

A four-year-old girl named Jenny was telling her mother about the Bible story she had just heard in her Sunday school class. It concerned the healing of the blind man, one of the times the Pharisees tried to find something they could use against Jesus. When she got to the part where the Pharisees questioned the man who was healed, Jenny gave her take on the story. She said, ***“Oh boy, those Ferris wheels sure were jealous of Jesus!”***

Well, Jenny, they weren't Ferris wheels. They were Pharisees. And yes, there was some jealousy involved. **But it was more than SIMPLY JEALOUSLY.** ***Today's lesson in Matthew's Gospel is about the Pharisees and their ongoing conflict with Jesus.***

Jesus had finally arrived in Jerusalem and had cleansed the temple. This did not make the Pharisee's happy. Feelings were running hot. So, Jesus told a parable about a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall around the vineyard, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and went away on a journey. When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit.

Incredibly, the tenants seized the landowner's servants. They beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. The landowner was stunned. He sent more servants to collect the fruit, and the tenants treated them the same way. Last of all, he sent his son to them. “They will respect my son,” he said. But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, “This is the heir. Come, let's kill him and take his inheritance.” So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.

Then Jesus asked a question of his listeners. “Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?”

It wasn't hard for his listeners to imagine what the landowner would do. “He will bring those wretches to a wretched end,” they replied, “and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time.”

Then Jesus summed up his parable, “Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit . . .”

When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus' parable, they knew he was talking about them. They looked for a way to arrest him, but they were afraid of the crowd because the people held that he was a prophet.

The Pharisees were among the most religious people who ever lived. Without their devotion to the faith of their fathers, the Jewish religion may not have survived. But the priorities of the Pharisees were a little out of whack. Many of them were more concerned with traditions than they were with people. **They let their power go to their head.**

Jesus called them hypocrites, saying one thing and doing another. It's not that they were worse than other people. Certainly, they were not. It's just that Jesus expected more out of them. Just like Jesus expects more out of you and me. **So, let's consider the Pharisees for a few moments and learn from their mistakes.**

1st of all, we need to see that just because people are religious, doesn't mean they know God.

Let me give you an example, he was a very religious man. He was a Pharisee. His name was Saul of Tarsus. He was one of the most religious people who ever lived. “Circumcised on the eighth day,” according to the law, “a Hebrew of Hebrews, a Pharisee,” is how he described himself. He was so zealous that he persecuted the early Christian church. He says that, in terms of “legalistic righteousness,” he was “faultless.”

If he were alive today, you would not want to have Saul over for dinner. He was what we might call, a “Bible thumper.” His self-righteousness would have been too much to bear. And he would have been determined to convert you. Even if you had been a member of his group, it wouldn't have been enough. He would have wanted you to be a “true believer.” “If you were a real Jew,” he would say, “then you would do such-and-such . . .” You ever encounter anyone like that? Maybe you have someone in your family like that. Maybe you were once like that. If you've never met anyone like that, maybe you are like that now.

Sociologist/Baptist preacher Tony Campolo says he was once like that. He uses the word Bible thumper to describe himself as a youth legalistic, self-righteous, always trying to convert others to his personal brand of religion. Until one day he was shocked to discover that he didn't know God at all. Super-religious, but he didn't know God. Can that happen? It happens all the time. In fact, if you meet somebody who is both super religious and smugly self-righteous, they are probably using religion to hide from God. Here's how Tony Campolo discovered it was true of him.

Tony was in high school. There was a kid named Roger in his school. Roger was gay and everybody made fun of him. They ridiculed him. They made his life hell. You know how cruel kids in school can be. They mocked Roger. When he would go into the shower after gym, they would wait until he came out and then they would whip their towels at him and sting him. One day, when Tony was absent, a group of five guys pushed Roger into the corner of the shower and urinated all over him. That night Roger went to the attic in the middle of the night and hung himself. And Tony Campolo, still suffering over this incident, writes, ***"I knew I wasn't a Christian because if I had been a Christian I would have stood up for my friend Roger. Even if they ridiculed me for doing it, I would have been his friend. I knew [then] that I didn't know Jesus."***

That was Saul's situation. A circumcised Jew, a member of the tribe of Benjamin, a zealot, a Pharisee, faultless in his devotion to the Law but he didn't know Jesus. Perhaps Saul made this discovery as he held the Apostle Stephen's robe while Stephen was being stoned to death for following Jesus. Saul had given his consent to Stephen's stoning, but you have to wonder if this didn't begin, at least subconsciously, a period of self-examination. Why do we feel the need to ridicule or persecute people who think differently than we do? Isn't it because, deep in our hearts, we are unsure of our own beliefs just as those who persecute gays are usually unsure of their manhood? It was not long after the martyrdom of Stephen that Saul met Jesus on the road to Damascus and then he knew for certain that, up to this point in his life, **he hadn't known God at all.** And Saul the persecutor became known as Paul the Apostle. **The same Paul who wrote in I Corinthians 13, "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing . . ."** **That's the first reason Jesus was upset with the Pharisees.**

Here is the second reason Jesus struggled with the Pharisee's: THE LIFE OF FAITH IS ABOUT BEARING FRUIT. And most Pharisee's did not see that they were NOT BEARING FRUIT FOR GOD'S KINGDOM. In fact, Jesus explains this parable with these words, ***"Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit . . ."***

