

# Pharisees R Us

*Sermon prepared by the Rev. Douglas Clark for August 30, 2015 – Ordinary 22*

*First Congregational Church, Haddam, CT*

*“In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, diversity; in all things, charity”*

Scripture: Matthew 15:1-9

Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, “Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands before they eat.” He answered them, “And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? For God said, ‘Honor your father and your mother,’ and, ‘Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die.’ But you say that whoever tells father or mother, ‘Whatever support you might have had from me is given to God,’ then that person need not honor the father. So, for the sake of your tradition, you make void the word of God. You hypocrites! Isaiah prophesied rightly about you when he said:



‘This people honors me with their lips,  
but their hearts are far from me;  
in vain do they worship me,  
teaching human precepts as doctrines.’

It's pretty easy to be critical of hypocritical people. I mean, the person who doesn't practice what she preaches—she's an easy target. When I was in high school, I sometimes thought that the people in the church my family attended were all a bunch of hypocrites. When I was a little older and a little wiser, I realized that, yes, there were a bunch of hypocrites in that church—and I was one of them.

Some of you here might have seen comedian John Oliver's take on sleazy—and wealthy—Christian televangelists that aired a week or two ago on his show “Last Week Tonight” and has since gone viral on the internet. John Oliver showed an aerial view of one televangelist's multi-million dollar mansion that qualifies as a parsonage and is thus exempt from property taxes. He also showed clips of Creflo Dollar urging his congregation and his TV audience to buy him a \$65 million private jet, presumably so he could jet around the world and share the gospel in distant lands without having to sit next to someone on a commercial airline flight.

Since the word “hypocrite” means “someone who is wearing a mask” or “someone who is playing a role in a performance,” it would be easy to criticize such televangelists as hypocrites pretending to be Christian: “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven.”

Jesus' critique of the Pharisees is somewhat along these lines. When they accuse him of “breaking the tradition of the elders” by not practicing the purity ritual of hand-washing, he answers by pointing out that another of their traditional practices actually results in breaking one of the Ten Commandments. The practice is called “Qorban.” According to this tradition, acts of piety toward God take precedence over acts of charity toward human beings—even toward one's parents. So, for instance, if you were angry at your parents, for whatever reason, you could vent your rage by making a vow that you would donate your accumulated assets to the Temple instead of providing for your parents in their old age. The scriptural justification for this practice is found in the book of Numbers: “When a man makes a vow to the Lord, or swears an oath to bind himself by a pledge, he shall not break his word; he shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth” (Num 30:2).

I agree with the Pharisees that making and keeping promises is an important spiritual and moral practice. But this practice should be secondary to other, more important matters, what Jesus elsewhere calls the “weightier matters of the law,” such as justice and mercy. When a woman in her marriage is being constantly abused by her husband, whether verbally or physically or both, she may need to break the marriage vow of “till death do us part” for the sake of her children's well-being and her own well-being.

You may be aware of the scandals surrounding Josh Duggar, of the Duggar family famous for their now-cancelled reality show “19 and Counting.” Duggar has called himself “the biggest hypocrite ever” for the stark contrast between what he preached as the executive director of the Family Research Council and how he has actually conducted his personal life. (The Southern Poverty Law Center classifies the Family Research Council as a hate group because of their virulent and vitriolic anti-gay rhetoric and lobbying.)

John Ortberg is the author of a book with a smile-provoking and thought-provoking title: *Everybody's Normal Till You Get to Know Them*. He's also the author of a short essay on today's scripture text with the title “Pharisees Are Us,” which I've borrowed as the title of today's sermon. John Ortberg notes that “in the first century a disproportionate amount of rabbinic attention was devoted to three areas of the law: dietary rules, Sabbath-keeping and circumcision. This was in spite of the fact that rabbis would not have claimed these as the central aspects of God's will for humanity. They knew that the essence of the law was the *shema*—the loving of God with heart and soul

and strength. So why the relentless focus on dietary laws, circumcision and Sabbath-keeping?

“The answer...involves 'identity markers,' or boundaries. All groups of human beings have a tendency to be exclusive; they want to know who is inside and who is out. So they adopt identity markers—visible practices of dress or vocabulary or behavior that serve to distinguish who is inside the group from who is outside.”<sup>1</sup>

For the Pharisees of Jesus' time, and the rabbis of Matthew's time, one of these “identity markers” was the practice of ritual handwashing before meals. (This was not a marker of personal hygiene, but rather a marker of religious purity.) When they accused Jesus and his disciples of neglecting this marker of religious purity, they were seeking to demonstrate that Jesus and his disciples were not being faithful to the law of God.

