

They Met at the Cross: The Teachers Who Hated Him”

Matthew 12:1-14 (NRSV)

There's a wide consensus of opinion that **Jesus Christ** is the one individual who ever lived **whose life came close to perfection**. That view is even held by some who do not hold, as Christians hold, that he was God on earth. They look at him and see **only humanity, but humanity higher, better and more superior** than it had ever been before or has ever been since.

How can it be that a being so true, so compassionate, so perfect was put to death while still in his early thirties? Surely, it borders on the incredible that the human race had no room for such a “great soul” who lifted humanity higher than it had ever been lifted before. The incredibility of his unwarranted execution is not removed because Christians believe his death and their life are forever bound together; or that, in the mysterious sovereignty of God, this greatest of human crimes has become the greatest of heaven's blessings.

The truth is that **certain people desired Christ's death**. They looked upon him as a danger, a menace and a terrible challenge to the things they held dear. They conspired for his death. They planned and plotted and schemed to bring it about. Further, in working for his death, they did not feel they were the pawns of any supernatural agency – by which I mean they felt as free as human beings always do. They had a clear and, to them, an entirely reasonable purpose in mind when they conspired to cause the death of Jesus Christ, and when they went to work, they found ready allies who ardently wished the same thing. The machinations of many people and cliques culminated at the cross on Calvary. On that “green hill far away, outside a city wall,” many paths converged, and strange and unexpected people met at Golgotha.

In the next few sermons I will inquire as to **why so many different kinds of people sought the death of Jesus Christ**. I want to be as fair to them as I can; to see what was good, if possible, as well as evil in their motives; to try to understand how the greatest felony in history came about; and to ask if, in this solemn event and with these mixed motives, we can see at work the human nature which we ourselves wear, to see the good and evil in our own soiled souls. I begin with **the Pharisees**. They came to desire the death of Jesus Christ and to work for it. Early in his ministry, we are told **they “went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him”** (Matt. 12:14).

Why did they want to destroy him? **Who** were these Pharisees? **How** was it they came into conflict with Jesus Christ? **What** made them accomplices in the foulest crime ever committed by the human race?

1. Who were these Pharisees?

The Pharisees were **religious leaders**. They were, in some ways, **the best** of their nation. They'd grown up as a school of thought and a body of teachers during the centuries between the Testaments. But for their conserving work, it's possible the Jews would have been lost in the welter of pagan peoples long before Christ was born in Bethlehem.

During the centuries immediately preceding Jesus' birth, the noble line of Hebrew prophets has ceased to be. There was no Isaiah or Jeremiah, no Amos or Micah to be an intermediary between God and his people (and vice versa), or to communicate a word from the Lord to them, and **the Pharisees, as a body, partly filled the spiritual gap** that had been left by their absence. **They stood in the Mosaic and prophetic tradition.** In spite of how he felt about them, Jesus said, on one occasion: "The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat" (Matt. 23:2). He acknowledged their authority. In fact, they were **the teachers and the preachers** (rabbis), **and the guardians of the Mosaic Law.** They ran the schools and the synagogues and, in a sense, they had become the conscience of the Hebrew people. But they weren't priests – or only very rarely. Nobody could be a priest who wasn't descended from a priestly family. One was born to the priesthood, and the Pharisees were not so born.

There is no doubt that the average Pharisees were **men of high moral character and burningly sincere.** They were true **believers.** But they always leaned to the Puritan side. Further, their efforts to keep the nation uncontaminated by admixture with the Gentile world put **iron-hard strictness** into their whole way of life. The Jews, they believed, were God's chosen people. They'd been separated from the other nations by divine appointment, and they felt the people needed to live holy and different lives. The Pharisees took it upon themselves to mark out the lines of separation and to guard them with vigilant care. They wouldn't eat with Gentiles. They wouldn't do business with Gentiles, or only when they felt compelled. And the idea of intermarriage with non-Jews was repugnant to them.

