

The Pharisee

A Search for What a Pharisee Truly Is

NATHANAEL HANAN



Updated 2026-07-18

Contents

Contents	2
1 The Separated Ones	3
2 Severed unto God	5
3 The Heart God Had Already Named	6
4 Guardians of the Word	9
5 How They Came to Power	11
6 Who They Claimed to Be	13
7 What They Actually Did	15
8 What Drove Them: The Word, the Money, the Praise	17
9 Who Is Their God?	19
10 How They Went Astray	21
11 What They Did with the Gifts of the Spirit	23
12 Why They Rejected Him Though They Saw the Miracles	25
13 How They Attacked the Faithful and the Lord	27
14 The Mask: Who They Were in Reality	29
15 Where the Road Ends	31
16 The Pharisee Born Again	34
17 The Same Leaven Today	36
18 The Pharisee in the Mirror	39

Chapter 1

The Separated Ones

Start with the word. "Pharisee" is a name, and the name already tells us most of what this book will show.

The word that comes into our English Bibles as *Pharisee* is the Greek pharisaïos Φαρισαῖος^{G5330}. The lexicons render it without flattery: *a separatist*, one who is *exclusively religious*, a *Jewish sectary*. But the Greek is a borrowed coat. Underneath it lies a Hebrew root, and the men who wrote the Gospels knew it well. The name is built upon the verb parash פָּרַשׁ^{H6567} — *to separate, to make distinct, to declare*.

So at the root a Pharisee is *a separated one* — a man set apart, marked off, distinct from the common run. And taken alone there is nothing evil in that. To be separated unto holiness is a high and holy thing, as we shall see. The tragedy of the Pharisee is not that he was separated. It is what his separation became.

For the same root carries a second face. Alongside *to separate* and *to declare*, the lexicon lists, by implication, *to wound*, *to pierce*, *to sting*. The book of Proverbs reaches for that very sense:

Proverbs 23:32, KJV · At the last it biteth like a serpent, and stingeth like an adder.

The word translated "stingeth" is parash. One root, two faces: *to set apart*, and *to sting*. Hold them together, because the whole story of the Pharisee lives in the space between them — a people set apart to declare the living God, who ended by stinging the faithful like an adder. And when the Lord Jesus at last pronounced his judgment upon them, he reached, whether they knew it or not, for the very image their own name had buried:

Matthew 23:33, KJV · Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell?

The separated ones had become the stinging serpents. That is not a poet's flourish. It is written into the root of the word they wore with pride.

There is one more word we must carry from the start, for it is the word the Lord used most often to expose them: *hypocrite*, the Greek hypokritēs ὑποκριτής^{G5273}. In ordinary

Greek it did not first mean a liar at all. It meant *an actor* — the man who stands on the stage and plays a part behind a mask, speaking lines that are not his own. Keep that picture. The Pharisee, in the end, is a separated man playing a holy part for an audience of men, while behind the mask the heart is somewhere else entirely.

A word, then, that means *set apart* and *sting*; a man who plays a part. But no child is born a serpent, and no man begins as an actor. The sting was an end, not a beginning. To understand how it came to this, we must go back — back behind the sect, behind the name, to the day God first reached into the nations and severed a people for himself.

Chapter 2

Severed unto God

The idea of a separated people is not the Pharisee's invention. It is God's.

When the LORD brought Israel out of Egypt, he did not merely rescue them; he set them apart. He drew a line around them and called everything inside it his own. The command that gathers it all together stands in Leviticus:

Leviticus 20:26, KJV · And ye shall be holy unto me: for I the LORD am holy, and have severed you from other people, that ye should be mine.

Read that verse slowly, because every later distortion is a distortion of it. Notice first that the separation is real and commanded. God genuinely severed Israel from the nations — different food, different days, different worship, different lives. To be holy is, by definition, to be set apart. There is no apology to be made for it.

But notice second, and this is the hinge of everything, the *direction* and the *purpose* of the severing. They are severed *from* the peoples, but they are severed *unto* the LORD — "that ye should be mine." The line was never the point. Belonging to God was the point. The separation was a fence, and on the far side of the fence stood a Person. To be set apart meant to be set apart *for him* — near to him, his treasure, his own.

Here, already, we can see the shape of the disease that was coming, though it had not yet come. A man can keep a fence with great care and forget entirely the One the fence was built around. He can love the line for its own sake. He can begin to measure his holiness by how far he stands from other people rather than by how near he stands to God. He can turn a gift — *you are mine* — into a boast — *I am not as they are*. When that happens, separation curdles. The same wall that was meant to guard nearness to God becomes a monument to distance from men.

That is precisely the road the Pharisee would walk. He would inherit a true and holy calling and keep it in his hand long after he had lost it in his heart. He would guard the fence and lose the Father.

And we are not guessing at this, nor reading the New Testament back into the Old. For long before any man bore the name *Pharisee*, the prophets of Israel watched this exact corruption happen in front of them — and God named it for what it was.

Chapter 3

The Heart God Had Already Named

The Pharisee is older than the Pharisees. The sect has a date; the heart does not. Centuries before the name appears, the prophets are already describing the man precisely — outward worship stretched tight over an empty heart — and God is already pronouncing against it.

Hear Isaiah. The LORD looks at a people crowded into his courts, lips moving, hands lifted, and says:

Isaiah 29:13, KJV · Wherefore the Lord said, 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.

Lips near, heart far, and a fear of God learned by human rules. That is the Pharisee drawn from life — and it is no accident that, when the Lord Jesus finally confronted the Pharisees over their traditions, he framed no new charge. He read them their indictment straight from this passage of Isaiah:

Mark 7:6, KJV · He answered and said unto them, Well hath Esaias prophesied of you hypocrites, as it is written, This people honoureth me with their lips, but their heart is far from me.

And Isaiah goes further, putting the separatist's boast into actual words:

Isaiah 65:5, KJV · Which say, Stand by thyself, come not near to me; for I am holier than thou. These are a smoke in my nose, a fire that burneth all the day.

"I am holier than thou." There it is, naked, generations before the sect was born — separation twisted into contempt, holiness turned into a fence against other men. And God's response is not admiration but disgust: *a smoke in my nose*. The very piety the man is proud of is what God cannot stand to smell.

What, then, did God want instead? The prophets are not shy. They say it again and again, in a single steady refrain: he wanted the heart, and the heart shows itself in mercy and obedience, not in the volume of religion.

First Samuel 15:22, KJV · And Samuel said, Hath the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams.

Hosea 6:6, KJV · For I desired mercy, and not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings.

Micah 6:8, KJV · He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the LORD require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?

