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## The Religion of the Pharisees: The Nature, Tactics, and Dangers of Man-Made Religion

*“Matthew 12:7 And if you had known what this means, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the guiltless.*

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*“The Pharisee’s Misuse of Scripture to Justify His Own Sin”*

November 18, 2012

Sermon Text: Matthew 5

Scripture Reading: Matt 5:17-48

Introduction-

Listen to the following excerpt from The Biblical Evangelist, put out by Pastor Robert Sumner. He very bravely exposed a mega-church and its pastor a number of years ago in his own fellowship of churches and he suffered greatly for doing so. Time, however, has vindicated the warnings he sounded. In fact, that same cultish “church” has been back in the news recently as the pastor who replaced the first one is in jail for abuse and is about to be sentenced to prison. The following was written by Pastor Sumner to expose the false teaching of the 41 year reign of the founding pastor. It is a perfect example of the religion of the Pharisees:

**The Biblical Evangelist  
Pastor Robert Sumner  
(on Jack Hyles)**

“Do you remember the Athenians, the men who invited Paul to speak to them at Mars Hill about Jesus and the resurrection because “he seemeth to be a setter forth of strange gods”? The

Scripture says of them, “For all the Athenians and strangers which were there spent their time in nothing else, but either to tell or to hear some new thing” (Acts 17:21).

One of the marks of a cultist is that he must always have some "new light" to present every time his disciples gather. When doing research on the Herbert W./Garner Ted Armstrong cult, the ex-followers we contacted emphasized that the leadership boasted it always had something new to reveal whenever they gathered at the festivals.

Apparently this form of egotism has been spilling over into Fundamentalism and we are alarmed at the results. We will use one man as an illustration and hope what is going on is confined to him, but we have no assurance that it is. This man has long been a leading light on the Fundamentalist conference circuit. He is the pastor of a Fundamentalist superchurch. He founded and heads a prominent school. While we have not been associated with him for a number of years and have heard him speak only once in half a decade, some concerned individuals have been sharing tapes of his messages with us that are shocking, indeed.

One brother sent us a tape of his sermon on Samson, saying he was alarmed at what he heard. So were we!

Purporting to answer the question of why God gives some Christians who fall into sin a second chance and does not give one to others, he said that David, for example, committed adultery and murder, but was used again, while others committed the same sins and weren't used again. He wondered why Samson got by with his sin and others in the Bible didn't, concluding that the secret was Samson's "consecration." (We surely wouldn't want to preach a sermon, offering Samson's life as the pattern for a life of consecration!) He put it like this:

*“God used Samson when He did not use others, who did the same things Samson did, because of one word – consecration. Samson was totally sold out to the plan of God for his life.”*

One of many amazing statements he made – which sounded like one Jimmy Swaggart used in explaining how his ministry would collapse without him – was,

*“Samson was valuable to God. Samson was so dedicated to God that when he made some stupid mistake, God said, ‘I need the fellah too much to put him on the shelf. He’s doing too much good for one little bad thing to cause him to forfeit his chance to serve me’.”*

But be assured, no individual, no matter how important he may seem in the eyes of his fellow men (or himself), is indispensable to God and God's ministry.

What this preacher proceeded to develop from the story of Samson was a merit/demerit system for Christian service, one that determines whether God will give someone another chance if that one falls into grievous sin. Perhaps he didn't intend it to be so, but his message came across as saying,

*"If you set out to do what God's will is for your life, and work hard enough at it, you can do anything you want to do and get away with it! In fact, you can get away with adultery and murder, just like David did!"*

His first point was,

*"God's degree of patience with you when you stumble is determined by how fast you were running."*

His next point was,

*"Your chance at a second chance will depend on what you did with your first chance."*

In short, if you were gung-ho in your labors, always on visitation, always tithing, always witnessing, going day and night in service, God will give you

a second chance when you fall. If not, He won't. He said flatly,  
*"God's degree of patience when you stumble will be totally dependent on how fast you were running."*

In other words, God operates on a system of merits and demerits. This preacher actually called it "stumbling insurance," concluding,

*"You'd better be worth enough to God, [have] enough merits built up, so when you stumble the demerits will not overbalance the merits."*

