

Luke 5:17-24

Sermon: **The teaching of Jesus vs. The teaching of Pharisees**

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A LITTLE ABOUT THE PHARISEES

1. (Luke 5:17) “One day he was teaching, and Pharisees and teachers of the Law were sitting there, who had come from every village of Judea and Galilee and from Jerusalem. And the power of the Lord was with him to heal.”

1.1. Today we will study a new event in the Bible. Luke begins the sentence with the words “one day.” Luke does not know exactly which day this was. Let us remember: his intent was not to provide precise details of when and where something happened. His focus is on the actual events that took place in Jesus’ time, and on why those events matter for us as readers.

1.2. Later in the text we read that the Pharisees and teachers of the Law had come to hear Jesus’ teaching. Before we begin unpacking the text, I want to try to describe the history of Pharisaism: how they came into being, what their beliefs were, what their main motives were, and so on.

1.3. The term “Pharisee” comes from the Hebrew word *perushim*, which means “separated.” Their exact origin is not known, but it is assumed they arose about 140 years before Christ. We know from biblical records that God did not reveal himself to Israel’s prophets from Malachi until the last prophet of the Old Testament—John the Baptist. That period lasted roughly 400 years. It was during this time that the movement known as the Pharisees emerged¹.

1.4. In Jesus’ day there were several groups of Pharisees active in Israel. They lived among the people, but kept themselves separate from them; they did not usually associate with the common

¹ The name “Pharisees” comes from the Heb./Aram. *perushim* = “separated.” The group took shape in the Hasmonean period (2nd century BC) and is mentioned for the first time by Josephus. They were “separated” in the sense of ritual purity and special concern for the Law, not because of abstaining from politics—on the contrary, they held significant political and popular influence. A key characteristic was that, alongside the written Torah, the binding oral tradition also carried authority. The tradition of the “400 years of silence” of the prophets comes from rabbinic sources (Talmud, *Yoma* 9b).

folk. Their goal was to stand out externally as holy and devout men. They were often scribes and teachers of the Law. Most rabbis who taught in the synagogues belonged to the Pharisaic movement. Their belief was this: “If only for one single day every Jew in Israel fully kept the Law of Moses, the Messiah would come and rule Israel, and then the rest of the world!” Because of this conviction, their mission was to travel throughout Israel and make every Jewish man their follower².

1.5. Some biblical scholars say that in Jesus’ day there were about 6,000 of them³. From today’s perspective, where within some Christian denominations we have hundreds of thousands of priests and teachers, that number may seem small. But for that time, it was a very large number of people who sought to impose their teaching upon the common people—those who neither knew nor practiced the Law of Moses and the Pharisaic oral tradition.

1.6. Even though they often despised the common people who did not know the Law, they enjoyed respect and were highly influential—both because of their learning and devotion to religion, and because of the outwardly exemplary lives they appeared to live before the eyes of the people.

1.7. According to Pharisaic teaching, God’s grace was available only to those who practiced the Law of Moses and their oral tradition. Only they were worthy of God’s grace. In the Gospels, Jesus called this oral tradition “the tradition of men⁴.” Convinced that an individual could fulfill the Law of Moses, the Pharisees created additional laws—which, in their opinion, was a necessary and unavoidable step forward. Their tradition was meant to act as a protective fence⁵ around the Law of Moses: whoever kept their additional laws could hardly ever break the Law of Moses itself.

1.8. However, what we clearly see in the Gospels is that their laws were merciless and destructive—both for the individual and for society. In their desire to protect the Law of Moses, they created a system that terrified people and placed upon them impossible demands⁶. They sought to control the common people through fear—and in this they were very successful.

1.9. Within Pharisaism there were scribes, teachers of the Law, scholars—these are all synonyms for teachers of the Law. Their task was to instruct the people in the Law, whether in writing or orally. Most teachers of the Law came from the Pharisaic movement, while a minority belonged to the Sadducees. Unlike the Pharisees, the Sadducees were open to the world and to the philosophies of their time. They were strongly politically oriented, and most of their members came from aristocratic

² Matthew 23:15

³ The figure of about 6,000 Pharisees in the time of Jesus comes from an ancient source: the Jewish-Roman historian Josephus Flavius, who in *Jewish Antiquities* (XVII, 2.4) and *The Jewish War* mentions that under Herod the Great there were around 6,000 Pharisees. This number is often quoted in biblical scholarship and in sermons.