Hosea's line — *I desired mercy, and not sacrifice* — the Lord Jesus would one day fling twice into the teeth of the Pharisees. To those who faulted him for eating with sinners he said, "I will have mercy, and not sacrifice: for I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (Matthew 9:13); and to those who faulted his disciples for plucking corn on the sabbath, "if ye had known what this meaneth, I will have mercy, and not sacrifice, ye would not have condemned the guiltless" (Matthew 12:7). They had got it exactly backwards: scrupulous at the altar, merciless at the gate. And Isaiah had already told them what God thinks of worship offered by unwashed hearts:

Isaiah 1:15-17, KJV · And when ye spread forth your hands, I will hide mine eyes from you: yea, when ye make many prayers, I will not hear: your hands are full of blood. Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes; cease to do evil; learn to do well; seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow.

The diagnosis is the same in every age, because the LORD measures by something man cannot see:

First Samuel 16:7, KJV · For the LORD seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the LORD looketh on the heart.

And Proverbs names the type so exactly that it could serve as a portrait of the Pharisee himself:

Proverbs 30:12, KJV · There is a generation that are pure in their own eyes, and yet is not washed from their filthiness.

Pure in their own eyes, and not washed. Remember that line; we will meet it again at a supper table, in a man named Simon, and in the Lord's words about a cup that is scoured on the outside and filthy within.

So the soil was old. When at last the name *Pharisee* grew up out of the ground, it grew in earth God had already condemned a thousand years before. But it grew at a particular moment, in answer to a particular wound — and to that moment we now turn.

Chapter 4

Guardians of the Word

The name was born in the ashes of Babylon.

When Jerusalem fell and the temple burned, Israel lost almost everything that had made her a nation — her land, her king, her altar, her holy city. In the captivity she was left holding one thing: the word of God, the law of Moses, written. And a people who have lost all else but the Word of God will hold to it all the more tightly.

So when the exiles returned, a new kind of man rose to the front. Not the priest at the altar, and not the king on the throne, but the *scribe* over the scroll — the man whose whole calling was to know, to copy, to guard, and to explain the law. Ezra was the first and greatest of them. And on the day the law was read aloud to the restored people, Nehemiah records how it was done:

Nehemiah 8:8, KJV · So they read in the book in the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading.

That small word "distinctly" is worth stopping over. In the Hebrew it is our root again — *parash*, the same root that stands beneath the name *Pharisee* — *to make distinct, to separate out, to declare plainly*. It is a rare word, standing in only five places in all the Hebrew Scriptures; and two of those five carry the very two faces we are tracing — here it means to declare a thing distinctly, and in Proverbs it means to sting like an adder (Proverbs 23:32). The contrast is built into the scarcity of the word itself. The Levites that day were doing *parash*: separating out the sense of Scripture so that the people could understand and obey. It was a good and beautiful work, the holiest kind of labour. And the whole later movement of the *separated ones* grew straight out of it — the careful setting-apart of the law's meaning, the iron resolve that the catastrophe of exile must never come again, that this time Israel would keep the commandments to the last letter.

To make certain of it, the guardians did something that seemed only prudent. Around the commandments of God they built a hedge of their own commandments — extra rules, fences set well back from the line, so that a man would be halted long before he ever reached the real transgression. Wash in this manner; walk no further than this; tithe even the herbs of the garden. The intention was reverent: to honour the law by guarding it on every side.

But here is the quiet hinge of the whole tragedy. A fence built to protect the word can, in time, be honoured *above* the word. The guard set over the treasure can come to act as though he himself were the treasure. The men who separated out the meaning of Scripture became, at last, a people separated by their own additions to it — and the additions grew, generation upon generation, until, as the Lord would one day charge them to their faces, they made the word of God of none effect through their tradition.

Between Nehemiah's day and the Gospels lie nearly four centuries, and in the middle of them came the fire that forged the sect. Outside the canon, in the books of the Maccabees and the histories of Josephus, we can watch it happen. When the Greek tyrant Antiochus Epiphanes set out to stamp the faith of Israel off the earth — defiling the temple, forbidding the Scriptures, forcing the people to eat unclean things and forsake the covenant on pain of death — there rose a company of devout men the records call the *Hasidim*, the *Assideans*, "the pious": men voluntarily devoted to the law, who would die rather than defile themselves. They were the most active supporters of Judas Maccabeus in his war for religious freedom; and their beginning, as one old authority fairly puts it, was patriotism and faithfulness to the covenant. So far it is a noble story, and we should honour it as one.

But when the war was won and the victors — the Maccabees' own house, the Hasmoneans — seized the throne and the high priesthood together and began to bargain with heathen Rome for advantage, the pious recoiled. To them the very thought of alliance with the heathen was treason against God; they had been *separated* unto him, and separation now became their banner. About this time the historians mark a change of name: the *Hasidim*, the saints, came to be called *Perushim*, the Pharisees — "separatists" instead of "saints." The first clear glimpse of them as a party is an ugly one — a Pharisee named Eleazar publicly demanding that the ruler John Hyrcanus surrender the high priesthood, with a slur upon his mother — and from that insult the breach ran on into open enmity. A movement born of covenant faithfulness had hardened into a party defined by what, and by whom, it stood apart from. So completely would it come at last to shape the nation's soul that a historian can compress the whole age into four words: Judaism became Pharisaism.

And there was something else the guardianship gave them, something they may never have set out to seek. To hold the key to the Scriptures, among a people whose whole life *was* the Scriptures, is to hold power. To that — to how the keepers of the word became the rulers of the people — we now turn.

Chapter 5

How They Came to Power

How does a religious party come to rule? Not, in this case, by armies. The Pharisees came to power the way teachers come to power: by holding the one thing everyone else needs and cannot reach without them.

They held the Scriptures. In a nation whose entire identity was the law of God, the men who could read, interpret, and apply that law held the keys to the public conscience. The Lord named it exactly:

Luke 11:52, KJV · Woe unto you, lawyers! for ye have taken away the key of knowledge: ye entered not in yourselves, and them that were entering in ye hindered.

The *key of knowledge*. Whoever holds the key controls the door. By the time of the Gospels the scribes and Pharisees had so thoroughly taken that seat that the Lord could describe it as a settled fact:

Matthew 23:2, KJV · Saying, The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat.

To sit in Moses' seat was to claim the authority to declare what God's law meant for every part of daily life. They had become the arbiters of orthodoxy — the men whose approval decided who was inside the faith and who was cast out of it. You can hear that assumed authority drip from their own words when the temple officers came back having failed to arrest Jesus:

John 7:48, KJV · Have any of the rulers or of the Pharisees believed on him?

As if to say: *we are the measure of truth; if we have not approved it, it is not to be believed.*

And they held a lever of fearful power: the synagogue. To belong to Israel was to belong to the synagogue, and the rulers could put a man *out*. Excommunication was no mere inconvenience; it was social and religious death — a man severed from his people, his worship, and often his livelihood. John lets us feel the fear it bred, first in the parents of a man born blind whom Jesus had healed:

John 9:22, KJV · These words spake his parents, because they feared the Jews: for the Jews had agreed already, that if any man did confess that he was Christ, he should be put out of the synagogue.