Referring to Samson, he said,

*"Samson was so dedicated to God that God gave him so many merits that when the demerits came he had a bonus of merits left over and God used him again."*

To illustrate, he referred to a man whose preaching he called "R-rated," but gets by with it because,

*"God looks down and says, 'It is sort of strange, but, Gabriel, go check his invitation on Sunday morning and see how it's going. Go check his soul winning; see how hard he works. Go check his Bible study.' And God looks down and says, 'The fella is doing so much good, I'll overlook a few of the blunders he makes'."*

And he spoke of another preacher whose language is so bad God looks down and says,

*“Oh, my soul, I think I’ll kill him,” but about that time the offending minister gets up and preaches a sermon on Hell, has 200 people saved, and God says, “Hold it a minute. Wait a minute. Let him finish that sermon first.”*

And he opined,

*“Folks, you’d do the same thing.”*

(Whether we would or not isn’t the point, obviously; we are dealing here with a God of absolute holiness and what He would do!)

Such teaching is utter nonsense, of course. Actually, it is a warmed over, remodeled version of the old “indulgences” philosophy practiced in Roman Catholicism. It has no more scriptural substance behind it than Rome has for its teaching. The primary difference is that the “earned” merit in one is after the fact and in the other it is before the fact. That’s all.

He said,

*“In my church a fellow stumbles, and is immoral – and I am not for immorality; I hate it with a passion, I am against it – but if you are not*

*tithing, shut your mouth about the adultery.”*

(As if there were any resemblance whatsoever between failing to tithe and committing adultery!) And he said a preacher who is busy for God is more likely to fall into sin than one who isn’t. (The exact opposite is true, of course, since the one closest to God has the most strength to resist temptation.)

What is really behind this wickedness and distortion of God’s Word? It is the motivation of covering up his own sin, of laying a screen to hide behind for the day that his own evil is exposed. And for Hyles, it worked! He remained in the pulpit even though he was publicly exposed in evil.

Little wonder then that First Baptist of Hammond, Indiana has a whole history of covering up evil, including the abuse of children, and that the recent arrest of Hyles’ own son-in-law (who succeeded him in the pulpit when Hyles died in 2001). The church is now millions of dollars in debt and has even cut off utilities in some of its facilities and college. But make no mistake, Hyles’ legacy lives on and the religion of the Pharisees and its evil that he preached is still infecting many, many people.

The religion of the Pharisees is not merely some system of doctrine that we disagree with. That it is, but it is more. It is an evil that oppresses and destroys people – emotionally, spiritually, and even physically.

Pharisaism handles the Scripture in such a way so as to justify the Pharisee's own sin. We saw this last week in the account of the Good Samaritan when the lawyer was said to be "seeking to justify himself" when he wanted a definition of "neighbor" that would suit him. Let's consider then a few excerpts from the Sermon on the Mount and see some examples of this Pharisaical twisting of God's Word-

(Mat 5:27-30 ESV) 27 ¶ "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' 28 But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart. 29 If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. 30 And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell.

Here then is the 6<sup>th</sup> commandment. Exodus chapter 20. How did the

Pharisees deal with it? Well, apparently they were a pretty lustful bunch. But as long as they didn't commit the outward act (or if they did, they only needed to do the proper paperwork to make it legal), then their take on the commandment justified them. Jesus says, "huh-un. Not so fast." The spirit of God's Word goes much deeper than the letter. It goes to the spirit and the spirit behind that commandment is that of a righteousness that exceeds that of the Pharisees.

The righteousness of Christ comes to us through faith, and by His suffering, death and resurrection, each one of His people die and are raised as new creations. These new creation people are indwelt by the Spirit of Christ and though we still sin, the Spirit within us does battle with that sin. Do we lust? Yes, but if you are a Christian, there is a new dynamic within you that rises up to meet that flesh, oppose it, and put it to death.

Is Jesus toying with the Pharisees here in vs 29-30? Ok, they want to take the Word of God absolutely literally, in an external sense, on a surface level. Let them deal with these two statements then! I mean if you take "tear out your eye" and "cut off your right hand" consistently with the hermeneutic of Pharisees, then where does that leave them?

