healing someone constituted work. In Jesus’ time, there were some Jewish teachers who said that saving a life is more important than anything else, even on the Sabbath. A person could even violate the Sabbath to help an animal that had become stuck in a ditch. When the Pharisees criticized Jesus for healing on the Sabbath, they must have decided that he was not saving a life—that is, the person who had been blind or crippled for years was not in imminent danger of dying right that moment. But Jesus interpreted the Sabbath differently, in terms of the kingdom of God. Jesus was giving not only life but fullness of life. He reasoned that if a person could pull an animal out of a ditch on the Sabbath, why not restore a person to wholeness? Why wait until the Sabbath was over to bring the fullness of life that God offered? The Sabbath controversy is a good example of how devout Jews—Jesus and the Pharisees—disagreed about the best way to be faithful to God.

What Can We Learn?

Christians are sometimes just as guilty of legalism as the Pharisees were. For example, many Christians today single out obscure biblical texts while paying little attention to the far more common imperatives about restoring wholeness to those who suffer, obtaining justice for the poor and oppressed, and insisting on proper use of resources. Even though Christians have the best of intentions, the church sometimes lapses into the kind of Pharisaic dogmatism that Jesus denounced. Individuals and congregations can

discern other ways the letter of the law or attention to minute details obscures the big picture of the kingdom of God in Christian lives.

Something else Christians can learn from the debates between Jesus and the Pharisees is that debate itself is a good thing. Even though the Pharisees have the reputation of being dogmatic and unbending, they were, in fact, quite open-minded and open to discus-

sion. They never stopped debating about the best way to follow God's will. Christians follow this tradition as the church debates the meaning of Scripture, considers multiple interpretations, discusses theology, and prays for enlightenment on how to act.

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SAMPLE SESSION