

Some men came down from Judea and began to teach the brothers, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom prescribed by Moses, you cannot be saved.” ² After Paul and Barnabas had **engaged them in serious argument and debate**, Paul and Barnabas and some others were appointed to go up to the apostles and elders in Jerusalem about this issue. ³ When they had been sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and they brought great joy to all the brothers and sisters. ⁴ When they arrived at Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church, the apostles, and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them. ⁵ **But some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, “It is necessary to circumcise them and to command them to keep the law of Moses.”**

The Controversy: Pharisaic Christians are insisting that Gentile Christians convert to Judaism in addition to converting to Jesus. God’s conversion of the gentiles is so successful and such a big deal in the life of the church that they cannot avoid the issue. What do we do with all these non-Torah compliant gentiles streaming into our faith?

The Debaters:

- Peter
- Paul and Barnabas
- Elders and Apostles

The Debate: Works vs Faith In this particular context it is the Works of Torah—those ethnic identity markers that set Israel apart from the nations. The purpose of the law was to restrain and slow a rapid descent into oblivion. God gave the law as a response to the acceleration of moral depravity. The law could restrain but could not redeem.

- The Works of the Law (Torah): Circumcision, Dietary Compliance, Sabbath Observance
- **Peter’s case: Exhibit A**—God’s work among Cornelius through Peter. 15:7-8 After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, “Brothers, you are aware that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles would hear the gospel message and believe. ⁸ And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he also did to us.”
- Gentiles were not viewed as inferior, or needing any ethnic marks in the flesh before receiving the Spirit by faith. He asks “why are you testing God by putting a yoke on their necks that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear.” Legal perfection. We are saved by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ the same way they are.
- **Barnabas and Paul’s case:** God’s work of pouring out the Spirit in their Gentile missions. Acts 15:12 “The whole assembly became silent and listened to Barnabas and Paul describe all the signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles.”

Serious argument and debate: They present solid, reasonable arguments and evidence for their case. God accepts the gentiles by faith in Christ alone.

- **James’ case—Scriptural reinforcement: Am 9:11–12; Is 45:21** ¹³ After they stopped speaking, James responded, “Brothers, listen to me. ¹⁴ Simeon has reported how God first intervened to take from the Gentiles a people for his name. ¹⁵ And the words of the prophets agree with this, as it is written (The testimony you just heard is according to the Scriptures).

¹⁶ After these things I will return and rebuild David’s fallen tent. I will rebuild its ruins and set it up again,

¹⁷ so that the rest of humanity may seek the Lord—even all the Gentiles who are called by my name—

declares the Lord who makes these things ¹⁸ known from long ago. ¹⁹ Therefore, in my judgment, we should not cause difficulties for those among the Gentiles who turn to God

The Decision:

- No conversion to Judaism is required. The Spirit is given by faith.
- Abstaining from all idolatrous practices—anything associated with idolatrous temples.

Our Application: It's human nature to turn the Christian Faith into Pharisaic religion.

Let me say this clearly: the greatest threat Jesus ever faced was not from hostile Samaritans, Romans, or Greeks. The greatest threat he faced was internal—it was the Pharisees and Scribes.

The greatest threat to the Gospel going forward into Greco-Rome was not the Greeks or Romans. It was the Pharisees who followed Paul to every city and did great harm and damage to his work.

The Greatest threat we face to making disciples today is not political, it's not cultural. It's internal. Pharisaism is alive and well in the church today and it has the effect of stopping evangelism cold. Neutralizing all efforts to break down barriers and to build bridges of the Gospel to our culture.

Illus. I put this question out on Facebook a few weeks ago: What are some artificial barriers to Christ that we erect in the church today?

In context, the Church has to address the evils of Pharisaic religion. What were these hyper-religious people known for?

- **Heresy: Adding human tradition/revelation to God's written Word.** This is called the "Oral Torah" and in Jesus's day he referred to it as "your ancestor's tradition." This isn't having an opinion or interpretation about God's word. Or a theory. But it is the elevation of that theory to Scriptural or sacred status.
 - How do we do this today? We elevate the traditions of men to equal status with God's truth, particularly the Good News.
 - When Paul was doing this—denying the gospel, persecuting the church, and continuing to teach the maddening system of the Oral Torah—all those extra laws intended to govern the written Word—he called himself a blasphemer. **When we deny what God says is true—salvation is by grace through faith apart from works of the Law we make God out to be a liar. THAT is the definition of blasphemy or heretical teaching.**