— and then even in rulers who secretly believed:

John 12:42, KJV · Nevertheless among the chief rulers also many believed on him; but because of the Pharisees they did not confess him, lest they should be put out of the synagogue.

That is power in its purest form: when grown men who believe the truth dare not say so for fear of you. They sat, too, in the council, the great Sanhedrin — Gamaliel among them, a man “had in reputation among all the people” (Acts 5:34), and Saul of Tarsus after him, who would one day cry out in that very council, “I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee” (Acts 23:6). Their reputation for strict, costly piety had won them the trust of the common people, and that trust was the very ground they stood on.

The historians let us measure that influence. Josephus — himself a Pharisee — records that they had so won the multitude that whatever they said against a king or a high priest was believed at once, while the Sadducees could carry only the rich. That made them a power no ruler could safely ignore. When Queen Salome Alexandra came to the throne, she governed, in effect, by placing herself wholly in their hands; the party that had recoiled from the Hasmoneans’ worldliness now wielded the Hasmoneans’ power. By the time the Gospels open they no longer needed a crown of their own. They held something steadier than a throne — the conscience of the common people — and from that seat they could bless a man or break him.

Now mark what their power was made of. It was made of the word of God. They rose because they were the keepers of Scripture; the people honoured them as the most faithful guardians of the holy law. The authority was, in its origin, a stewardship — held in trust, for the people, under God. The whole question of this book is what they did with it. For power that begins as a stewardship of the word can quietly turn into a possession to be defended at any cost — even, in the end, against the Word made flesh.

But before we follow that descent, let us be fair, and let us be exact, about who these men claimed to be — and, at their best, truly were.

Chapter 6

Who They Claimed to Be

Let us give the Pharisee his due, fully and without grudging. If we are to understand him — and, harder still, to find him in ourselves — we must first refuse the cartoon. These were not lazy men, nor scoffers, nor open sinners. They were the most earnest, most observant, most respected religious men in Israel. That is the whole point. The warning of the Pharisee is not a warning against the obviously wicked. It is a warning against the devout.

Hear how Paul, who had been one of them, described the life — under oath, before a king:

Acts 26:5, KJV · Which knew me from the beginning, if they would testify, that after the most straitest sect of our religion I lived a Pharisee.

The *straitest* — the strictest, the most exacting — sect of the whole religion. They held themselves to a standard far above the common man. They fasted not the one required day a year but twice in every week. They tithed not only their income but the very herbs in the garden pot:

Matthew 23:23, KJV · Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone.

Hear that last line carefully, for we shall need it again: *these ought ye to have done*. The Lord does not mock the tithing of herbs. He says plainly they ought to have done it. The fault was never in the doing of the small things; it was in leaving the great things undone while the small ones were polished.

And on one great matter the Pharisees were simply right — gloriously right — against their rivals. The Sadducees, the priestly aristocracy, denied the resurrection, denied angels, denied the spirit. The Pharisees stood firm:

Acts 23:8, KJV · For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, neither angel, nor spirit: but the Pharisees confess both.

They believed in a coming Messiah. They believed the dead would rise. They believed God would judge the world and reward every man. In all of this they confessed the truth, and Paul could stand in their own court and say it without blushing: "of the hope and resurrection of the dead I am called in question" (Acts 23:6).

This is who they claimed to be, and not without cause: the guardians of the truth, the teachers of Israel, the guides of the people toward God. Paul paints the self-portrait of such a man, and he knows every line of it from the inside:

Romans 2:17-20, KJV · Behold, thou art called a Jew, and retest in the law, and makest thy boast of God, and knowest his will, and approvest the things that are more excellent, being instructed out of the law; and art confident that thou thyself art a guide of the blind, a light of them which are in darkness, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of babes, which hast the form of knowledge and of the truth in the law.

A guide of the blind. A light to those in darkness. A teacher of the simple. They had a zeal for God that few could match, and Paul grants it without reserve: "they have a zeal of God" (Romans 10:2). The Lord himself could point the listening crowds to the seat of Moses these men occupied and say, "whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe and do" (Matthew 23:3).

So the claim stood high, and a great deal of it was true. Here was earnest devotion, sound doctrine on the resurrection, painstaking obedience, real and burning zeal. And that is precisely why what follows is so terrible, and so searching for every religious heart. For now we must lay the claim down beside the record, and ask the plain, unsparing question: with all of this, what did these men actually *do*?

Chapter 7

What They Actually Did

Set the high claim down beside the record, and the first thing that strikes you is not cruelty. It is *reaction*. Wherever mercy moved, the Pharisee murmured.

When sinners crowded in to hear Jesus, here was the response of the most religious men in the land:

Luke 15:1-2, KJV · Then drew near unto him all the publicans and sinners for to hear him. And the Pharisees and scribes murmured, saying, This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them.

Read it again. The lost are coming home, and the guardians of God complain. The thing that should have made heaven rejoice made them mutter. That single reflex — irritation at grace given to the wrong people — runs through everything they did.

It turned even the Sabbath into a weapon. The day God gave for rest and mercy became, in their hands, a trap laid for the merciful. When a man with a withered hand stood in the synagogue, they were not watching the man; they were watching Jesus — “whether he would heal him on the sabbath day; that they might accuse him” (Mark 3:2). A ruler of the synagogue, indignant that a bent woman was made straight on the Sabbath, was answered by the Lord with one word: *hypocrite* (Luke 13:15). They even “came, and tempting desired him that he would shew them a sign from heaven” (Matthew 16:1) — when heaven itself was standing in front of them. And again and again they set their own tradition above the plain commandment of God. Here is the sharpest instance, in the Lord’s own words:

Mark 7:9-13, KJV · And he said unto them, Full well ye reject the commandment of God, that ye may keep your own tradition. For Moses said, Honour thy father and thy mother; and, Whoso curseth father or mother, let him die the death: but ye say, If a man shall say to his father or mother, It is Corban, that is to say, a gift, by whatsoever thou mightest be profited by me; he shall be free. And ye suffer him no more to do ought for his father or his mother; making the word of God of none effect through your tradition, which ye have delivered: and many such like things do ye.

Look closely at what they had built. A man could withhold support from his own aged parents by declaring the money "Corban," dedicated to God — and their tradition called him holy for it, while the fifth commandment lay broken in the dust. The fence had eaten the field. The guardians of the word had found a way to keep the rule and break the command, and to feel righteous doing it. And there is a bitter irony buried in the very word they chose: *Corban* renders the Hebrew qorbān קָרְבָּן^{H7133}, a gift *brought near* to the altar, which grows from the root qārav קָרַב^{H7126}, *to draw near, to approach* God. The one word for drawing near to God had been turned into a device for pushing a father and mother away.

