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Caught Up in the External

Biblical Reflection on 22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time B

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TORONTO, AUG. 26, 2009 ([Zenit.org](http://zenit.org)).- How many times have we heard, or perhaps even said ourselves: "So-and-so is a Pharisee." "That person is so Pharisaical." "They are caught up in Pharisaism."

Today's Gospel (Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23) offers us a good opportunity to understand the role of the Pharisees in Judaism, and why Jesus and others had such strong feelings against their behavior. Who were the Pharisees of Jesus' time, and who are their modern-day contemporaries?

Let me try to simplify a very complex topic to help us understand today's Gospel. The Pharisees sought to make the Law come alive in every Jew, by interpreting its commandments in such a way as to adapt them to the various spheres of life.

The doctrine of the Pharisees is not opposed to that of Christianity. At the time of Jesus, the Pharisees were the "conservative party" within Judaism. They adhered strictly to the Torah and the Talmud and were outwardly very moral people. They were the leaders of the majority of the Jews and were revered by their followers for their religious zeal and dedication. Their main opposition was the party of the Sadducees, who were the "liberal party" within Judaism. The Sadducees were popular among the high-class minority.

Pharisees are mentioned when John the Baptist condemns them and the Sadducees in Matthew 3:7-10: "But seeing many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, offspring of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" Why would John the Baptizer say that the Pharisees, who were outwardly moral, zealous, and religious, were the offspring of vipers?

Jesus reserved his harshest words for the Pharisees as well. In Matthew 16:6, Jesus warned the disciples, "Watch and take heed from the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees." What were the disciples to beware of? Were they to beware of the immorality of the Pharisees and Sadducees?

Adherence to the law

The Pharisees in Jesus' time promoted adherence to the law with a genuine interior response and advocated ordinary day-to-day spirituality. There were some Pharisees who were caught up only in external prescriptions, but they would have been criticized by other Pharisees even as the prophet Isaiah criticized hypocrisy in the past. Similarly, Jesus reprimanded aberrant Pharisees occasionally and had some clashes with them over his reinterpretation of the law. Jesus did not condemn Pharisaism as such or all Pharisees.

The Pharisees "relied on themselves, that they are righteous." They believed that their own works -- their doing what God commands and their abstaining from what God forbids -- were what gained and maintained God's favor and recommended them to God. The Pharisees self-righteously and hypocritically despised all

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others who did not meet the same standard of law keeping that they met.

They would not eat with the tax collectors and other sinners, because they were self-righteously aloof. They spent their time murmuring about who was eating and drinking with Jesus. Jesus said to them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (Luke 5:31-32).

No etiquette lesson!

In today's Gospel passage, (Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23), the Pharisees and scribes come from Jerusalem to investigate Jesus. Jesus abolishes the practice of ritual purity and the distinction between clean and unclean foods. The watchdogs of religious tradition cite Jesus for running a rather lax operation! Some of his disciples were eating with unwashed hands (Mark 7:2). Pharisees and scribes seize this infraction of the law and challenge Jesus, "Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?" (v. 5).

Jesus doesn't respond with an etiquette lesson or an explanation of personal hygiene. Instead, he calls the Pharisees and scribes what they are: "you hypocrites" (v. 6). Quoting Isaiah, Jesus exposes the condition of the legalists' hearts. They cling to human precepts and put their trust in the traditions of their elders over the commandment of God (v. 8).

Against the Pharisees' narrow, legalistic, and external practices of piety in matters of purification (Mark 7:2-5), external worship (7:6-7), and observance of commandments, Jesus sets in opposition the true moral intent of the divine law (7:8-13).

But he goes beyond contrasting the law and Pharisaic interpretation of it. Mark 7:14-15 in effect sets aside the law itself in respect to clean and unclean food. Jesus' point is well taken -- and most Pharisees would have agreed -- that internal attitude is more important than the externals of the law.

Pharisaical notion of sin

Jesus rejects the Pharisees' and the scribes' notion of sin. For Jesus, sin is the human spirit gone wrong, not a failure to distinguish between types of food. Jesus' attitude toward sin is consistent with his views regarding the Sabbath. The letter of the law without compassion is dehumanizing.

We can see how Jesus wants his message to be made known to the Pharisees and scribes (vv. 1-8), the crowd ("Listen to me, all of you, and understand" vv. 14-15) and his disciples (vv. 21-23). It is good news to all that God doesn't desire legalism. Instead, because of what God has done in Jesus Christ, the Father offers a new kind of life. One doesn't have to worry about how well one is obeying the rules and keeping oneself clean.

Having been made clean, we are now free to use our hands to serve others. We might even get them dirty in the process. God gives freedom from the law. God offers his grace. That is the same good news we get to share as we serve the legal-minded, the crowds, and even the disciples of Jesus who are around us.

Contemporary Pharisees

Who are the modern-day Pharisees and their followers? The blind modern-day Pharisees and their blind followers are very religious, moral, zealous people. They strive to keep God's law, and they are zealous in their religious duties. They diligently attend Church every Sunday. They are hardworking, outwardly upright citizens. They keep themselves from and preach against moral evil.

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In addition to being moral and religious and zealous, modern-day Pharisees and their followers believe that human efforts, do not believe that salvation is conditioned on the work of Christ alone; instead, they believe that salvation is ultimately up to what the sinner adds to Christ's work!

In contrast to the modern-day Pharisees and their followers, true Christians are those who boast in Christ crucified and no other, meaning that they believe that Christ's work ensured the salvation of all whom He represented and is the only thing that makes the difference between salvation and condemnation. They know that their own efforts form absolutely no part of their acceptance before God. They rest in Christ alone as their only hope, knowing that it is the work of Christ by the grace of God that guarantees salvation.

Jesus showed that only those who were sinners in need of a healer, who do not have righteousness in themselves, who are devoid of divine entitlement, who do not deserve to be in fellowship with God, are the ones He came to call to repentance.

The medicine of mercy

Whenever I hear Jesus' words about legalism in today's Gospel, I cannot help but recall with gratitude and emotion Pope John XXIII. In his historic, opening address on Oct. 11, 1962, at the beginning of the momentous Second Vatican Council, John XXIII made it clear that he did not call Vatican II to refute errors or to clarify points of doctrine. The Church today, he insisted, must employ the "medicine of mercy rather than that of severity."

The "Good Pope" as he was called, rejected the opinions of those around him who were "always forecasting disaster." He referred to them as "prophets of gloom" who lacked a sense of history, which is "the teacher of life." Divine Providence, he declared, was leading the world into a new and better order of human relations. "And everything, even human differences, leads to the greater good of the Church."

"Papa Roncalli" was a human being, more concerned with his faithfulness than his image, more concerned with those around him than with his own desires. With an infectious warmth and vision, he stressed the relevance of the church in a rapidly changing society and made the church's deepest truths stand out in the modern world. He knew that the letter of the law without compassion is dehumanizing.

"Papa Giovanni" was beatified by his successor, John Paul II in 2000. May he soften the hearts of the modern-day Pharisees and Sadducees who are alive and well in the Church and world today!

[The readings for the 22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time B are Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-8; James 1:17-18, 21b-22, 27; and Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23]

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