It's interesting. Earlier in this chapter we encounter that strange little story of Jesus cursing a fig tree. We read in the 18 & 19 verses: ***"Early in the morning, as [Jesus] was on his way back to the city, he was hungry. Seeing a fig tree by the road, he went up to it but found nothing on it except leaves. Then he said to it, 'May you never bear fruit again!' Immediately the tree withered."***

It is clear that Jesus did this for the benefit of his disciples. The poor fig tree was an object lesson. **What good is a fig tree that does not bear fruit? And what good is a follower of Jesus who does not bear fruit?**

You see, the Pharisees took the easy way out. It's always much easier to be religious, to go about your duties in the synagogue or the church, than it is to love your neighbor. ***It's always easier to wear religious garbs and to use religious language than to speak up for the POOR and the HOMELESS. It's always easier to read your Bible than it is to intervene at school for a friend that is being harassed.*** The Pharisees had the business of being religious down pat. **The problem is they weren't bearing the fruit of the Kingdom of God in their lives.**

The Moody Monthly magazine once featured an article titled, **"Confession of a Pharisee."** It related the experience of a Christian lady and two of her friends who lived in a lovely residential area near a woman named Ada. All three of these women taught Sunday school and were active in church, but they would have nothing to do with Ada because she drank heavily and engaged in loud quarrels with her husband. While the church women realized Ada needed the Lord, they were proud and couldn't bear the thought of being seen with her. **Then news came that Ada was**

seriously ill. Although they knew they should help her, they still did nothing, and a short time later Ada died. At the close of the article the author described her feelings as she saw the hearse in front of her neighbor's house. She wrote, **"The silent witness of that body on the stretcher will haunt us for a long time. Could any of us honestly say we cared for Ada's soul? *That's why I think we three are Pharisees.*"**

Jesus accused the Pharisees of not bearing fruit. Please understand that we are not talking about doing good works simply as another way of pleasing God. **Faith is not about earning our way into God's favor.** However, if a person has Christ within, he or she can no more help doing good works than a healthy fig tree can resist growing figs. **Good works are not a matter of earning our salvation. Good works are the fruit of our salvation.** St. Paul said in Galatians 5:22 that the fruit of the spirit is *"love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness and self control."* None of these is a UN-NATURAL EMOTION. They are the outpouring of a heart that is filled with God.

When I think of kindness and gentleness, I think of the late Fred Rogers of Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood. Fred Rogers was a Presbyterian minister, and he had a seminary professor who helped him learn the building blocks of his neighborly theology.

The professor's name was Dr. Bill Orr, and he taught systematic theology. But, as Fred Rogers remembers, he didn't just teach it, he lived it. Bill Orr took Jesus of Nazareth seriously, and he taught with that same level of sincerity. One day when it was freezing cold outside, Dr. Orr left with his heavy overcoat on, but he came back to teach his afternoon class without the coat. He'd given it to someone who was cold. One of his students had to ask, *"What happened to the coat?"* And Dr. Orr said, *"Oh, I have another one at home,"* and he never spoke of it again.

Dr. Orr understood about bearing fruit. He was a deeply religious man, but his religion showed primarily by the fruit he bore.

This is to say that what Jesus wants most out of us is that we walk the walk as well as talk the talk. Nobody is impressed by a hypocrite, and to a certain extent that is what the Pharisees of Jesus' time were—**HYPOCRITES**. . *They bore the face of religion but not its heart.* They're not the first, or the last, to do so, of course. We have many people in churches today who make that same mistake.

The Rev. Alex Stevenson compares such people to a fictitious character on the children's TV SHOW RUG-RATS. This character is named Angelica Pickles. Rug-Rats is about a group of babies. Angelica is the oldest of the group. She's five. All the others are less than two and are only able to talk to each other.

"Angelica is always making trouble for the babies who she repeatedly calls dumb. Angelica makes up stories to mislead the babies and trick them into thinking untrue things simply for her own entertainment. For instance, one time she convinced the babies that they would all become chickens because they had come down with the chicken pox. Angelica is often mean to the babies, but only when the grown-ups are not looking. When a grown-up is near she smiles and bats her eyes and tosses her blond pigtails and talks about how much she loves playing with the babies."

Alex Stevenson says that Angelica Pickles would have made a good Pharisee. "The religious leaders of Jesus' day seemed to live by the same philosophy as Angelica Pickles.. They thought that the purpose of their good deeds was to get on the good side of the grown-ups. They paid alms and prayed and made sacrifices so that others would think good of them. *Then when no one, or they thought no one, was looking, they would act differently.*"

Please don't misunderstand. Many of the Pharisees were good people, the best of their time. But there were some who were *"all show and no go."* Like many people today they gave the appearance of being a "Religious Person," but they didn't know God at all. **FOR THEY WERE NOT BEARING...the fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness and self control. AND YOU???** Do you know God? You're here in God's house today. That's a good beginning, but does the love of Jesus live in your heart? *Are you bearing the fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness and self-control?* Jesus calls us to walk our talk just as he asked it of the Pharisees and other religious people long ago. **So now it is time for you and I to COLLECT THE HARVEST—THE FRUIT OF GOD...ARE YOU READY?? AMEN.**