⁴ Matthew 15:1-3.6.9; Mark 7:7-9:13

⁵ “The ‘fence around the Torah’ (Pirkei Avot 1:1). From this tradition the Mishnah developed with concrete regulations: 39 categories of prohibited work on the Sabbath (Shabbat 7:2), the washing of hands before meals (Yadayim 1:1), the separation of tithes even from purchased produce (Demai 2:2), the prescribed times for reciting the Shema (Berakhot 1:1), and the dowry in the case of divorce (Ketubot 4:4).”

⁶ The Catholic Church throughout history introduced various rules that made the life of believers more difficult: the prohibition of possessing and translating the Bible into the vernacular (Middle Ages), numerous obligatory fasts and abstinences, mandatory celibacy of priests (from the 12th century), the practice and abuse of indulgences (late Middle Ages), and interdicts by which entire communities were left without the sacraments. The Catholic Church held marriage to be indissoluble, so women often remained bound even in difficult circumstances.

families. Theologically, they differed sharply from the Pharisees: they did not believe in the resurrection, in angels, in the coming of the Messiah, or in God's judgment upon the earth. For them, the Old Testament was merely a collection of wisdom on how best to live here and now. They believed this life was the only life a person has, and after death there is nothing. By that belief, God did not even need to exist. Because of these differences, they were often in conflict with the Pharisees.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GOD THE FATHER AND HIS SON, JESUS CHRIST

2. Ok, let's go to the text. We read at the very beginning that Pharisees and teachers of the Law had come from all over Judea, Galilee, and Jerusalem to hear the teaching of a man called Jesus. Here we are talking about a large number of Pharisees and scribes who came to hear and see Jesus. His popularity was then at its very peak of fame, and we clearly see that in this passage. The Pharisees and teachers of the Law certainly would not have come in such numbers if he had not been so well known.

2.1. Further in the text we read that Jesus was "driven by the power of the Lord" to heal. The question I asked myself is this: why would the authors of the Bible write that "the power of the Lord" was present when Jesus healed people? If Jesus had authority as Almighty God to heal whomever he wanted, whenever he wanted, then why do the authors write that he healed the multitudes being "full of the Spirit of the Lord"? Could Jesus, without the presence of his Father's Spirit, perform miracles on his own? These are all legitimate questions.

2.2. I am increasingly convinced that Jesus could not do anything without the presence of the Spirit of the Lord. Although in the Gospels Jesus emphasizes that the Father had placed all things in his hands, he immediately follows by telling his disciples: "*Do not worry, I do nothing that is not in accordance with the will of my Father.*" From the way the biblical authors write, we can conclude that they too understood the relationship between God the Father and his Son, Jesus Christ, in this very way⁷.

2.3. So what exactly did the relationship between God the Father and his Son, Jesus Christ, look like? I don't think we can define it completely. The Bible does not give us a precise and clear answer to that question. I will offer a few possibilities:

1. We know that Jesus often withdrew into solitude to pray. Perhaps it was then that the Father told him in detail what was about to happen and what he needed to do – a relationship similar to the one the Old Testament prophets had with God⁸.
2. Another possibility is that the Father only gave him the broad outline of his plan, and Jesus himself had to decide how to carry it out.
3. A third possibility: Jesus, as a sinless being and a unique man, had an insight into God's wisdom that no human being before him had ever possessed. Perhaps he was so united with

⁷ John 5:19; John 5:30; Luke 4:18; Acts 10:38; John 14:10

⁸ Exodus 33:7-11; Numbers 12:6-8; 1 Kings 19:9-13; Isaiah 6:1-8; Jeremiah 1:4-10; Habakkuk 2:1; Daniel 9:20-22

the Father that, through the situations unfolding before him, through studying the Torah, through the testimony of his mother Mary, his father Joseph, the angels, and others – that he would be the Messiah – he could recognize what God was doing in a given moment, why he was doing it, and to whom he was doing it. And precisely because of that special unity with the Father, he knew how to act and respond in every situation. He knew his Father was faithful to his plan, and by knowing the heart of that plan, he could speak and act in accordance with the Father's will.

