

The Pharisees

JUDAH'S ANCIENT TORAH TEACHERS

BY VICTORIA SARVADI, TH.D.

Yeshua confirmed that the ancient Jewish teachers were said to sit in the Seat of Moses, which was a seat of authority, a seat of interpretation and instruction (Matthew 23:43). Those who were honored to carry on the teachings and mantle of Moses did so to determine proper conduct to God's Covenant people through the instructions of Torah. The conduct or behavior as it relates to the Scriptures is called "*halakhah*" which comes from the Hebrew word *holech*, meaning "he walks." How a person walks or behaves in life is determined by keeping God's instructions or Torah precepts. As we take the idea of *holech* (walk), we can see parallel thoughts with words such as the "paths" or "ways" we "walk" on. These words connect the idea of *halakhah* to other passages of Scripture.

Consider this: "So if you **walk** in my **ways**, to **keep** my statutes and my commandments, as your father David **walked**, then I will lengthen your days" (1 Kings 3:14, NKJV).

The ways or paths of *halakhah* of God are narrow and dedicated to holiness. Enoch, (whose name means "dedicated" from the Hebrew word *chanoke*) walked with God as well. He was so dedicated in his walk with God that he was able to walk right into eternity without dying a physical death. So,

halakhah is obedience to a high path—God's ways, God's instructions. *Halakhah* is how you walk out your life according to God's laws.

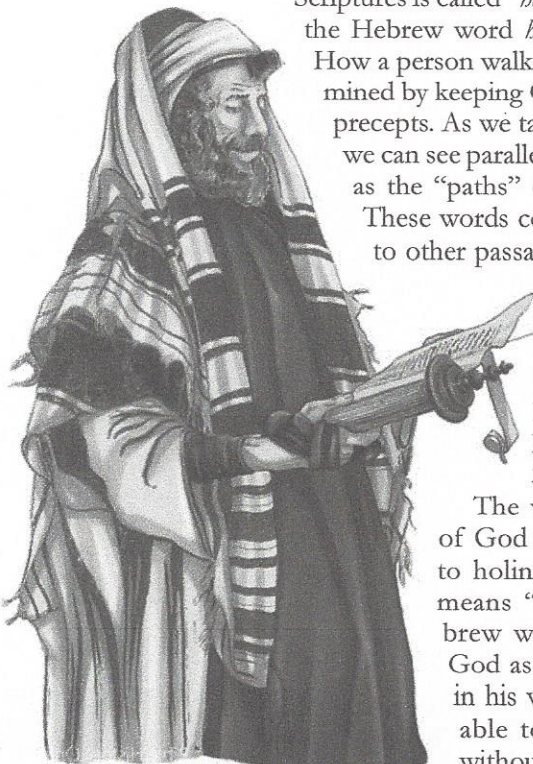
Yeshua commanded his followers to listen to the Pharisees and to do what they taught but not to do what they themselves did (because so many of them were hypocrites in that they did not do what they taught others to do). Yeshua was basically saying that the Pharisees' *halakhah* teachings had merit and that he had no problem with them. But one must practice what one preaches. If you talk the talk, you must walk the walk.

A common idiomatic question in biblical times was "Whose dust is on your feet?" This meant, "What rabbi or teacher do you 'follow' or 'walk' behind?" Or, "Whose path are you on?" Rabbi Yose ben Yoeser, who lived two centuries before Yeshua, said, "Let thy house be a meeting-house for the wise, and power thyself in the dust of their feet; and drink their words with thirstiness" (*Mishnah, Pirkei Avot* 1:4).

The "followers" (like those walking down the path behind Yeshua) were often referred to as "the Way." This is probably a misnomer. Instead of being an exclusive name of the followers of Yeshua, this term could have implied that all Jews followed a *halakhah* or way of some teacher.

MODERN DAY PHARISEES

Much of modern Christianity has a negative bias toward the ancient Pharisees but few realize the correct reason why. Many think the Pharisees were legalistic, and that was Yeshua's problem with them. Others think they were erroneous in their system of

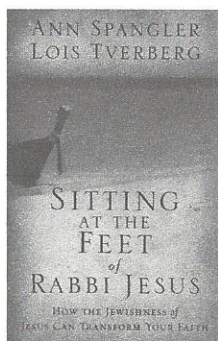


belief. But we can clearly see that Yeshua told his disciples to **do** what the Pharisees taught. If they were teaching error, Yeshua would not have told his disciples to **"take care"** to do what they tell you. In fact, the doctrinal tenets of faith of the Pharisees were very close to those of modern Christianity. They believed in the coming of Messiah as King and Judge to restore all creation, and they believed in the resurrection, the existence of angels, and the power of God to heal and cast out demons.