And the weight of their religion always fell on other people:

Matthew 23:4-7, KJV · For they bind heavy burdens and grievous to be borne, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers. But all their works they do for to be seen of men: they make broad their phylacteries, and enlarge the borders of their garments, and love the uppermost rooms at feasts, and the chief seats in the synagogues, and greetings in the markets, and to be called of men, Rabbi, Rabbi.

There is the whole man in five verses. Burdens for others, none for themselves. Works done to be *seen*. Robes widened, prayer-boxes broadened, best seats sought, public greetings savoured, the title *Rabbi* loved. Their alms were sounded with a trumpet, their prayers offered standing on the corners, their fasts worn on disfigured faces, "that they may be seen of men" (Matthew 6:2, 5, 16). Every act of devotion had quietly turned to face the crowd.

And the proportion was monstrous. They would cross the world to make a single convert, and demand a journey for a tithe of seeds, while justice and mercy were trampled at home:

Matthew 23:15, KJV · Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye compass sea and land to make one proselyte, and when he is made, ye make him twofold more the child of hell than yourselves.

Matthew 23:24, KJV · Ye blind guides, which strain at a gnat, and swallow a camel.

This was the record. Not the deeds of careless men, but the deeds of careful men whose care had gone entirely to the surface. And that forces the question that the next chapter must answer: if such devotion could curdle into this, what was really *driving* it? What did these men actually love?

Chapter 8

What Drove Them: The Word, the Money, the Praise

What drove the Pharisee — the word of God, or the love of money? The honest answer is: both, but in an order. It began with the word, and it ended in the money and the praise the word could buy. That descent is the secret of the whole sect.

It began well. No one can read the record and deny that these men started in earnest zeal for God. Paul, looking back on his own Pharisee years and on his countrymen still in them, says it plainly and even tenderly:

Romans 10:2, KJV · For I bear them record that they have a zeal of God, but not according to knowledge.

A zeal of God. Real fire, real devotion. Paul calls his own former life "exceedingly zealous of the traditions of my fathers" (Galatians 1:14). So the engine, at the start, was the word. They loved the law; they gave their lives to it.

But watch what the word, once they were its acknowledged keepers, began to bring them. It brought them the chief seats and the public greetings and the title men loved (we have already seen them savour these). It brought them standing, security, and, plainly, money. Luke draws back the curtain in a single, devastating phrase:

Luke 16:14, KJV · And the Pharisees also, who were covetous, heard all these things: and they derided him.

Covetous. The keepers of the holy law were lovers of money — and when the Lord taught that no man can serve both God and mammon, they did not repent; they sneered. Their covetousness had grown teeth. The Lord charged them with devouring the very houses of widows under a cloak of long prayers:

Matthew 23:14, KJV · Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye devour widows' houses, and for a pretence make long prayer: therefore ye shall receive the greater damnation.

The long prayer was the cover; the widow's house was the prize. He told them the truth about the inside of their scoured cups: "within they are full of extortion and excess" (Matthew 23:25). The word had become a trade.

And deeper even than the money was the hunger for the praise of men. This, more than gold, was their true wage. When his own miracles had half-persuaded the rulers, John tells us what held them back:

John 12:42-43, KJV · Nevertheless among the chief rulers also many believed on him; but because of the Pharisees they did not confess him, lest they should be put out of the synagogue: for they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God.

There is the order, exact and final. *They loved the praise of men more than the praise of God.* The Lord had already exposed it as the very reason they could not believe:

John 5:44, KJV · How can ye believe, which receive honour one of another, and seek not the honour that cometh from God only?

So which was it — the word or the money? It was the word *first*, and then the money, the status, and the applause that custody of the word delivered into their hands. The gift of God's law became a means to the praise of men, and the love of the means slowly strangled the love of the Giver. They never stopped handling holy things. They only stopped doing it for God.

Which raises a question more terrible than any we have asked. If a man keeps the form of God's worship but lives for money and the praise of men — then whatever his lips confess, *who is actually his God?*

Chapter 9

Who Is Their God?

Every man has a god — the thing he truly serves, the master he cannot finally disobey. The Pharisees had no doubt about the answer they would give. Their God was the LORD, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; they were his guardians, his teachers, his separated ones. They said so to the Lord's face:

John 8:41, KJV · Ye do the deeds of your father. Then said they to him, We be not born of fornication; we have one Father, even God.

That was the claim: *we have one Father, even God*. But the Lord Jesus would not let the claim stand on its own word. A man's true father is known by whose works he does, and the Lord pressed exactly there:

John 8:42-44, KJV · Jesus said unto them, If God were your Father, ye would love me: for I proceeded forth and came from God; neither came I of myself, but he sent me. Why do ye not understand my speech? even because ye cannot hear my word. Ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and abode not in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaketh a lie, he speaketh of his own: for he is a liar, and the father of it.

These are the most fearful words ever spoken to religious men, and they were spoken not to pagans, not to harlots, but to the strictest worshippers in Israel. *Ye are of your father the devil*. Note the Lord's logic, for it is not cruelty but exposure: the devil is a murderer and a liar — and these men were even then plotting murder (verse 40, "ye seek to kill me") and resisting the truth. By their works, not their words, their true paternity stood revealed. They confessed God with the mouth and did the lusts of the devil with the hand.

How can such a reversal happen to devout men? Because a man's real god is not the one he names but the one he serves, and the Pharisee served three idols dressed as worship. The first was *mammon*. The Lord had said no man can serve two masters —

Luke 16:13, KJV · No servant can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon.

— and the very next verse records that the covetous Pharisees, hearing it, derided him (Luke 16:14). They had chosen mammon and would not be told. The second idol was *the praise of men*, which they loved more than the praise of God (John 12:43; 5:44). The third, and the deepest, was *self* — their own righteousness, set up as the thing to be admired and defended:

Luke 16:15, KJV · And he said unto them, Ye are they which justify yourselves before men; but God knoweth your hearts: for that which is highly esteemed among men is abomination in the sight of God.

A god of money, a god of reputation, a god of self — and Isaiah had long ago named the kind of deity such men actually worship: not the living God, but a god remade in the image of human rules, “their fear toward me is taught by the precept of men” (Isaiah 29:13). They had carved a god they could manage, who asked for clean cups and broad phylacteries and never for the heart.

This is why the question *who is their God?* matters so much. A man does not fall into the devil’s family by denying religion. He falls into it by keeping the form of worship while serving money, reputation, and self — and so, without ever leaving the synagogue, comes to do the works of the liar and the murderer. Which is exactly the path we must now trace step by step: not the sudden apostasy of a scoffer, but the slow, respectable straying of the devout. How did men who began with a zeal of God go so far astray?