Is it possible that we see the same “bare letter” hermeneutic in Nicodemus when he came to Jesus? –

(Joh 3:3-4 ESV) 3 Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." 4 Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?"

And so it is. Jesus goes right down the list of Pharisaical false traditions and exposes them. In each case we see that the tradition was produced by the Pharisees' using Scripture in such a way as to justify their own sin:

(Mat 5:31-32 ESV) 31 ¶ "It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' 32 But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

What should be our approach to marriage? Well, as Jesus emphasized over in Matthew 19, it should be to not destroy the marriage covenant. To love one another as husband and wife for life as God intended marriage to be. The Pharisees however pulled Deut 24 out, warped it, camped upon the mere appearance of the words “for any cause” and “a certificate of

divorce” – and used it to justify their own evil adulteries and treacherous putting away of one’s wife.

(Mat 5:33-37 ESV) 33 ¶ "Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.' 34 But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, 35 or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. 36 And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. 37 Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from evil.

Here the goal was to take the Scripture and interpret it in such a way so that shady business deals could be justified. “Perform to the Lord what you have sworn” was a loophole. Hmmm...what I have sworn? So the manner in which I do the swearing determines if I really am bound by the oath or not. We see it developed in Matthew 23 –

(Mat 23:16-22 ESV) 16 ¶ "Woe to you, blind guides, who say, 'If anyone swears by the temple, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath.' 17 You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that has made

the gold sacred? 18 And you say, 'If anyone swears by the altar, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gift that is on the altar, he is bound by his oath.' 19 You blind men! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred? 20 So whoever swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. 21 And whoever swears by the temple swears by it and by him who dwells in it. 22 And whoever swears by heaven swears by the throne of God and by him who sits upon it.

See what they did? They took the “swearing” and ran with it and made it depend on the form of the oath they took. All designed to let them be justified in their shady business deals.

And it continues –

(Mat 23:23-24 ESV) 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!

Here is the heart of the evil of the religion of the Pharisees – the disregard of what is really important to the Lord, *justice, mercy and faithfulness*. Are the more “surface”

matters important, such as *tithing*, or *not committing actual adultery*, or *not actually murdering someone*? Yes. Jesus says so – *without neglecting these things*. But there are things that are even more important to the Lord that lie behind these outward, physical conformities to God’s Law. WHY do we not do these things? Because *justice, mercy, and faithfulness* demand that we obey God’s Law. These are the “weightier” matters of the Law and they are *embraced by our hearts and minds*. This is Jesus’ next point:

(Mat 23:25-28 ESV) 25 ¶ "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! 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. 27 ¶ "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! 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.

Christ is speaking here of course of the condition of their hearts. Without a heart that has been regenerated by God, a man will take Scripture and create mere outward religion that is

designed to justify himself. That is what the Pharisees did. That is what Jack Hyles did. He created a system – an outwardly very, very successful system, that looked like the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. But it wasn't. It was based upon zealous outward performance-

- Soul-winning visitation
- Bus route ministry and competitions
- Using only the KJV Bible
- Abstaining from alcohol and tobacco

Whitewashed tombs. Apparently clean cups. But the weightier matters – well, that is another matter entirely.

In some ways the next indictment of them by our Lord is the most damning of the Religion of the Pharisees –

(Mat 23:29-35 ESV) 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.

Here is the real exposure of Pharisaical religion. From its pulpits it exalts Isaiah, Jeremiah, Paul, Peter, and Christ Himself. Quotes their words. Rails against those who hate the Bible. But when Christ Himself appears, or any of His true servants, Pharisees hate them with a murderous rage.

Just as the Jews of old killed and persecuted God's prophets like Jeremiah, Jesus tells these vipers of His day that when His Apostles and His people are sent out by Him, they will kill them and crucify them and flog them and drive them out of town. And of course we know that is precisely what happened – see the Book of Acts.

It is the same today. And all you need do to find that this is indeed true is to challenge their traditions. Then look out! Challenge the power. Question the "good ol' boys club" that leads most of these systems by brining the



“weightier matters of God’s Word” to bear upon them. When Pastor Sumner began to write his articles exposing Jack Hyles, for instance, it really is not an exaggeration to say that his very life was endangered.

