

*Michael Reeves*

# evangelical pharisees

THE

GOSPEL

*as Cure for the*

*Church's Hypocrisy*

“Jesus warned us about becoming like the Pharisees, and Michael Reeves reminds us in this winsome and penetrating book that we need to heed that warning today. We all are prone to trusting in ourselves and longing for the praise of people instead of resting and delighting in the gospel of God’s grace. We never move beyond the gospel or the need to repent of our self-dependence, and thus this book is a spiritual tonic for our souls.”

**Thomas R. Schreiner**, James Buchanan Harrison Professor of New Testament, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“In *Evangelical Pharisees*, Michael Reeves addresses a subtle but fatal threat facing the church today. Christ’s diagnosis of the heart of the Pharisee was that ‘they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God’ (John 12:43). If we want to preserve the purity of our faith, we must do more than hold fast to our confessions and creeds. We must humbly examine ourselves and ask whether the celebrity culture of our day and the tribalism that is on the rise within our ranks are fueled by something more akin to the motivations that drove the Pharisees of Christ’s time than we would like to admit. *Evangelical Pharisees* is a great place to begin that inquiry.”

**Kenneth Mbugua**, Senior Pastor, Emmanuel Baptist Church, Nairobi, Kenya



*Evangelical Pharisees*

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# Evangelical Pharisees

*The Gospel as Cure for the Church's Hypocrisy*

Michael Reeves

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*For my friend and brother, Joel.*

*“A friend loves at all times, / and a brother is born for adversity.”*

*Proverbs 17:17*





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## Beware of the Leaven

WHAT IS THE MOST URGENT NEED of the church today? Better leadership? Better training? Healthier giving? Orthodoxy? Moral integrity? Each of these are undoubtedly needs, but underneath them all lies something even more vital: *gospel integrity*.

In Luke 12, when thousands had gathered together to hear Jesus, he began to say to his disciples first, “Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy” (v. 1). That might have been unsurprising had he been warning the people as a whole, but he said it *to his disciples first*, to those who had already left all and followed him. Clearly, hypocrisy—a lack of integrity in both head and heart—was a danger even for them.

Matthew records Jesus saying to his disciples, “Watch and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees *and Sadducees*” (Matt. 16:6). Seeing this, J. C. Ryle commented that Christ “foresaw that the two great plagues of His Church upon earth would always be the doctrine of the Pharisees and the doctrine of the

Sadducees.”<sup>1</sup> So it is not that Pharisaism was the only threat to the church that Jesus foresaw, but it was perhaps the primary one. Pharisaism, after all, is the sort of heartless formal religion that marks the first subtle step in the spiritual decline of a church before it ever slides into outright apostasy. It is the perpetual internal menace we can overlook as we dissect and bemoan the failure of others.

### The Hidden Cancer

It is usually easy to spot brazen sins (such as murder, adultery, and theft), but hypocrisy by its very nature is a pretense, making it hard to detect. Hypocrisy does not want to be identified for what it is. It poses and deceives to avoid discovery. “The hypocrite is very often an exceedingly neat imitation of the Christian,” said Charles Spurgeon. “To the common observer he is so good a counterfeit that he entirely escapes suspicion.”<sup>2</sup> Like leaven or yeast in dough, hypocrisy is transformative in its power but almost completely imperceptible. Like unmarked, whitewashed tombs, hypocrites may be full of dead people’s bones, but outwardly they appear beautiful (Matt. 23:27).

It is all too easy, therefore, to laugh at the idea that Pharisaism might be an ongoing problem for the church. Nobody today is a self-avowed, card-carrying Pharisee, after all. We keep the word as verbal mud only to be thrown at others. Even then, we hardly mean it, for “the Pharisee” strikes us as a cartoon villain. To call someone a Pharisee sounds rather harsh and cruel. But the leaven of the

1 J. C. Ryle, *Warnings to the Churches* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1967), 51.

2 C. H. Spurgeon, “The Touchstone of Godly Sincerity,” in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Sermons*, vol. 17 (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1871), 206.

Pharisees is a clear and present danger for disciples, according to Jesus. Cloaked by impressive performance and words that profess the gospel of grace, it can lurk in the hearts of the most ardent “gospel-centered” folk as much as those who can clearly articulate justification by faith alone or maintain a confession of faith.

