

So you are the Pharisees!

Key information to read and discuss:

The Pharisees

In the [Gospels](#) the Pharisees often appear as the influential arch-enemies of [Jesus](#). They tirelessly watch how the Jewish people observe the [purity and holiness code](#). From this the word 'Pharisee' has come commonly to be a synonym of 'hypocrite'. Such a picture of the Pharisees is, however, one-sided. In fact the Pharisees were [one Jewish group among many](#) - a lay movement which placed emphasis on the Torah (the Law of Moses and its interpretation) and in particular on the importance of the purity code for everyday holiness.

There were also many different types of Pharisee. Some of them seem to have been fairly close to Jesus in their thinking. Sayings resembling the teaching of Jesus occur among the sayings of Rabbi **Hillel**, for instance, and Hillel was active in Pharisaic circles. The Apostle [Paul](#) also came from among the Pharisees.

In the opinion of the Pharisees holiness was not only for the priests and the [Temple](#). By observing the purity code every member of the people of God might participate in the holiness of God. In the interpretation of the written Law the Pharisees had the help of the so-called 'Oral Law', i.e. oral tradition consisting of explanations of the Law which was thought to go back to Moses himself.

Conflicts between the Pharisees and the disciples of Jesus came to a head after the death of Jesus, when the [Jesus movement](#) began to accept Gentiles into membership without demanding that they be circumcised or that they observe the purity code. These controversies are reflected in the way the Pharisees are portrayed in the [New Testament](#).

Another group often mentioned in the New Testament in connection with the Pharisees are *the Teachers of the Law*. Here we are dealing with a very different group of people. While the Pharisees were a kind of revival movement, 'Teacher of the Law' is a professional term. The Teachers of the Law were authoritative professional interpreters of the Torah.

From:

<http://www.helsinki.fi/teol/pro/merenlah/oppimateriaalit/text/english/judaism.htm#The%20Qumran%20Discoveries>

Pharisees - a group of influential Jews active in Palestine from 2nd century BCE through 1st century CE; they advocated and adhered to strict observance of the Sabbath rest, purity rituals, tithing, and food restrictions based on the Hebrew Scriptures and on later traditions.

- "Pharisees" probably means "separated ones" in Hebrew, referring to their strict observance of laws and traditions (Luke 18:10-12).
- Long-time political and religious rivals of the Sadducees, vying for influence among the rulers and the people.
- Mostly laymen, but possibly also some priests (from the tribe of Levi) or even members of the Sanhedrin (Acts 5:34).

- Followed not only the laws of the Hebrew Bible, but also the "traditions of the elders" (Mark 7:1-13; Matt 15:1-20).
- Leaders were called "rabbis" or "teachers", such as Nicodemus (John 3:1-10; 7:50; 19:39) and Gamaliel (Acts 5:34; 22:3).
- Also had trained "scribes" (Mark 2:16; Acts 23:9) and "disciples" (Mark 2:18; Matt 22:16; Luke 5:33).
- NT Gospels portray them mainly as opponents of Jesus (Mark 8:11; 10:2), who conspire with the Herodians to kill Jesus (Mark 3:6).
- Some of Jesus' harshest polemics are directed against the "hypocrisy" and "blindness" of the Pharisees (Matt 23; John 9).
- In contrast to Sadducees (Mark 12:18-27), Pharisees believed in the resurrection of the dead (Acts 23:1-8).
- Paul himself was a Pharisee (Phil 3:5; Acts 23:6; 26:5), as were some other early Christians (Acts 15:5).

From: http://catholic-resources.org/Bible/Jewish_Groups.htm

The *Pharisees* were in many ways the idealists of Jewish society. Most of the *Scribes* (the 'theologians' of the day) were Pharisees. In general, despite their 'bad press' in the Gospels, the Pharisees sought to live a life of spiritual purity by a meticulous following of the *torah* (Jewish law). They did not believe in compromise with the Romans (as did the Sadducees) nor in revolutionary activity (as did the Zealots). No doubt their emphasis on the law could result in legalism which may, in turn, become a pretext for hypocrisy. Nonetheless, many Pharisees were highly committed and deeply spiritual people. They believed in the resurrection of the dead. From their perspective, Jesus seemed to relativize the law which explains their anger towards him.

From: <https://resource.acu.edu.au/gehall/XTOLOGY2.htm>

Questions to discuss:

Pharisees, what do you think about people who don't obey all the Jewish laws?

Why does Jesus bother you?

Who do you believe is called to be holy? How do people live holy lives?

Interesting things your group could highlight from Scripture:

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+7%3A1-13%3B+Matt+15%3A1-20&version=NABRE> (check the footnotes for some key points – and first part of each story is probably most helpful for the purpose of this activity)

These 2 texts show the opposition to Jesus. Why wouldn't you be offended, Pharisees, when Jesus openly tells his disciples not to listen to you? You're the ones who not only know the laws but the traditions as well, which are just as important in your eyes. What an absolute disgrace that the disciples were eating with unclean hands! Clean / unclean are two major codes in Jewish living. Jesus answers this question by talking about honouring your mother and father. What a fool! The way to honour your mother and father is by living the Jewish laws, which means clean hands!