It is sad that many modern day teachers and leaders who teach God's Word often teach the truth but are living their lives in sin at the same time. They too aren't practicing what they are preaching! There is much accountability in this matter (Psalm 37:4). This was Yeshua's greatest issue with the Pharisees, and, no doubt, it is still his major issue with many Christians.

The sad thing is that very few people today think twice about double standards. They know Yeshua taught that one must not lie, steal, commit adultery, judge others, or profane the name of the Lord, but they acknowledge these truths while compromising their own conduct just as the Pharisees did. The problem, then, is that most Christians are lacking *halakhah*, which is a dedicated and righteous path. One might say, Ah, but Christ did away with that Law. I don't have to follow that path. Not so! As Yeshua said, "Don't suppose that I came to do away with the Law and the Prophets. I did not come to do away with them, but to give them their full meaning. Heaven and earth may disappear. But I promise you that not even a period or comma will ever disappear from the Law. Everything written in it must happen. *If you reject even the least important command in the Law and teach others to do the same, you will be the least important person in the kingdom of heaven.* But if you *obey* and teach others its commands, you will have an important place in the kingdom" (Matthew 5:17-19, CEV).

This distinctly clear message somehow creates much dissention amongst Christians. It would seem many Gentile believers have been blinded regarding the Torah and are uncertain of exactly what Yeshua did to change the Torah of God. Hear what Yeshua goes on to say, warning us that we must not be double minded as the Pharisees were: "You must obey God's commands better than the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law obey them. If you don't, I promise you that you will never get into the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:20, CEV). It **is** true Yeshua **did** "do away" with the ordinances that were written **against us** (Colossians 2:14), but he did not abolish the Torah—certainly not God's instructions for holiness; not God's Ways; not God's behavior; not God's *halakhah*. God's **ways** are good. They are Spirit.



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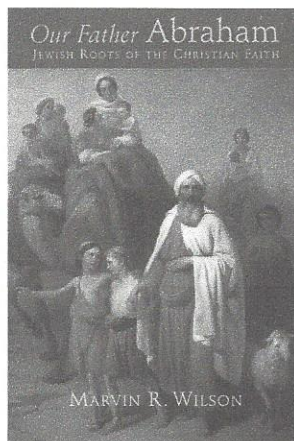
They are life.

One must renounce this Greco-Roman mindset that says we are now allowed to be lawless because of grace. Grace does not mean you are free to break God's laws. Grace does not give you a pass to dismiss his ways or forget his *halakhah*. No—the teacher now is the Holy Spirit that is deposited in the covenant believer by trust. The Spirit begins to *write* God's laws (his higher ways) on your heart as you are transformed into a new creation—you (the mortal) and the holy God (immortal) become one in covenant. Because you are in covenant, Yeshua takes on your liabilities (the debt of the law you owe and all that is written against you) and pays for it on your behalf. Then, he gives you *his* assets of the covenant which empower you not only to "do or walk" out the ways of God by his Spirit but also to desire to do them as well! Because the Torah is supernaturally written in you, it becomes a part of your new behavior—a new, more powerful way to walk out God's instructions for life. You actually become a *living Torah* (Romans 2:13–15). The Torah is not dead. It is alive in you by the Spirit. It is the Law of the Spirit in Christ Jesus, *Mashiach* Yeshua!

The laws—the "behavior" of God—never change because God never changes and his covenant is eternal. It is not a new Law that God has instituted but rather it is a new or better **covenant** (Jeremiah 31:31). The terms of the covenant remain the same, which are wonderful promises of provision, protection, health, and liberation from evil on

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God's side of the contract and obedience to follow his ways on man's side of the contract. The difference (besides nailing the laws that *condemn* us to the cross) is the new covenant comes with a free gift of *the Holy Spirit* to those who enter in by trust.

Obedience is no longer determined by man's power to "walk" out God's commandments in the flesh, but rather it is by the power of the Holy Spirit in man that the ways of God are now manifest. God's grace is the gift of a supernatural conscience convicting you when you are disobeying God's ways (sin) or affirming God's ways as you operate in the fullness of the Spirit. The fruit or works will be apparent in your life as the "greater deeds" (John 14:12) that Yeshua said will begin to overflow in you. He will give you desires such as wanting to help the poor or widows, teach or evangelize, serve as a volunteer, give financially more than you ever have before, and many other selfless deeds.