Chapter 10

How They Went Astray

No one becomes a Pharisee in a day. The straying we are describing is not a leap but a drift — slow, respectable, and lit at every step by the conviction that one is doing right. That is what makes it so dangerous. A scandalous fall frightens a man back to God; a slow drift never frightens anyone, because at no single point does it feel like falling.

The engine that drove the whole drift was one thing: a righteousness of their own. The Lord drew the portrait in a single line, telling a parable —

Luke 18:9, KJV · And he spake this parable unto certain which trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others.

There is the seed of everything. *Trusting in themselves that they were righteous* — and the inevitable second half, *despising others*. A righteousness you build yourself must be defended, compared, and ranked; and the moment you measure your standing by the distance between you and other men, contempt is already in the blood. Paul, who had run the whole course, names the fatal mechanism exactly:

Romans 10:3, KJV · For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God.

Going about to establish their own. That is the labour of a lifetime, and it cannot stop, because it is never finished. It must keep adding, refining, fencing. And so the drift moved in steps, each one reasonable.

First, they added their traditions to the word as a protective hedge — and then taught the hedge as though it were the word:

Mark 7:7, KJV · Howbeit in vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men.

The commandments of men, taught for doctrines. The fence had been promoted to Scripture. Second, with the outward rules multiplying, the heart was quietly left behind — exactly as Isaiah had foreseen, lips drawing near while the heart withdrew far (Isaiah

29:13). Third, the corruption worked unseen, the way leaven works through dough — and the Lord chose precisely that image to warn his disciples:

Luke 12:1, KJV · In the mean time, when there were gathered together an innumerable multitude of people, insomuch that they trode one upon another, he began to say unto his disciples first of all, Beware ye of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy.

Leaven is the perfect picture of how they went astray: a little of it, hidden, silent, spreads until it has changed the whole lump. No one decided to become a hypocrite. The leaven simply did its work, year by year, while the outside of the cup was kept ever more bright. Fourth and last, the drift produced blindness — and the blind, set up as guides, can only lead others into the same ditch:

Matthew 15:13-14, KJV · But he answered and said, Every plant, which my heavenly Father hath not planted, shall be rooted up. Let them alone: they be blind leaders of the blind. And if the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch.

That is how they went astray: not by abandoning religion but by perfecting the wrong kind of it — building a righteousness of their own, fencing it with human rules, losing the heart inside the fence, and going blind without ever knowing the lights had gone out. And a man that far gone will do something almost impossible to believe. Confronted with the unmistakable power of God, he will call it the power of the devil.

Chapter 11

What They Did with the Gifts of the Spirit

Here we reach the darkest deed of all, and we must walk into it carefully, because it tells us how far the drift had carried them. The question is simple: when the Spirit of God worked openly before their eyes, what did the Pharisees do with it?

They called it the work of the devil.

A man was brought to Jesus — possessed, blind, and unable to speak, a triple prison — and the Lord set him wholly free. The crowd gasped and began to wonder aloud whether this could be the promised Son of David. And the response of the separated ones was this:

Matthew 12:22-24, KJV · Then was brought unto him one possessed with a devil, blind, and dumb: and he healed him, insomuch that the blind and dumb both spake and saw. And all the people were amazed, and said, Is not this the son of David? But when the Pharisees heard it, they said, This fellow doth not cast out devils, but by Beelzebub the prince of the devils.

Mark what has happened. They did not deny the miracle — they could not; the man stood there seeing and speaking. They could not bear what the miracle meant, so they assigned it to hell. The undeniable goodness of God they branded as the craft of Satan. The Lord answered by naming exactly whose power they had just slandered:

Matthew 12:28, KJV · But if I cast out devils by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God is come unto you.

It was the Spirit of God. And to look full into the work of the Holy Spirit and call it the work of the devil is not one sin among many; it is the sin that closes the door from the inside. The Lord said so in the gravest words he ever spoke:

Matthew 12:31-32, KJV · Wherefore I say unto you, All manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men: but the blasphemy against the Holy Ghost shall not be forgiven unto men. And whosoever speaketh a word

against the Son of man, it shall be forgiven him: but whosoever speaketh against the Holy Ghost, it shall not be forgiven him, neither in this world, neither in the world to come.

This is what the Pharisee finally did with the gifts of the Spirit: he watched the Spirit heal, and he said *Beelzebub*. It was the natural end of the long drift. A man who has spent his life defending his own righteousness cannot welcome a power that exposes it; and a power he cannot welcome, he must explain away — and the only explanation left, once the miracle is undeniable, is to call God the devil. Stephen, dying under their stones, gave the whole history in a sentence:

Acts 7:51, KJV · Ye stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Ghost: as your fathers did, so do ye.

Ye do always resist the Holy Ghost. This was not a single bad day in Galilee. It was the settled posture of a heart that had chosen its own righteousness over God's, and would therefore fight the Spirit of God to the death — even crediting his works to Satan. Which presses the question that has been building under every chapter: if the miracles were real, and they knew it, why would such men not simply bow and believe?

Chapter 12

Why They Rejected Him Though They Saw the Miracles

Let us put to rest a comfortable lie we tell ourselves — that if only we had *seen* the miracles, we would have believed. The Pharisees saw them. They saw more of them, and closer, than anyone alive. And they did not believe. Their unbelief was not caused by a lack of evidence, and that is the most sobering fact in their whole story.

They never denied the miracles. Nicodemus, a Pharisee, said it for them all when he came by night: "we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him" (John 3:2). *We know*. Even gathered in council to plot against him, they conceded the facts:

John 11:47-48, KJV · Then gathered the chief priests and the Pharisees a council, and said, What do we? for this man doeth many miracles. If we let him thus alone, all men will believe on him: and the Romans shall come and take away both our place and nation.

Read that and you have the answer to the whole question. *This man doeth many miracles* — admitted. And in the very same breath: *the Romans shall come and take away our place*. They rejected him not because the works were doubtful but because the works were a threat. Belief would cost them their place — their power, their position, their nation, their standing. They weighed the Son of God against their seat in Moses' chair, and they kept the chair. John states the bare fact and then the deeper one:

John 12:37-40, KJV · But though he had done so many miracles before them, yet they believed not on him: that the saying of Esaias the prophet might be fulfilled, which he spake, Lord, who hath believed our report? and to whom hath the arm of the Lord been revealed? Therefore they could not believe, because that Esaias said again, He hath blinded their eyes, and hardened their heart; that they should not see with their eyes, nor understand with their heart, and be converted, and I should heal them.

They could not believe. But notice why they could-not had fallen on them: it was the judgment that comes upon a will that has long said *will not*. They had "loved the praise

of men more than the praise of God” (John 12:43); they had “loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil” (John 3:19); they had refused the light so often that at last the eyes that would not see were made unable to see. And under it all lay a motive uglier than fear, which even a pagan judge could read on their faces. When they handed Jesus to Pilate, Pilate saw straight through them:

Matthew 27:18, KJV · For he knew that for envy they had delivered him.