The word “Pharisees” means “separated ones.” In all the tumult and the strife in Palestine in the first century of the common era, the Pharisees believed that the best way to be faithful to God and to God's law—the Torah—was to separate themselves from others, to “keep away from persons or things impure, in order to attain the degree of holiness and righteousness required in those who would commune with God.”<sup>2</sup> Among other things, the Pharisees practiced purity rituals, such as ritual hand-washing before meals, as a way to distinguish themselves from others—including from Jesus and his disciples.

One problem with this perspective is that it can easily create an “air of sanctity” or self-righteousness around the “separated ones.” Another problem is that separation through purity rituals and purity laws is always exclusive, never inclusive.

So it's not at all difficult to understand why Jesus would have a problem with the Pharisees, why he would call them hypocrites, why he would roundly denounce them. “**Woe to you**, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you lock people out of the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 23:13). Jesus said of his ministry, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matthew 15:24)—precisely those people whom the Pharisees had excluded.

So yes, it's pretty easy for us Christians to be dismissive of the Pharisees, for their air of sanctity and self-righteousness, for their exclusiveness. Except that Jesus also says to us Christians, take the log out of your own eye before you try to remove the dust mote from your neighbor's eye. (Remember also that we Christians are not Jesus, and so we're not at liberty to be dismissive of those we happen to dislike.)

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1 John Ortberg, “Pharisees Are Us,” *The Christian Century* August 23, 2003, 20. Accessed online.

2 <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/12087-pharisees>

It's not my purpose this morning to look out the window at someone I dislike, someone I feel superior to. Rather, it's my intention to invite all of us—myself included—to look in a mirror and ask, “What are my personal identity markers that serve to distinguish me from those who are outside my group?” What are our *congregational* identity markers that on some level are exclusive rather than inclusive?

Before we climb on the Pharisees-are-hypocrites bandwagon, we need to take a serious look at our own capacity for separation and exclusion, at our own practices that serve to distinguish who is inside our group from who is outside our group.

When I am being honest with myself about myself (which I hope is most of the time), I know that I am most comfortable around people who are like me: white, college-educated, middle class, theologically and politically progressive. On some subconscious level, I probably look for these kinds of “identity markers” when I meet a new person. I like to think of myself as an open, welcoming, inclusive, well-mannered, affirming kind of person (you know, the kind of person my dog thinks I am). But there's also a shadow side to my self-image: a kind of smug sanctity, a kind of willful ignorance about my capacity not to practice that which I preach.

Here's a trivial example. A few months ago, our son Ethan bought himself a car. It's a 2000 Ford Focus station wagon that's in pretty good shape. I've recently been on Ethan's case about getting the oil changed in his car—to no avail. So I went to the Car Talk website, which is connected with the public radio program of “Click and Clack, the Tappet Brothers,” Tom and Ray Magliozzi. (Sadly, Tom died a year or two ago, from Alzheimer's disease; but NPR is still broadcasting shows from the archives.)

Here's what I learned from the Car Talk guys: under normal conditions, we should change the engine oil in our vehicles every 5,000 miles (not every 3,000 miles like it says on the stickers we get). (Disclaimer: I'm not recommending this approach to automobile maintenance. I'm just telling you what I read on the Internet.)

One thing the Car Talk website does make clear that we should check things like oil level and tire pressure on a regular basis between oil changes. So I said to Ethan: be sure to check your oil level and tire pressure. A few days later, I realized that I needed to practice what I preached. So I checked the tire pressure. All four tires were properly inflated. Then I checked the oil level. To my surprise, it was down a quart. Now I need to buy a quart of 10W-30 and add it to the crankcase. Good thing I decided to practice what I preach. **Now** I can feel smug and self-righteous! **Now** I can be a Pharisee!

As you and I continue together on our journey of transition, I will be asking you, among other things, to look in the mirror of self-reflection and ask ourselves if what we practice is consistent with what we believe. I happen to think that most of what we

practice is indeed consistent with what we believe, but this kind of self-reflection will do no harm and could well be helpful to your visioning process. It's always a good thing to look at our traditions and practices, to insure that they are consistent with Jesus' message and ministry.

Thanks and praise be to God! Amen.