The most important desire that God gives is the desire to reject sin in your life. Even though

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you are capable of and may still be in sin, your desire will be to turn away from it. But God allows you to decide, as an act of your own will, to overcome sin (by his Spirit) or to deliberately continue to do (with great conflict) what you now hate to do. God's giving of the desires of your heart does not mean that if you have a desire for a Mercedes

Benz, he will give it to you. Instead, if you delight yourself in the Lord, then the desires you begin to experience in your heart are being manifest there because God actually gave those desires to you (Psalm 37:4).

THE FAULT OF JUDGMENT

"Also, to some who were *relying on their own righteousness and looking down on everyone else*, [Yeshua] told this parable: 'Two men went up to the Temple to pray, one a *Parush* and the other a tax-collector. The *Parush* stood and prayed to himself, 'O God! I thank you that I am not like the rest of humanity — greedy, dishonest, immoral, or like this tax-collector! I fast twice a week, I pay tithes on my entire income . . . ' But the tax-collector, standing far off, would not even raise his eyes toward heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God! Have mercy on me, sinner that I am!' I tell you, this man went down to his home right with God rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but everyone who humbles himself will be exalted" (Luke 18:9-14, CJB).

The question becomes, How many Christians have taken this Scripture and have said in their hearts, "O God! I thank you that I am not like the Pharisee in this story"? Many Christians have taken the parable of the judgmental Pharisee as a reason to *judge* the judgmental Pharisee.

THE ORAL LAW

In ancient times, it was not the custom for people to take notes of a sermon like we do today. Many did not read or write. There was no printing press. No one had a family Bible on the living room coffee table or bookshelf. There were no recording devices, DVDs, CDs, tapes, or books on the subject—no Internet to check out more information. There weren't any pads of paper, pencils, or convenient ballpoint pins! The custom was that the books of Torah and Prophets were to be memorized by every Jewish male. The boys of age were taught to read and write the Hebrew language of Torah. Husbands and kinsman redeemers were required to teach the women and children the ways of God that they learned from the Torah teachers.

The Rabbis and Torah teachers would have sermons (like our teachers and pastors do today) to teach the lay people how to understand and implement Scriptures. These sermons were in the form of parables, stories, and allegories. The older, ancient stories were passed down orally and were eventually redacted into a book called the *Mishnah*. The *Mishnah* is one of the two books included in the Talmud. The other book is the *Gemara*, also known as the oral traditions passed down from Moses. These oral teachings, like the Rabbi's commentaries,

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were eventually redacted in a written form too.

The Jews who sought Yeshua for understanding, therefore, were well versed in the Scriptures, the Talmudic stories of the famous rabbis and the oral traditions passed down from their beloved ancestors. When Yeshua taught these first-century Jews, he would often refer to the common foundational and cherished knowledge that became the Talmud. As Gentiles, we are not versed on the teachings of the Talmud and are unaware that many of Yeshua's teachings were based on clarifying or expounding on these ancient oral teachings. We are at a loss, and sometimes we misunderstand the intent and premise of Yeshua's lesson as we have nothing on which to hang his teachings like these first-century listeners did (Luke 5:33-39).

THE SILENCING OF THE PHARISEES

Yeshua's followers were Jews. Many scholars believe that upwards of hundreds of thousands of the Jews followed Yeshua and believed that he was the Messiah. The Sadducees were nervous about the numbers of Jews who were following him. In the past, charismatic teachers had caused revolts against Rome, and the people had suffered because of the rebellion. The Sadducees were appointed by Rome to govern the Jews in the ways of their spiritual laws and in compliance to Roman rule, thereby keeping the peace. This governing group, called the Sanhedrin was political not spiritual. Vying for favor from the Roman government, they were more interested in their positions of power than anything God may have been requiring.

The Sanhedrin, comprised primarily of Sadducees, arrested Yeshua in the middle of the night (2 am). The Pharisees were not among the group that conspired with Judas or arrested or tried Yeshua (Mark 14:1-2). We see in Scripture that at some point the Pharisees stopped asking Yeshua questions. "While the *Pharisees* were gathered together, Jesus asked them, saying, 'What do you think about the Christ? Whose Son is he?' They said to him, 'The *Son of David*.' He said to them, 'How then does David in the Spirit call him Lord, saying: "The Lord said to my Lord, 'Sit at my right hand, Till I make your enemies your footstool"'? If David then calls Him 'Lord,' how is he his Son?' And no one was able to answer Him a word, nor from that day on did anyone dare question Him anymore" (Matthew 22:41-46).