Envy — the Greek *phthonos* φθόνος^{G5355}, not *zēlos* ζήλος^{G2205}, the zeal that can burn for good, but its malignant shadow, the begrudging of a goodness one cannot share; and of every motive the Gospels might have named for the handing over of Jesus, this is the one Matthew and Mark alike fix upon. The goodness they could not produce, and could not deny, they could not endure. And so they reached the strange, terrible condition the Lord named to them after he opened the blind man’s eyes — the one disease that cannot be cured, because the patient insists he is well:

John 9:41, KJV · Jesus said unto them, If ye were blind, ye should have no sin: but now ye say, We see; therefore your sin remaineth.

There is the reason they rejected him though they saw the miracles. It was never the evidence. It was the will — a will that loved its place, its praise, and its own righteousness too much to bow; a will so set against the light that the very claim to see, *we see*, became the proof of the blindness. Pride does not lack reasons to disbelieve. Pride simply cannot kneel. And a will like that, cornered by a goodness it cannot bear, does not retreat. It attacks.

Chapter 13

How They Attacked the Faithful and the Lord

Recall the second face of their name. The root parash means *to separate* — but it also means *to sting like an adder*. In the way they dealt with the Lord and with everyone who followed him, the second meaning came fully out of its sheath. The separated ones became the stinging serpents, and the sting fell in stages, each one harder than the last.

It began with *questions* — not honest questions, but traps. They came with flattery on their lips and a snare in their hands:

Matthew 22:15-18, KJV · Then went the Pharisees, and took counsel how they might entangle him in his talk. And they sent out unto him their disciples with the Herodians, saying, Master, we know that thou art true, and teachest the way of God in truth, neither carest thou for any man: for thou regardest not the person of men. Tell us therefore, What thinkest thou? Is it lawful to give tribute unto Caesar, or not? But Jesus perceived their wickedness, and said, Why tempt ye me, ye hypocrites?

When the questions failed, they turned to *slander*. The miracles they could not deny, they poisoned — “by Beelzebub,” we have heard them say; “this man is not of God,” they ruled over the man born blind (John 9:16). Then they reached for *unholy alliances*. The Pharisees despised the worldly Herodians; yet to destroy Jesus they joined hands even with them:

Mark 3:6, KJV · And the Pharisees went forth, and straightway took counsel with the Herodians against him, how they might destroy him.

Next came *isolation* — the synagogue weapon. They could not yet reach Jesus, so they struck the man he had healed, interrogated him, reviled him, and cast him out for the crime of telling the truth about his own eyes:

John 9:34, KJV · They answered and said unto him, Thou wast altogether born in sins, and dost thou teach us? And they cast him out.

And at the end of the road was *murder*. All the questioning, slander, and scheming had only ever been moving toward one fixed purpose:

John 11:53, KJV · Then from that day forth they took counsel together for to put him to death.

Even that was not the end of the sting, for what they did to the Shepherd they would do to the sheep. The most zealous Pharisee of his generation tells us, in his own words, how he hunted the followers of Jesus — and remember, this was done as an act of religious devotion:

Acts 26:9-11, KJV · I verily thought with myself, that I ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. Which thing I also did in Jerusalem: and many of the saints did I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests; and when they were put to death, I gave my voice against them. And I punished them oft in every synagogue, and compelled them to blaspheme; and being exceedingly mad against them, I persecuted them even unto strange cities.

Imprisonment, voting for executions, dragging believers from city to city — “exceedingly mad” with zeal. That last phrase is a single violent Greek word, *emmainomai ἐμμáíνομαι*^{G1693}, which appears nowhere else in the New Testament — *to rave, to be furious*. Paul reached for a word of sheer frenzy to brand his own Pharisee years: he did not merely oppose the believers, he raged against them. This is the adder’s full venom: men so certain of their own righteousness that they could murder the righteous and call it serving God. The separating root had finished its dark work; the guardians of the word had become the killers of the Word and of all who loved him.

And now we are ready to lift the mask, and to say plainly the thing the whole record has been driving toward: who, behind all the robes and prayers, these men actually were.

Chapter 14

The Mask: Who They Were in Reality

We come now to the word the Lord used for them more than any other, and to the gap it names. He called them *hypocrites* — the Greek *hypokritēs* ὑποκριτής^{G5273}, which in ordinary speech meant *an actor*, the man on the stage who speaks behind a mask, wearing a face that is not his own. That is the master-key to the Pharisee. He is a separated man playing a holy part for an audience of men, while behind the mask the heart is elsewhere. Everything in this book has been the slow widening of the gap between the part he played and the man he was.

The Lord tore the mask off in images no one could forget:

Matthew 23:27-28, KJV · Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness. Even so ye also outwardly appear righteous unto men, but within ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity.

A whited tomb — fair and bright in the sun, and full of death within. That is the reality the mask concealed. He had said the same of their scoured religion a moment earlier: the cup polished on the outside, "but within they are full of extortion and excess" (Matthew 23:25); and in Luke, more quietly still, he called them "graves which appear not," so that men walk over them unaware of the corruption beneath their feet (Luke 11:44). *Pure in their own eyes, and not washed from their filthiness* — Proverbs had drawn the man long before, and here he stood.

Nowhere is the gap clearer than at prayer, where no audience of men can see — except that the Pharisee had learned to perform even there. The Lord set two men in the temple side by side:

Luke 18:10-14, KJV · Two men went up into the temple to pray; the one a Pharisee, and the other a publican. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess. And the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be

merciful to me a sinner. I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other: for every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.

Read the Pharisee's prayer again and notice that it is addressed to no one. He "prayed thus *with himself*." The words say *God*, but the speech is a mirror; every line is about his own merit, and even God is invited only to admire. He despises the very man beside him — "this publican" — exactly as the parable warned: trusting in himself, and despising others. And the verdict overturns everything the world could see. The man with nothing to show, who would not so much as raise his eyes, who simply struck his breast and begged for mercy — *that* man went home justified, and the great religious man did not.

This is who they were in reality. Behind the broad phylacteries and the chief seats and the long prayers stood men full of hypocrisy and iniquity, pure in their own eyes and unwashed within, so wrapped in their own righteousness that they could not do the one thing the publican did and be saved by it. We have seen what they claimed and what they were. It remains only to ask, soberly, where such a road must finally lead.

Chapter 15

Where the Road Ends

Where does this road end? We would rather not ask, but the Lord himself answered, and he answered the Pharisees more plainly and more often than he answered anyone. He did not leave their destiny to be guessed.

To their faces, after all the woes, he asked the question that contains its own dreadful answer:

Matthew 23:33, KJV · Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell?