The **strength and the weakness** of the pharisaic position is seen very clearly in our Lord's parable of the tax collector and the Pharisee who went up to the temple to pray. The Pharisee said, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income" (Lk. 18:11a, 12). And it was true. Accuse this Pharisee of what you will, but not of lying. Injustice or infidelity could not be laid to his charge. He lived a moral life. However hearty his appetite, he curbed it on Mondays and Tuesdays with a fast. He gave tithes of all he possessed to the church. (How many Christians would be able to be so scrupulously pious or generous?) He subjected himself to several spiritual disciplines; he wasn't afraid to submit to a self-imposed, rigorous code of rules and regulations.

In spite of Jesus' extensive condemnation of their hypocrisy (Mk. 12:37b-40; Lk. 20:45-47; Matt. 23:1-36), **it's impossible to withhold some admiration from the Pharisees.** People of this cast of mind are thrown up by reformation and renewal in every age. They are **all-out believers.** They want **the highest and the best** from themselves and their contemporaries. No regime is too strict for them. They will fulfill all the moral law requires, and then some more! No denomination or community church is exempt from this **passionate spirit.** There is something in this spirit to admire. **In an age of compromise, these men will never compromise.** In an age of softness and fuzziness, they stand by the requirements of the law as they understand it, and if necessary, they will even die for it.

2. How did these Pharisees get into conflict with Jesus Christ?

That they were **in conflict with Christ** nobody who reads the New Testament can deny. The Pharisees appear in **a very poor light** in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. True, many Jewish rabbis seriously resent the picture the New Testament gives of the Pharisees. They say the gospels offer **a false idea of the Jewish Puritans**, and that Christians are ignorant of the high, conservative service – in the best sense of the term – that the Pharisees rendered to Judaism. It would be fair to remember it's possible to say things which are perfectly true concerning other people, and yet, because these things are **selective**, to give **an unbalanced picture**. Presbyterians ought to know that especially well. Many people think we're old-fashioned and out-of-date, uptight and un-cool. How often haven't we read the word "**Presbyterian**" used by the media in just such a pejorative, and negative, way?

The rabbis feel something like that has happened to the picture of the Pharisees in the New Testament because they only appear when they are in controversy with Jesus – and no one can appear to advantage if he/she is in controversy with Jesus Christ – the picture gives no adequate portrait, so the rabbis think, of their finer qualities. The things said about them may be true, but other things could have been said as well. Many leaders of modern Judaism believe a fuller account would have given us a kinder picture of the Pharisees than we now possess. Let us allow something to that viewpoint, but the question still remains: **how did this sharp conflict come to be** between the Pharisees and the noblest Jewish Son of their race? The reasons are both of **principle and personality**.

In the first place they were **angered by Jesus Christ's note of authority**. Believing what we do about Jesus, we understand the note of authority. Jesus came from God. He spoke as if he was God. He announced. And, although like the Pharisees, Jesus didn't temporize, much less compromise, the common people noticed **his authority was different than theirs**. The gospel writers note: "the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes" (Matt. 7:28b-29; Mk. 1:22). Further, his acts of healing impressed them as having authority (Mk. 1:27; Lk. 4:36). Several times Jesus said he was "a man under authority" (Matt. 8:9; Lk. 7:8). Inevitably, that note of authority offended the Pharisees. They asked him point-blank, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you that authority?" (Matt. 21:23b).

As educated leaders of the people, the Pharisees were accustomed to receive a certain deference and special respect from the uneducated masses (among whom they, no doubt, placed Jesus). But he gave them neither. Initially, at least, he treated them with the same kindness and independence with which he treated others, but he did not defer to them in the way they wished. They resented it. They began to ask such questions as: "Who is he anyhow? He's just a carpenter from Nazareth. He speaks with a Galilean accent. He's never been properly educated. He's just been to one of our synagogue schools. He never graduated from a scribal college. He never sat at the feet of the most learned rabbis in the land."

While they were thinking and saying these things, **the voice of the Nazarene was ringing in their ears**: “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty” (Jn. 6:35). “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life” (Jn. 8:12). “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” “I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father” (Jn. 10:11, 14-15a). “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die” (Jn. 11:25-26a). “I am the way, the truth and the life” (Jn. 14:6). And repeatedly Jesus taught, “You have heard it said, ... but I say to you ...” (Matt. 7:21-22, 27-28, 31-32, 33-34, 38-39, 43-44).

