

## The New Pharisees

My favorite band of all time is the early 90s band *Juliet Screed*. Perhaps you've heard of them? Probably not. It was the garage band for which I was the drummer and sometimes lead singer in college. We never played any gigs, and our songs were not very good, but we had a lot of fun. We fit in the alternative genre. That means our lyrics didn't have to make sense, but we could act as though the only reason you couldn't understand them is because you weren't intellectual enough. We liked the music, but the intellectual elitism of even our favorite groups annoyed us. I remember a song we started to write called "The Ultimate Alternative" intended to poke fun at this attitude. Some of the lines were, "I am better than you," "I eat more fish than you," "I've saved more whales than you," "I am smarter than you." You get the picture.

I have been reminiscing because, lately, I have had this same feeling from some of my brethren. It sounds a lot like the Pharisee in **Luke 18:11-12**, "God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get" (ESV). The tax collector took a completely different approach; but I often wonder what happened the next time he prayed. Did he look up to heaven and say, "God, I thank you I am not like other men, self-righteous, self-trusting, legalistic, or even like this Pharisee"? Yet that is exactly the rumblings I am hearing from those who constantly want to throw around the accusation of being pharisaical. You might have heard it this way. "God, I thank you I am not like other Christians, legalists, uncompassionate, pharisaical, or even like those preachers who write on the internet. I am truly spiritual and know I don't have to attend all the assemblies, I can dress however I want, I pray all the time, I give money to the poor, and I have constant spiritual highs I never knew before." In their attempts to separate themselves from the Pharisees, they have run headlong into the same attitude on the opposite end of the spiritual spectrum. We might call them the *New Pharisees*.

Now don't misunderstand me. Should we be legalists, uncompassionate, or pharisaical? Of course not. Do preachers who write on the internet sometimes get it wrong? Sure. Should we be spiritual people? Obviously. The point is not necessarily about any of the issues brought up. Rather, it is about the attitude so often accompanying those who accuse everyone else of being Pharisees.

I guess every generation has those who think they figured out how things really work when no one else has ever been able to. They have a true connection with God and everyone else is just falling short. If the rest of us could just take their approach, then we would be spiritual Christ followers like them.

No doubt, there is a time to push others to grow spiritually. We are to stir one another up to love and good works (**Hebrews 10:24**). None of us have it all figured out and all of us need help and challenge from those who are more spiritually mature than we. However, we must remember the directive of **Romans 12:3**, "For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think..." (ESV). Note also the instruction of **Galatians 6:1, 3**, "Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted...For if anyone thinks he is something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself" (ESV).

Any growth or understanding we have is by God's grace, not because we are elite Christians. Even if we feel others don't get it, we are in the same boat as they. We are forgiven sinners doing the best we can to grow in Christ. We don't need folks looking down on us from on high whether from the side of those who have legalistically figured out how to dot all the i's and cross all the t's or from the side of those who have graciously figured out Jesus loves us even when we are imperfect.

At either end of the spectrum we end up in the same place. We become Pharisees. Instead, let's stay in the middle with Christ, recognizing the obedience He requires and finding comfort in His grace when we fail. We don't need a spiritually elite class. We need Christians who humbly help each other no matter where we are on the growth spectrum.

--Edwin L. Crozier