The word translated *hell* is *geenna* — Gehenna, the valley of Hinnom outside Jerusalem, the foul ravine where the city's refuse and carcasses were burned, the fire never quite going out. The Lord took that smouldering rubbish-valley as the very picture of the end of the wicked. *How can ye escape* it, he asked the separated ones — the men most sure of heaven. He had already told them they would not enter the kingdom at all: "except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees," he had warned, "ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:20); and worse, by shutting the door against others they shut it on themselves, "ye neither go in yourselves, neither suffer ye them that are entering to go in" (Matthew 23:13). To the unbelieving rulers he said it without a figure:

John 8:23-24, KJV · And he said unto them, Ye are from beneath; I am from above: ye are of this world; I am not of this world. I said therefore unto you, that ye shall die in your sins: for if ye believe not that I am he, ye shall die in your sins.

Ye shall die in your sins; whither I go, ye cannot come. And lest anyone think this is mere thundering, remember that the Lord told the covetous Pharisees a story — told it to them, immediately after they had derided him for his teaching on money — about a rich man who fared sumptuously and a beggar at his gate:

Luke 16:22-26, KJV · And it came to pass, that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom: the rich man also died, and was

buried; and in hell he lift up his eyes, being in torments, and seeth Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom. And he cried and said, Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water, and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame. But Abraham said, Son, remember that thou in thy lifetime receivedst thy good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things: but now he is comforted, and thou art tormented. And beside all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed: so that they which would pass from hence to you cannot; neither can they pass to us, that would come from thence.

A great gulf fixed. The chief seats and the fine linen of this life on one side; torment and an unbearable thirst on the other; and no crossing, ever. That "great gulf" is itself a word weighed with care — the Greek chasma *χάσμα*^{G5490}, our *chasm*, found nowhere else in the New Testament: the fixed, impassable void. And here is the dreadful symmetry — the men who had built their whole religion upon *distance*, separating themselves from the sinners they despised, arrive at the last at a distance of God's own making, which no man can ever cross. And the Lord ended the story with a line aimed straight at men who had Moses, the prophets, and were about to witness a man raised from the dead and still not repent:

Luke 16:31, KJV · And he said unto him, If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead.

This is where the road ends for the impenitent Pharisee: not in the heaven he was so sure of, but cast out — while, in the Lord's own warning, others come streaming in from the ends of the earth to take the place he assumed was his:

Matthew 8:11-12, KJV · And I say unto you, That many shall come from the east and west, and shall sit down with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven. But the children of the kingdom shall be cast out into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

It is the most frightening destination in Scripture precisely because of who walks toward it — not the harlot and the thief, but the fasting, tithing, Scripture-keeping, separated man.

And yet — hear this before the chapter closes — the Lord spoke every one of these warnings *to Pharisees*. He did not pronounce their doom from a distance; he pressed it on the very men in danger, and a warning pressed on a living man is not a sentence already executed. It is a mercy, a hand thrust out before the gulf is fixed. Which means the road,

terrible as its end is, is not yet shut behind them. A Pharisee can still turn. And some, blessed be God, did.

Chapter 16

The Pharisee Born Again

If the story ended at the edge of that gulf, this would be the most hopeless book in the world, for it would mean that the most earnest religion leads most surely to hell. But the Gospel does not end there. The same pages that record the doom of the Pharisee also record Pharisees who were saved — and they show us exactly how.

Consider Nicodemus. He was "a man of the Pharisees, a ruler of the Jews," and he came to Jesus by night, cautious, hedging, keeping his reputation safe. And to this Pharisee the Lord spoke the words that name the only way out for any Pharisee:

John 3:3, KJV · Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

Not reform, not try harder, not add another rule — born again. A Pharisee cannot polish his way into the kingdom; he must be born anew from above, given a new heart he could never manufacture. And the seed took. We meet Nicodemus again in the council, daring to ask, "Doth our law judge any man, before it hear him, and know what he doeth?" (John 7:50-51); and at the very end we find the timid night-visitor come fully into the daylight, openly claiming the body of his crucified Lord and burying it like a king:

John 19:39, KJV · And there came also Nicodemus, which at the first came to Jesus by night, and brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about an hundred pound weight.

A hundred pounds of spices, his reputation spent, his fear gone. The Pharisee had been born again.

And consider the greatest of them. Saul of Tarsus was the Pharisee of Pharisees — "as touching the law, a Pharisee... touching the righteousness which is in the law, blameless" (Philippians 3:5-6), the man who hunted the church to the death. When Christ met him, the whole towering structure of his own righteousness came down in an instant, and he wrote its epitaph himself:

Philippians 3:7-9, KJV · But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ. Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered

the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ, and be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith.

There is the conversion of a Pharisee in one stroke. Everything that had been *gain* — the pedigree, the strictness, the blamelessness, the whole self-built righteousness — he threw onto the loss side of the ledger and called it refuse — *dung*, the Greek skybalon σκύβαλον^{G4657}, the filth flung to the dogs, what the body casts out; he chose the most violent word he could find for the righteousness he had once prized — that he might have instead a righteousness he could never earn: *not mine own, but that which is of God by faith*. This is what the Lord meant when he said our righteousness must *exceed* that of the scribes and Pharisees (Matthew 5:20). He did not mean we must out-fast and out-tithe them. He meant we need a righteousness of a wholly different kind — not achieved but received, not ours but God's, the gift given to all who believe; for "Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth" (Romans 10:4).

It can happen. Gamaliel, a Pharisee, counselled the council to be careful lest they "be found even to fight against God" (Acts 5:39). Luke notes plainly that there were "of the sect of the Pharisees which believed" (Acts 15:5). The door the Pharisee shut against others was never bolted against himself. He had only to do what he had spent his life refusing to do: stop trusting in himself, and trust the One he had been built to recognize and had chosen to crucify.

Which leaves one question, and it is no longer a question about them. It is a question about us.

Chapter 17

The Same Leaven Today

We have traced what the Pharisees did, and how they came to do it. It remains to answer, in one plain sentence, the question this whole book has been pressing toward — *why* did devout men do such things — and then to ask whether the same thing can happen now.

The why, gathered into a single line, is this: they came to love the things of God more than God himself. The law, the standing it gave them, the praise of men, the safety of their own righteousness — these were good gifts, and they let the gifts crowd out the Giver. Paul names the root of every such fall: "when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened" (Romans 1:21). There is the whole mechanism in miniature. Knowledge of God that does not bow and give thanks does not stay neutral; it curdles. The unthankful heart, however orthodox, slowly darkens — until it can stand before the Son of God and call him Beelzebub. Pharisaism is not the sin of knowing too little about God. It is the sin of knowing much and worshipping self.