The Pharisees were furiously angry with our Lord, in the first place, **because of his tremendously powerful and persuasive note of authority**.

They were angry, in the second place, with **Christ’s universalism**. Ever since Abraham, the Jews felt they were **God’s chosen people**. True, they had a spiritual mission to the whole world, but their calling became a source of great national pride, and especially so to the Pharisees. They spoke out from the crowd sometimes, and challenged the teaching of Jesus by saying, **“We are the descendents of Abraham”** (Jn. 8:33). Jesus countered them by saying he wasn’t so sure, “If you were Abraham’s children, you would be doing what Abraham did, but now you are trying to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God” (8:39b-40) and authoritatively, once more, he concluded, “Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was I am” (Jn. 8:58).

Jesus was swift to recognize the half-truth in what they said. He always conceded that **it was to “the lost sheep of the house of Israel”** that he had first come (Matt. 15:24; cf. 21:37). It was among them he was born, and his mission was primarily to them – after all, Israel was the place he lived his entire life – **but he came not only to and for the Israelites**. The implications of his message were universal. Beginning “in Jerusalem,” his message was ultimately meant to encompass “Judea, and Samaria, and the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8; cf. 3:26). No racial inferiorities are compatible with his teaching (Gal. 3:28; Col. 3:11). “And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise” (Gal. 3:29). As the Nazis and apartheid politicians had to learn the hard way, people who want to preach doctrines of racial superiority and inferiority must look elsewhere for their authority. It cannot be found in Jesus Christ.

He had time for **the Samaritan woman** at the well (Jn. 4), and **the Syrophenician woman** at his table (Mk. 7:21-24; Matt. 15:21-28). And before his last week on earth, the coming of **certain Greeks** to see him (Jn. 12:20-23) lifted up his spirits.

The Pharisees were angry with him because **he seemed to deprecate their separateness and spiritual superiority**.

They were also angry because **he seemed to be indifferent to some aspects of their puritanism**. Notice it was only of some aspects of their Puritanism that Christ was critical. Their fine moral record would have been, in its wholeness, a joy to Jesus. But there were some aspects of their Puritanism he could never abide. If “tax collectors and sinners” had a party and asked Jesus, he’d go and enjoy himself, in spite of what the Pharisees considered to be proper. When Matthew, the tax collector forsook his old life to follow Christ and gave a farewell feast to his friends, Jesus was there (Matt. 9:9-13; Mk. 2:13-17; Lk. 5:27-32). They described him as “a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!” (Matt. 11:19). Mind you, he also attended a Pharisee’s party (Lk. 7:34, 36)! Sometimes, he actually invited himself to dinner. Remember the story of Zaccheus (Lk. 19:1-10). That was a terrible shock to the Pharisees. Even those among them who believed that, indeed, he might be a prophet of God, were shaken by that. They said in bewilderment to each other, “He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner” (Lk. 19:7).

They were also angry with Christ because of **his attacks upon them**. People whose acquaintance with the New Testament is slight sometimes suppose that Christ never used **denunciation**. They should read the twenty-third chapter of Matthew’s Gospel. After all the centuries, it still burns. **Jesus Christ lashed the Pharisees**. He called them hypocrites to their face (23:23). Five times in a few verses he curses them. He calls them “blind guides” (23:24) and “whitewashed tombs” (23:27). It is not in human nature to like people who talk about us in that way. The Pharisees were angry with Jesus because of his terrible attacks upon them.