Yet while hypocrisy may be a hidden and quiet problem, it is not a slight one. An outright hypocrite is “a child of hell” (Matt. 23:15), and Dante showed great perception when he placed hypocrites in the eighth circle of hell in his *Inferno*. For hypocrisy, as we shall see, is a denial of the gospel, a sin that for all its subtlety is more essentially hellish than the sins of the flesh the hypocrite so swiftly condemns. As C. S. Lewis wrote,

The sins of the flesh are bad, but they are the least bad of all sins. All the worst pleasures are purely spiritual: the pleasure of putting other people in the wrong, of bossing and patronising and spoiling sport, and back-biting; the pleasures of power, of hatred. For there are two things inside me, competing with the human self which I must try to become. They are the Animal self, and the Diabolical self. The Diabolical self is the worse of the two. That is why a cold, self-righteous prig who goes regularly to church may be far nearer to hell than a prostitute. But, of course, it is better to be neither.<sup>3</sup>

### **Poor, Misunderstood Pharisees?**

But is all this being unfair to the historical Pharisees of Jesus’s day? Throughout most of the history of the church, the Pharisees

3 C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Glasgow: Collins, 1955), 92.

have been taken as the very definition of hypocrisy, as legalists who sought to earn their righteousness rather than receive it from God. Over the last half century, however, a number of scholars have sought to amend this idea, and so restore the reputation of the Pharisees.<sup>4</sup> Old Testament religion, they have rightly pointed out, was not a religion of works righteousness, but a religion of grace. As such, they have argued, it is unfair to paint the Pharisees as believers in a religion of works.

However, while it is quite true that all the Old Testament Scriptures taught the same message of God's grace as the New Testament, it does not follow that all the Israelites (or in this case, the Pharisees) believed in or lived in that grace. Indeed, a constant refrain of the prophets was that the people were not listening to what God was saying. They may have been circumcising their flesh, but they were not circumcising their hearts (Deut. 10:16, 30:6; Jer. 4:4, 9:26). In practice, they were trusting in themselves and not the Lord.

While, then, we need not say that every single Pharisee in Jesus's day was an outright hypocrite, we need not be surprised at his insistence that there was an antigospel hypocrisy that was typical of the Pharisees. They did justify and exalt themselves among men (Luke 16:15), trusting in themselves that they were righteous (18:9). Paul writes that as a Pharisee himself, he had had "confidence in the flesh . . . having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law" instead of "the righteousness from God that depends on faith" (Phil. 3:4, 9). In that confession, we see a man who clearly accepted Jesus's condemnation of the Pharisees

4 I am thinking here primarily of the school known as the "New Perspective on Paul."

as children of the devil (John 8:44). For what Saul the Pharisee needed was a new heart and a new righteousness.

### A Problem with the Gospel

It is easy to brush off Pharisaism as the foible of the zealous, a merely temperamental weakness. A pharisaical or hypocritical spirit leaves such an obvious moral trail—from pride to people pleasing, tribalism, empire building, and lovelessness—that it is easy to diagnose it simply as a moral problem. Yet what the Pharisees show us is that Pharisaism is not just the crankiness that comes with a hardening of the spiritual arteries. First and foremost, it is a *theological* issue. The Pharisees were as they were and acted as they did because they denied the gospel. Their mercilessness, love of applause, and trust in themselves all flowed from a refusal to listen to Scripture, a refusal to receive a righteousness not their own, and a refusal to see their need for a new heart. Their character was a manifestation of their theology.

The theological roots of sickness in the church (being *roots*) often remain unseen. So it was in the years running up to the Reformation. In the late Middle Ages, many saw a need for church reform. Monastic orders set about reforming themselves, and even the Papacy went through some attempts at reform. Everyone recognized that there were rotten apples and dead branches that needed pruning. Yet for most, the solution was quite simple and quite superficial: give the church a good moral scrub. Clear up the abuses, wash away the bad behavior, and all would be well. What made Martin Luther so different was his appreciation of the depth of the problem. A truly transformative reformation and renewal of the church, he saw, required dealing with the theological causes



of the trouble. Likewise today: the moral deficiencies and spiritual dryness that Christians bemoan have roots. Our need is not just for moral integrity but gospel integrity.