- **Self-righteousness:** Belief that strict moral compliance made them more righteous before God. But Jesus said, the “sinners and the prostitutes are entering God’s Kingdom ahead of you Pharisees” (Mt 21:23, 31). Self-righteousness is any area of sin that you don’t need Jesus for.
- **Hypocrisy:** Hypocrisy is simply forbidding or requiring something for others that you do not forbid nor require for yourself. It is the appearance of piety, strictness of religion but inwardly our hearts are still full of lust, prejudices, and shameful thoughts.
 - **Illus. Bill Cosby.** America’s dad who rapes women in his private life. Now that’s an egregious and grotesque example. Truth is, we’re all guilty of hypocrisy on occasion at some level.
 - Pharisees had the problem of inaccessibility. The higher up in the decision path you go in any organization the harder it is to hear the truth about yourself. The average synagogue going Jew wouldn’t have been comfortable nor authorized to rebuke them when they saw obvious hypocrisy. But Jesus did challenge them.
- **Religiosity: Prioritizing religious systems over people.**
 - Straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel. Careful to tithe and practice religion with scrupulous detail and then failing to show mercy, justice, or grace to people who are made in God’s image. People aren’t the priority in this system, the SYSTEM is. It becomes this machine that needs to be served rather than serving the people.
- **Judgmentalism.** Judgmentalism is when we become the standard of all that is right over matters that are debatable or issues of personal preference, or personal calling issues.
 - Career moms vs. stay-at-home moms.
 - Homeschooling families vs. public or private or charter school families. What happens is we unconsciously become the standard of what is best for others. We unintentionally judge others because of what God has called us to do and be in our situation. **There’s a little Pharisee in all of us in this regard.**
- **Ostentation:** Theirs was a life of public, religious pageantry. They loved the honored seats at banquets, or to be greeted in the marketplace as wise master. They loved pomp and honor of their position in society. Jesus was repulsed by the swaggering pride of showy religion. Why is the church so casual? Let me correct that. There is nothing casual about our worship. We approach God with reverence, awe, in humility and with Great respect. We are careful about what we say, and what we sing so that everything we do is for the glory, the honor and fame of our God and his Son Jesus. Don’t mistake our lack of formality or religious affectation for a casual attitude toward God. We’re not casual—we’re modest. Our worship may lack pretention, well, so be it.

What is the result of allowing the Pharisaic gene to take over the church? **It stops the forward momentum of the Gospel because it puts unnecessary barriers that are not the gospel in people’s way.**

1. This approach to religion doesn't actually make disciples of Jesus.

¹³ “But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. For you neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in. ¹⁵ Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel across sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves.

If the Pharisaic party had been allowed to take over the Christian faith at this critical juncture in Acts 15—if they had won the debate—if Gentiles had been forced to convert to the works of the Law in Judaism in order to also be Christians—the Christian faith would never have made it out of the first century. It would not have taken hold in the Gentile world.

2. This approach to religion doesn't prioritize mercy ministry to people.

²³ “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. ²⁴ You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel! Justice to the disenfranchised, faithfulness to God's Word; mercy to those who need it most.

3. This approach doesn't result in spiritual purity—it can only ever offer the veneer of personal purity.

²⁵ “For you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. ²⁶ You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean.”

This is what the Gospel is about. It is about the internal problem of sin—that's what makes us impure before God, not externalities.

4. This approach leaves a person spiritually dead.

²⁷ “Woe to you... For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness. ²⁸ So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.”

There's no life in religion. Jesus told the Pharisees "You religiously study the Scriptures because you think in them you have eternal life—the same Scriptures that testify about me—yet you refuse to come to me and I would give you the life you seek."

5. This approach was the wrong religious heritage. Theirs was a heritage, not of compliance to Torah but of breaking it under the guise of keeping it. Theirs was a legacy of persecuting the very prophets that God had sent to reform Israel and point them to their future Messiah.

²⁹ "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and decorate the monuments of the righteous, ³⁰ saying, 'If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.' ³¹ Thus you witness against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. ³² Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers. ³³ You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell? ³⁴ Therefore I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and persecute from town to town, ³⁵ so that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah the son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar. ³⁶ Truly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation.

Conclusion: Did you know that your body, as you sit there this morning, is full of cancer cells. And those cells have epigenetic switches that can be flipped on—causing cancer to grow in your organs, or bones—left untreated this cancer will eventually take over the body and kill it.

There was no way God was going to allow this cancer on the Christian Faith—the heresy that in addition to believing on the Lord Jesus and receiving the free gift of his grace, that one would have to follow the identity laws of Moses. No way.

Though we are not natural born Jews, we are their spiritual descendants. And though we are not members of the Sanhedrin, there is a little Pharisee in all of us, waiting for his/her chance to multiply, grow, and eventually take over.

Its instinct is to always stop the message of the Gospel:

- **We all have the same problem. We have sinned and fallen short of God's glory, rebels in his realm.**

- **We all have the same solution. Jesus Christ paid it all—took upon himself the punishment of sin so that we could be forgiven—restored to our image-bearing vocation.**
- **We all have the same means of accessing that grace—faith. Trusting loyalty. Believing obedience to the Gospel.**