If you travel through the southern United States (and please understand I am not saying there aren’t plenty of Pharisaical groups in the North), you will see church buildings, BIG church buildings, on almost, it seems, every corner. You go into a Wendy’s and there is John 3:16 on the counter where you order. Stop at a Starbucks and here are two guys with Bibles open in front of them, and over there is an older fellow, perhaps a pastor, telling a lady seated at a table that he hasn’t seen her in church for quite awhile.

Surely this Bible belt area of the country must be heaven? No, it isn’t. Not at all. I have no doubt that it is largely what Jesus said: a clean, nice-looking cup on the outside full of filth and defilement on the inside. It is Pharisaical religion in many cases. Not all, but the Pharisees are there in large numbers. And I think any true pastor or Christian who lives there would agree with this assessment.

And in all of this system, you will find the same, consistent, distortion and misapplication of God’s Word as Jesus confronted here in the Sermon on the

Mount. The goal, as always, is to self-justify the Pharisee.

Listen to Fil Anderson in his book *Breaking the Rules: Trading Performance for Intimacy With God-*

*“As long as a relationship is ruled by love, the rule of law is obsolete.”*

ROBERT BILMONT

The handwriting in the front of my first Bible, the King James Version bound in black imitation leather, is unmistakably that of a child. I recognize it as my own. The inscription simply says: "Fil accepted Jesus Christ on February 26, 1961." Looking back, I'm still not sure what happened to me on that day. I grew up in the South. Smack dab on the buckle of our nation's Bible belt. From early childhood I was taught that religion was the only ticket to the best life in this world.

The North Carolina church I attended provided me with a tightly sealed view of God, the world and me. Since ours was the kind of family that showed up whenever the doors were opened, I lived within the pervasive cloud of the church's influence, which narrowed my vision and shaped the borders of my world. Growing up there, I learned about our corner on God's truth, and

anyone who dared to disagree with us was either flirting with hell or already headed there.

My religion was characterized by a code of requirements, those activities or beliefs necessary to gain good standing with God. As I grew older, the essential truths associated with my religion became increasingly precise and the boundaries surrounding it more constricting. Vigilantly, my religion taught me that God is powerful, flawless, and provoked to anger by my weakness, defects and disregard. In ironic contrast to the freedom it was alleged to provide, religion enslaved me to a rigid and demanding regimen of rules.

This self-salvation blueprint became the pattern I was to follow if I were to have any hope that God would recognize me as "fit for heaven." Attend religious services. Show acts of generosity and kindness (show being the operative word). Believe sound doctrine. Avoid immoral activity. Read the Bible. Pray. Obey the rules. Think pure thoughts. Boldly share the truth with others. Don't cuss. Don't drink. Don't smoke. Carefully guard your appearance and reputation. These telltale signs were regarded as the only means to acquiring an abundant

life and thereby guaranteeing security, acceptance, love and forgiveness.

Since this was the life I wanted and was striving for, I dedicated myself again and again to believing and behaving properly. Yet, despite my desire and determined efforts, I rarely felt that I was making steady progress. Instead it seemed that for every step forward, I took two steps back. The only abundance I experienced was mounting feelings of disappointment.

I was ten years old in February 1961 when a traveling revival preacher came to town. And he was mad! Mad at all the sinners there-and mad at me. At least that's the way I remember it. The first night of the revival I felt overpowering shame and regret as he described our wickedness and the gory details of Jesus' death. Feeling as though he was speaking directly to me, I listened intently as the preacher recited the latter half of a familiar verse, "While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8 NIV).

The dreadful climax came when he urged each of us, before going to sleep that night, to seriously ask ourselves, "If I were to die and face God tonight, how could I expect a holy God to allow me entrance into

heaven? Why should God not cast me into hell's fiery furnace?" It was a traumatic thing for a ten-year-old to go to bed feeling guilty, ashamed and afraid, especially when those feelings were provoked by the preaching of what was meant to be good news. Before drifting off to sleep, I remember telling God, "I'm sorry for being so bad."