4. A fourth possibility: Jesus, as eternal God, knows what will happen next. How does he know? Because it is his plan, it is the reality created through him, and therefore in line with that plan he responds to every situation.

2.4. In my opinion, the first three possibilities I listed are genuinely possible, and perhaps together they form the full description of the relationship between Jesus and his Father. Unlike Christian tradition, which teaches that Jesus had absolute authority to do whatever he wanted whenever he wanted, I personally believe he did not! Why is that even so important? I believe the answer to that question will become clear as we unpack the text before us.

2.5. In the eyes of church theology, this passage where Jesus forgives a person's sins has always been proof of his divinity and his authority as God. If that is so, I am fine with that. But, as I have said many times before – and forgive me for repeating myself – if Jesus came as a man to show the way to another man, then this event before us must also be read with that perspective in mind. I believe this event offers much more than just confirmation of Jesus' divinity. My personal conviction is this: Jesus' main intent here was to confront the Pharisees with how wrong their oral tradition really was. In this event Jesus will theologically confront their false beliefs.

THEIR FAITH IS STRONG

3. Ok, let's continue with the text. **(Luke 5:18–19)** *"Some men came carrying a paralyzed man on a bed. They tried to bring him in and lay him before Jesus. But when they could not find a way to do this because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and lowered him on his bed through the tiles into the middle of the crowd, right in front of Jesus."*

A Jewish house in the time of Jesus

Houses were square in shape, built of stone, with a single floor and a large central space. The outer section was reserved for animals. The roof was flat, with a slight slope to collect rainwater— not a single drop was to be wasted. On the roof, clothes were dried, tools were stored, and people also prayed under the stars. It was both a social and a spiritual space, which is why it had a protective railing for safety. It is very likely that the Gospel event took place in just such a house.



3.1. We read that some men were carrying their paralyzed friend on a bed, intending for Jesus to heal him. This event takes place inside a house. Whose house was it? Was it the home of one of Jesus' disciples? I don't think so. In Mark 1:40–2:2 we read that after healing the leper, Jesus spent some time outside the city teaching the people. Afterward, he decided to return to Capernaum, specifically to his own home. And when the crowd heard that Jesus had returned, they again pressed in on him – in his own house where he was living. Based on Mark's Gospel, we can assume that this event took place inside Jesus' home.

3.2. Ok, from the text we can conclude that the desire and faith of these men were strong! We read that they decided to "climb" up onto the roof with the intent of lowering their paralyzed friend right in front of Jesus inside the house. To do this, they had to remove part of the roof, make an opening, tie up their friend who was lying on the stretcher, and carefully lower him into the house where Jesus and the crowd were gathered. This was by no means a simple task. Someone else might have given up at the mere sight of the crowd. Someone else might have turned back after seeing the Pharisees standing among the people. But not them! In the hearts of these men, there was no thought like: *"It's impossible to bring our friend before Jesus."* Their faith made them bold and determined to carry out what they eventually did. No one and nothing could stop them from reaching the man called Jesus. In other words, for them Jesus – who had already for months been claiming to be the Messiah, the Son of God – was worth every effort. They believed that this was true, and that is why they came to him at all costs.

3.3. (Luke 5:20) *"When Jesus saw their faith, he said: 'Man, your sins are forgiven.'"*

3.4. We read in the text that when he (Jesus) "saw" their faith, he said: *"Man, your sins are forgiven!"* I believe Luke wants to highlight exactly this point – that Jesus "saw" their faith. Let's continue with the text, but let that word "saw" stay with you, because we will return to it later.