And that sin did not die with the sect. The Lord warned that the leaven would *spread* (Luke 12:1), and the apostles watched it rise again inside the young church. Paul had to confront grown believers who, having begun in the Spirit, were sliding back into a righteousness of rule-keeping:

Galatians 3:1-3, KJV · O foolish Galatians, who hath bewitched you, that ye should not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ hath been evidently set forth, crucified among you? This only would I learn of you, Received ye the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith? Are ye so foolish? having begun in the Spirit, are ye now made perfect by the flesh?

The same leaven. And Paul told Timothy that it would mark the last days — not open irreligion, but a hollow religion, the Pharisee's exact disease wearing a Christian coat:

Second Timothy 3:5, KJV · Having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof: from such turn away.

A *form* of godliness — the outside of the cup polished bright, the power within denied. The word is exact: morphōsis μόρφωσις^{G3446}, an outline, a semblance, a shape

with nothing inside it. Paul uses it only twice in all his letters, and the other time he hangs it on the Pharisee himself, the man who had "the form of knowledge and of the truth in the law" (Romans 2:20). The same hollow outline in both — the Pharisee's form of knowledge, the last days' form of godliness — and here in Timothy it is set directly against the *power* it has learned to live without. Titus heard the same charge: "They profess that they know God; but in works they deny him" (Titus 1:16). And the risen Christ said it to a whole congregation, the church at Laodicea, in words that could have been addressed to any Pharisee in the temple:

Revelation 3:17, KJV · Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked.

Rich in their own eyes, and naked before God — the same blindness exactly, only moved now from the synagogue into the sanctuary.

So how does the leaven look in a church now? It looks like worship aimed at being seen, giving that wants to be noticed, prayer pitched at the listening room. It looks like loving the praise of men more than the praise of God (John 5:44), and a leader who cannot bear to lose his platform. It looks like a human tradition — a style, a fixed liturgy, a calendar of preset readings, a fence the Bible never built — honoured as though it were the word of God, while the living voice of the word and the freedom of the Spirit are quietly crowded out. It looks like a faith handed down by birth and by rite, conferred on an infant and assumed ever after, rather than confessed by a heart that has itself met God. It looks like a quiet editing of Scripture — keeping the verses that comfort the age and shelving the ones that rebuke it, doing what seems right in our own eyes while the plain command is made of none effect. It looks like grace running to the wrong people, the addict and the outsider, and provoking murmuring instead of joy. It looks like measuring our standing by the distance between us and other Christians, and thanking God we are not as they. And at its darkest, it looks like a religion that keeps the form of godliness but no longer expects its power — meeting the work of the Spirit, when it comes, with suspicion and a sneer, because it did not come through our gate.

The Lord's most frightening words were spoken not to the irreligious but to the busy and the orthodox:

Matthew 7:22-23, KJV · Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity.

Prophecy, deliverance, mighty works — and *I never knew you*. It is possible to do much in the name of Christ and never to have known him. That is the Pharisee in a Christian century, and he is far harder to see, because he carries a Bible and sings the songs.

This is why the book cannot end as history. The leaven is not safely behind us in a dead sect; it is the standing temptation of every church and every believer that takes God seriously — ours no less than theirs. Which is why the last word must not be about them at all. It must be a mirror.

Chapter 18

The Pharisee in the Mirror

We have spent this whole book at a safe distance, studying a sect that died long ago. That distance is the last illusion to surrender. The Lord did not warn his disciples about the Pharisees as a matter of history. He warned them about a contagion:

Luke 12:1, KJV · Beware ye of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy.

Beware ye. He said it to his own followers, the men closest to him — not *beware of those men over there*, but *beware, lest this work in you*. For the leaven is not a first-century sect; it is a permanent possibility in every heart that takes God seriously. The Pharisee is not finally a man in a robe. He is the religious self in all of us — the part that would rather be admired than forgiven, that keeps the rule and loses the love, that thanks God it is not as other men, that polishes the cup and never looks inside. We have not been reading about strangers. We have been holding up a mirror.

Run back over the whole portrait and ask it of yourself, honestly. Do I separate myself unto God, or only away from people I despise? Do I love the word, or the standing and the praise it brings me? Have I built a righteousness of my own that I must defend? When grace runs to the wrong people, do I rejoice, or do I murmur? Have I a religion scoured bright on the outside while something inside goes unwashed? The questions sting — and remember, *parash*, the root of the whole matter, means *to sting* as well as *to separate*. Better the sting now, in the mirror, than at the gulf.

And the way out is not a better performance. It is the one thing the Pharisee in the temple could not bring himself to do, and the one thing the broken man beside him did. Set the two prayers side by side a last time. One man recited his merits to himself and went home unjustified. The other could not lift his eyes, struck his breast, and said seven words:

Luke 18:13, KJV · And the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner.

That is the whole exit from pharisaism, and there is no other. Not *God, I thank thee that I am not as other men*, but *God be merciful to me a sinner*. Empty hands. A confessed

need. A righteousness begged for, not boasted of. The man who prays it goes down to his house justified, while the great religious man does not. And there is a wonder folded into his cry that the Pharisee beside him never saw: *be merciful* is the Greek *hilaskomai* ἱλάσκομαι^{G2433}, the verb of atonement — the same root as *hilastērion* ἱλαστήριον^{G2435}, the *mercy seat*, the blood-sprinkled cover of the ark where God met his people and sin was covered — the very word Paul lifts to Calvary, where God hath "set forth" his Son "to be a propitiation through faith in his blood" (Romans 3:25). The broken tax-collector was not merely asking to be let off; he was asking God to be his mercy seat, to meet him at the place of atoning blood. He understood the temple better than the temple's own guardian — for the Pharisee trusted the altar of his own merit, and the publican cast himself upon the mercy seat of God.

And here, at the end, the word we started with is redeemed. The Pharisee took a holy calling — *be ye separate* — and ruined it, separating himself in pride from sinners and at last from God. But the call to separation was never wrong; it was only ever pointed the wrong way. Hear it once more in its true direction, with the promise the Pharisee never heard because he would not stoop to need it:

Second Corinthians 6:17-18, KJV · Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, and will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty.

Be ye separate... and I will be a Father unto you. There is the separation God always wanted — not a wall a man builds to keep others out and feel holy, but a coming-out unto God who comes out to meet him, and receives him, and is a Father to him. The Pharisee separated himself and found a gulf. The child of God is separated unto a Father. The whole difference between them is the publican's prayer — and it is never too late, for any of us, to pray it.

How this was made

This is the author's own work. It was composed with [junifye](#) and an AI assistant, drawing its Scripture and original-language work (Greek, Hebrew, cross-references) from [Darash](#) (Hebrew *darash*, “to seek, inquire, study”), a tool and reference work for the Bible in its original languages.

A gift of support — [Stripe](#)



Scan to read this book online