The Sanhedrin, however, handpicked certain people, waking them in the middle of the night to be their prosecuting witnesses. They were not successful in finding two people who could agree that Yeshua had broken any of the laws of Torah (Mark 14:55). At least two witnesses were required by the Torah to convict someone of a transgression of the Law. Finally, they forced Yeshua to

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admit that he was the Messiah. It was then, at Yeshua's comment, "It is as you say," that he was charged with blasphemy (Matthew 26:64).

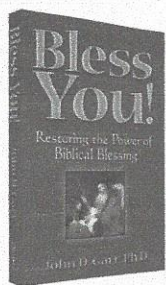
Rome did not consider it a crime for anyone to claim to be the Jewish Messiah, so instead Caiaphas, the High Priest and leader of the Sanhedrin convinced Pontius Pilate that Yeshua claimed to be king. Of course, according to Rome, only Caesar was king. The accusing crowd around Yeshua in the early hours of the morning was held over as witnesses by the Sanhedrin so that they could speak against Yeshua before Pilate. This covert plan to arrest and convict in the cloak of the night was a scheme of the prosecution. It was done quickly, for the Sanhedrin did not want Yeshua's vast numbers of followers from all over Israel to cause a riot. He was already on the cross by 9 AM on Passover, at which time the majority of the Jews of Jerusalem and the guests from the countryside were only just arriving at the temple for the morning prayers and sacrifices.

THE PHARISEES IN A NEW LIGHT

In Scripture we find one instance where some of the Pharisees were sympathetic toward Yeshua and actually warned him to leave the Galilee in order to save his life from Herod: "Just at that moment, some *P'rushim* came up and said to

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Yeshua, 'Get out and go away from here, because Herod wants to kill you!' (Luke 13:31).

Two members of the Sanhedrin, who were also Pharisees, were, in fact, secret believers in Yeshua (John 3:1), and they argued against the judgment of the Sanhedrin (John 7:50-51). Joseph of Arimathea, a rich and highly respected man (John 19:38), begged Pilate for Yeshua's body, which he prepared for burial and, with the help of Nicodemus, laid to rest in his own tomb (Mark 15:41-43).

We also see *believing* Pharisees participating in debates over a major issue of the movement: "But some of the *believers* who belonged to the party of the *Pharisees* stood up and said, 'The Gentiles must be circumcised'" (Acts 15:5). Then there was the time when a Pharisee came to defense of the disciples and those of the Way of Yeshua: "But one of them, a Pharisee named Gamaliel, who was a teacher of the Law and was highly respected by all the people, stood up in the Council. He ordered the apostles to be taken out for a while, and then he said to the Council, 'Fellow Israelites, be


careful what you do to these men. You remember that Theudas appeared some time ago, claiming to be somebody great, and about four hundred men joined him. But he was killed, all his followers were scattered, and his movement died out. After that, Judas the Galilean appeared during the time of the census; he drew a crowd after him, but he also was killed, and all his followers were scattered. And so in this case, I tell you, do not take any action against these men. Leave them alone! If what they have planned and done is of human origin, it will disappear, but

if it comes from God, you cannot possibly defeat them. You could find yourselves fighting against God!" (Acts 5:34).

PROUD OF THEIR POSITION IN GOD

The Pharisees were a party of zealous Jewish spiritual leaders who prided themselves in the cloak of religion. They had the truth of God's Word in their hands but instead of applying it to their lives or allowing it to change their inward behavior or yielding to the true Spirit of God's Word to be healing and encouragement to a hurting human world, they often created platitudes and were empowered by debate in order just to be right. Many of them lived for the recognition of man, walking in arrogance with unteachable spirits. There was an election, however, who heard, humbled themselves and began to *walk* in *Spirit* and in truth.

How sad is it that so many of us Christians are no different than the Pharisees? No wonder Yeshua said to the dead, powerless, lawless, deedless, defiled church of the end times: "And to the angel of the *church* [sic] in Sardis write, 'These things says he who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars: I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead. Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die, for I have not found your works perfect before God. Remember therefore how you have received and heard; hold fast and repent. Therefore if you will not watch, I will come upon you as a thief, and you will not know what hour I will come upon you. You have a few names even in Sardis who have not defiled their garments; and they shall *walk* with me in white, for they are worthy. He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments, and I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life; but I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels'" (Revelation 3:1-5).

May we wake up and begin to *walk* with God as his Spirit writes his Ways and Will (his Kingdom) in our hearts. O that we not be so blind that we can't see the Messiah right in front of our faces. May we not be so arrogant that we can't operate in the true Spirit of his precepts evidenced by good fruit. May we continue to die to self every day as we choose to turn away from sin. Our King is faithful! 

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