THE TEACHING OF JESUS VS. THE TEACHING OF THE PHARISEES

4. (Luke 5:21–24) *"Then the scribes and Pharisees began thinking to themselves: 'Who is this who speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?' But Jesus, knowing their thoughts, said to them: 'Why are you thinking such things in your hearts? Which is easier to say: Your sins are forgiven, or to say: Get up and walk? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins'—He said to the paralyzed man—'I say to you, rise, take up your mat, and go home!'"*

4.1. In these verses we see the disapproval of the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law. They were shocked by Jesus' words. In their eyes, here stood a heretic who must have come from the father of lies himself—Satan. I believe the Pharisees had been waiting eagerly for Jesus to say something like this. Why? Because, as we see throughout the Gospels, the Pharisees and scribes were constantly looking for opportunities to trap Jesus in His words and disgrace Him before the people. A few may not have acted this way, but the majority saw Jesus as a threat. Why? Because they were losing followers, and with them, the power they held over the common people. These Pharisees, thinking in their hearts against Jesus, had not come with open hearts to hear His teaching. They had come to humiliate Him, to make Him look like a fool before the crowd. And His words, "Your sins are forgiven," were the perfect opportunity for them.

4.2. The text goes on to say that Jesus, knowing their thoughts, asked: *“Why are you thinking such things in your hearts?”* The question arises: did Jesus say this as God, who knows the thoughts of every man, or as one of us—a man—who knew the heart and mentality of the Pharisees? It could be either. But I am more inclined toward the second. Why? Because Jesus grew up in a culture where Pharisees were a constant presence in society. The teachers He had heard in the synagogues throughout His life were Pharisees. As one who had diligently studied the Torah, Jesus had certainly spent much time in their company, debating theological questions. As a man, He knew their teaching and their theological convictions, and so He knew exactly how they would react to His statement.

4.3. And Jesus was not the only one who knew how Pharisees thought. The apostle Paul himself had been one of them, and so he knew very well what most of them believed in their hearts. I have a dear friend, a brother in Christ, who has spent his entire life in one particular Christian denomination. In talking with him, I came to realize that he knows exactly what he can and cannot say within his community. I am certain he “knows” their thoughts—I am certain he knows their theological convictions.

4.4. So, what exactly were the Pharisees thinking in their hearts? Their theological tradition essentially taught this: “A person worthy of God’s forgiveness and grace is the one who literally carries out in his life the Law of Moses and the oral tradition of the elders.” How could one know if someone was worthy of God’s grace? The Pharisees claimed to have the key to that answer. If someone chose to become their disciple, they would guide him step by step into the Law of Moses, teaching him their oral traditions—how to dress, how to fast, where and how to pray, even how to persuade others to join their movement. Over time, one Pharisee could say of another: *“His sins are forgiven.”* They knew full well that only God could forgive sins, but that did not change the fact that they believed they held the key to salvation. Deep down they considered only members of their movement worthy of God’s forgiveness. And this was clear in their fruit: they were self-righteous and saw themselves above others.

— In other words, they claimed authority to forgive sins. —

4.5. If we look at this event from that perspective, then we see that the Pharisees were not angry with Jesus because He wanted to prove that He was God. They were angry because this ordinary man from Nazareth, who did not belong to their movement, had taken upon Himself the right to decide who was forgiven by God and who was not! Not only that—Jesus dared to declare forgiveness over the very people the Pharisees called the outcasts of society. Their term for such people was “sinners,” and they despised them from above. And it was precisely these people of whom Jesus now said: *“Your sins are forgiven.”* I can only imagine how those words rang in the ears of the Pharisees. In their hearts they must have been thinking: *“Forgiveness for ordinary sinners? This man is completely insane! How dare He say that? How dare He disgrace our God, who gives grace only to those worthy of forgiveness—and that is us!”* Surely rage filled the hearts of these self-righteous Pharisees. But Jesus, knowing their hearts, wanted to expose the lie they believed, to open their eyes and help them see just how wrong they were.

4.6. What did Jesus know about God the Father that the Pharisees did not? Jesus knew that God can forgive whomever He wills, whenever He wills, wherever He wills. God does not need a denomination, a movement, or a religious institution in order to forgive an individual’s sins.

Forgiveness is the gift of God, as Paul later wrote⁹. Only He decides who will receive grace and who will not. No one is worthy of God's favor. No one can earn forgiveness by works in God's eyes. Jesus knew this truth—and the Scriptures testify to it! Beyond that, Jesus had the wisdom to recognize to whom His Father had granted forgiveness.

4.7. In the next sermon, we will continue with this same event.

⁹ Ephesians 2:8-9; Romans 3:23-24; Colossians 2:13-14; Titus 3:5-7