What if, instead of attempting to scare the hell out of us (which has never been very effective with me), the preacher had emphasized the extravagant love and outrageous mercy of God? What if, instead of stressing the magnitude of our depravity, he'd emphasized God's enormous goodness? What if, when quoting that biblical passage, he'd included the preceding words of that verse, "God proves his love for us" (Romans 5:8 NRSV)? What if, instead of intimidating us with the threat of torture, he'd approached us with the assurance of God's protection?

What if the "gospel" he preached had actually been good news? Tragically, as a needy ten-year-old I didn't hear or see the good news in the religion that was offered. Instead of leading me to realize that I was God's beloved, he led me to believe that I was God's biggest disappointment.

Fil Anderson. *Breaking the Rules: Trading Performance for Intimacy with God* (Kindle Locations 126-128). Kindle Edition.

Anderson goes on in his first chapter and gives a classic opening description of the religion of the Pharisees. The chapter is entitled –

### *Is Your Faith in God or Religion?*

And it opens with this quote by Richard Halverson:

*In the beginning the church was a fellowship of men and women centering on the living Christ. Then the church moved to Greece where it became a philosophy. Then it moved to Rome where it became an institution. Next, it moved to Europe, where it became a culture. And, finally, it moved to America where it became an enterprise."*

Anderson continues-

During a week of revival meetings in February 1961, I concluded that religion must provide the best answer to the question, What's the best way to live? So, on the evening of February 26, 1961, the final night of our church's revival services, I responded

to the invitation for those "lost in sin to come forward and commit your life to God." As people sang "Just as I Am," I walked the aisle to lay my life on the altar. I knew from then on that my eternal security would be determined by how well I conformed to my religion's rules and rituals. So religion became the center of my life. It was a brilliantly designed and seductively attractive marketing program whereby life with Jesus was reduced to doctrinal beliefs and moral commandments. Well-intentioned teachers, preachers and parents, who sincerely believed God had given them responsibility for training me, delivered the program in carefully worded vision statements, motivational slogans and mission strategies. Immediately I began learning my religion's vocabulary, memorizing its rules, and adopting its customs and practices. I swallowed it hook, line and sinker, while ignoring the cry of my soul for the kind of faith that makes life possible. Looking back I see that my religion had made itself God, demanding things that God abhors: division of people, diminishment of self and narrow closed-mindedness. In the process I became "churched" rather than transformed. Systematically taught how to apply a cosmetic brand of godliness that was fear-based and that

produced guilt and shame, I was folded into a homogeneous belonging system that resulted in conformity and expediency. It was little more than a permanent evasion of reality—a compromise with life. While conforming to an outward code of conduct, I and other members of my church offered one another an apparent justification for lives that were basically the same as our neighbors', whose perspectives were merely those of the world and its fleeting values. Years later, I had become an accomplished religious professional—a relentless overachiever whose self-image was based on hard work and clean living. I earned love and approval by doing and performing. Religiously trained to define myself around the Herculean demands of roles and activities, my credo was: "If you want to be loved, make yourself lovable." My well-informed head knew about the unconditional love of God, but my ill-informed heart had no knowledge of it at all, only a desperate longing. My religion's answer to, What's the best way to live? was essentially the same as Betty Crocker's answer to, What's the best way to successfully bake a scrumptious dessert? All religion requires of us is to gather the proper ingredients, carefully fold them into our life and then remain exposed to

the proper amount of heat. Yet my life was haunted by the recognition that either my mix was flawed or I was half-baked. Despite my best efforts to get my life right, something always went wrong.

Fil Anderson. *Breaking the Rules: Trading Performance for Intimacy with God* (Kindle Locations 156-162). Kindle Edition.

### **Conclusion: Blowing Trumpets**

The very performance-based religion of the Pharisees that Anderson describes so well is motivated by self-glory. Pharisees have their own system of rewards, and Jesus confronted them openly as He once again warned US to beware of them and their false religion:

(Mar 12:38-1 ESV) 38 ¶ And in his teaching he said, "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes and like greetings in the marketplaces 39 and have the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts, 40 who devour widows' houses and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."

And again –

(Mat 6:1-6 ESV) ESV Matthew 6:1 ¶ "Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven. 2 ¶ "Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward.

Beware. Look out! This leaven is with us today and it will ensnare us if we are not careful. Christ has set us free from all of it. We must never permit any Pharisee to enslave us again.