Finally, they were **angry at Christ’s popularity**. We’re told, “The common people heard him gladly” (Mk. 12:37, KJV). Perhaps it was this that brought the animosity of the Pharisees to a head. Intellectuals and purists often affect to despise the masses, but they do not really despise them. At least, if they despise them with one part of their mind, they secretly covet their applause with another. Most folks like to be told that someone has noticed and admired them. Most folks like to see their names or pictures in the paper. There was something of that in the Pharisees. They half-despised the people, yet they wanted their attention, approval and applause. If ever they had it, Jesus stole it from them for a while. He seemed to be able to fascinate even their officials. They sent their officers to arrest him and bring him before the Sanhedrin – they were in league with the Sadducees at that time – but the officers came back without Jesus. When they were asked why they hadn’t done their duty, they could only gape and say: “Never has anyone spoken like this!” (Jn. 7:46).

Well, there it is! You see **the grounds of their animosity**. They were angered by our Lord’s note of authority, by his universalism, by his indifference to some forms of their Puritanism, by his attacks upon them personally, and by his popularity with the people. But even allowing for all that ...

3. How did the Pharisees come to desire Jesus’ death?

It's one thing to heartily dislike someone, and to have what you judge to be good reasons for so doing, but to move from that to schemes to "do him in" is another whole world.

It probably happened something like this. If you dislike some people, all your information about them takes on the dye of your dislike. Everything they do, everything you hear they do, gets interpreted in your mind in a biased way. The very dislike the Pharisees had of our Lord meant their reasons for disliking him became heightened. The **note of authority**, they interpreted as "**blasphemy**" (Matt. 9:3; 26:65; Jn. 10:33). "He puts himself in the place of God!" The **note of universalism**, they interpreted as **traitorous**. They called him "**a Samaritan**" (Jn. 8:48). "The man isn't loyal to his own people!" The **indifference to certain aspects of their puritanism**, they took to be **morally dangerous**. "This man associates with tax collectors and sinners. He's known by the company he keeps!" His **personal denunciation** of them, and his wide **popularity**, they talked themselves into regarding as an effort to deceive the masses. Putting it all together, they concluded **he was a menace and a danger to the nation**. He had to be destroyed. And when they set out to do that they found themselves with unexpected allies. People they'd normally dislike wanted the same thing. It brought them in line with the Herodians, the Sadducees, and at the last, even with Rome. So they went to work. The best of their age became the prime movers in the greatest crime of all history.

4. **What are things sincere people can learn from all this?**

Is this study merely historically interesting? Or do these facts point to things we should recognize as dangers to ourselves? I would stress two things. **First, keep saying to yourself: "These were good men."** The Pharisees present the most terrible illustration in all history of how "**good people**" can go wrong. You can be an upholder of the law; you can be a student of the Book; you can be a leader in things that make for the moral wellbeing of our society – and yet you can go as terribly, tragically wrong as the Pharisees.

It's usually spiritual pride that ensnares people like this. As **Tiger Woods** has reminded us, gifted and successful people can easily feel entitled. They reach the dizzying heights of achievement and forget they can only live at those heights on their knees. They begin to think themselves as the architects of their own virtues. But, remember that the Pharisee, who boasted of his virtues in the presence of God, was condemned, while the tax collector, who beat his breast and cried for mercy, "went home justified."

Further, watch out that your goodness doesn't become **hurtful legalism**. Many people are regarded as being "good" in their local churches, yet many are in the Puritan tradition. In all humility, let us remember before God that, unless our lives are controlled by the Holy Spirit, we also may go tragically wrong. It is a particular danger of "good" people at any time. The Pharisee in us could take over in us.

Here's the second thing. **Remember**, as Paul said: "**The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life**" (2 Cor. 3:6b). It's a sad thing when the warm life of God in Jesus Christ is chilled by the rigour and coldness of our moral codes. Such things can happen. I've known "good people," people whose word is their bond, who are honest in all their business dealings, just and above reproach

in the commerce of the nation, yet who are strangely lacking in tenderness and in that melting, compassionate love we look for in a follower of Jesus Christ. We can stand for strict moral principles, but when the principles we have taught are disregarded let's be careful not to spurn or abandon the repentant sinner, especially in our own house.

The Pharisees had lost tenderness.

Charles Dickens once said, "Have a heart that never hardens and a touch that never hurts." If we lose tenderness, we shall be guiltier than the Pharisees because we have a Nobler Example, Saviour and Lord.

Amen

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