It might sound like I am about to make a call for orthodoxy. I am not. Not quite. Orthodox belief is vitally important, but it is not exactly the same as gospel integrity. For it is quite possible to have dead orthodoxy, or an orthodoxy that is only skin-deep: to affirm the truth on paper but deny it in the heart and in practice. Integrity, on the other hand, requires that the truths we formally confess are embraced such that they affect and change us. Integrity is found where the head and the heart are aligned.

Sinclair Ferguson writes of hypocrisy's twin, legalism:

Legalism is . . . not merely a matter of the intellect. Clearly it is that, for how we *think* determines how we live. But we are not abstract intellects. And legalism is also related to the heart and the affections—how we *feel* about God. . . . Within this matrix legalism at root is the manifestation of a restricted heart disposition toward God, viewing him through a lens of negative law that obscures the broader context of the Father's character of holy love.<sup>5</sup>

Just so, the leaven of the Pharisees was a matter of both the intellect and the affections. They were intensely proud of their orthodoxy, but despite all their study, they failed to see either the depth of their need or the liberality of God's kindness. They

5 Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Whole Christ: Legalism, Antinomianism, and Gospel Assurance—Why the Marrow Controversy Still Matters* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 85.

professed a God of grace but were blind to the true meaning of grace. Seeing God as only conditionally loving, they did not perceive the sheer loveliness and benevolence of God. Thus, they did not heartily love him but sought to serve him with a joyless duty. Copying the god they thought they saw in Scripture, they then treated others with merciless harshness and self-concerned lovelessness.

It is quite possible to maintain a facade of orthodoxy but without integrity. We can profess the language of grace but deny its nature by a prickly, severe manner or disdain for the weak. And the fact that the gospel of grace can be denied in such subtle ways only emphasizes what an elusive problem we are dealing with. John Calvin wrote that some believe there is nothing amiss “unless there is open and admitted reproach or contempt of [God’s] Word.” But to think like that, he argued, betrays not only a hollow and bogus faith but a blindness to the nature of our sin. “The human heart,” he noted, “has so many crannies where vanity hides, so many holes where falsehood lurks, is so decked out with deceiving hypocrisy, that it often dupes itself.”<sup>6</sup>

Being a matter of both head and heart, the leaven of the Pharisees cannot be cured with a mere call to orthodoxy. Christian integrity involves more than knowledge: what Calvin called a deeply rooted “persuasion of God’s fatherly love.”<sup>7</sup> Yet Pharisaism was—and remains—a primarily theological issue. More than the head is involved, but not less.

6 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols., ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 3.2.10.

7 Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.2.12

## Treating the Sickness

In the Gospels, Jesus spelled out three basic theological mistakes the Pharisees made:

1. Their approach to Scripture
2. Their understanding of salvation
3. Their disregard of regeneration

That is, they were mistaken in their understanding of the three essential *r*'s of the gospel: *revelation*, *redemption*, and *regeneration*. These are:

1. The Father's revelation in the Bible
2. The Son's redemption in the gospel
3. The Spirit's regeneration of our hearts

These three *r*'s constitute the three basic subject areas of a biblical, Trinitarian, and creedal understanding of the gospel.<sup>8</sup> They make a good template for diagnosing the disease of Pharisaism and so for dealing with many of the deepest internal problems in evangelicalism today, which bear such strong resemblance to those in first-century Pharisaism. I hope to show that our most elemental in-house issues (from our partisanship to our pragmatism) are inextricably related to our failure to have integrity to these gospel essentials.

As Luther saw, true reformation of the church takes more than a moral bath. It requires the gospel. Without the gospel,

<sup>8</sup> For an introduction to these three *r*'s, see Michael Reeves, *Gospel People: A Call for Evangelical Integrity* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022).

our attempts at reform will be superficial. As the Puritan Richard Baxter put it,

Alas! can we think that the reformation is wrought, when we cast out a few ceremonies, and changed some vestures, and gestures, and forms! Oh no, sirs! it is the converting and saving of souls that is our business. That is the chiefest part of reformation.<sup>9</sup>

Without that reformation of hearts and lives through the gospel itself, we may find, as Jonathan Edwards found in Northampton, that the people are a “sober, and orderly, and good sort of people” and yet that they remain “dry bones.”<sup>10</sup> In the tradition of Luther, the Puritans, and Edwards, this is a call for reformation.

9 Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1974), 211.

10 Jonathan Edwards, *The Great Awakening*, ed. C. C. Goen, vol. 4 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 113, 117, 149.