

Pharisees

Related: [Sadducees](#); [Sanhedrin](#); [Essenes](#); [Herodians](#); [Leaven](#)

Pharisees. This name comes from the Hebrew word ‘parash’ which means ‘to separate’. This was a name given to a religious sect among the Jews beginning in the 2nd century BC, who called themselves ‘chasideim’, which means ‘pious ones.’ The movement began with good intentions in the era of the Macabees, but degenerated over time. Seeing the secularization of the Jewish people, the Pharisees stressed moral purity, but they did not see the importance of purity in the heart. They viewed themselves as superior, that they were “not as other men” (Luke 18:11). Of all the religious sects within Judaism, Paul spoke of them as “the most straitest sect” (Acts 26:5). The Pharisees and the Sadducees together composed the [Sanhedrin](#). A third sect called the [Essenes](#) excluded themselves from the council. Unlike the Sadducees, there were no social requirements to be a Pharisee. They included Jews from upper, middle, and lower classes, and as a result gained large numbers and held great influence. They were known for making proselytes (Matt. 23:25). They were closely aligned with the scribes who kept track of the writings of the fathers as well as the scriptures; hence the Lord’s connection between the two groups; “Woe unto you, scribes, Pharisees, hypocrites!” (Matt. 23). In contrast to the Sadducees, the Pharisees believed that tradition was of equal (or greater) importance than the scriptures. They emphasized ceremonial hand washing, public prayers, and paying tithes. They labored to remain blameless as “touching the righteousness which is in the law” (Phil. 3:6) by keeping on top of the necessary temple sacrifices, etc. The Pharisees were the leading enemy *before* the cross, and on account of the resurrection, the Sadducees really came forward as the leading enemy of Christ *after* the cross. Ultimately, the sect of the Pharisees won out, and became what we know as Rabbinical Judaism today.

The Hypocrisy of the Pharisees. Within the Pharisees there was a wide range. Men such as Gamaliel, Nicodemus, and Saul were more dedicated and consistent (Phil. 3:5), yet in general the Pharisees had a good exterior but a filthy interior (Matt. 23:25). They would use elements of tradition to get out of obeying the plain commandments of the law (Matt. 15:1-20). They honored God with their lips, but their hearts were far from Him. The Lord on earth strongly repudiated the Pharisees for their hypocrisy. They were stirred up to violence against the Lord because His perfection among them (the Light shining) exposed their true character. A few, like Nicodemus, came to the Light (John 3:21) but the rest rejected Him.

Ritualism and Rationalism. The Pharisees and Sadducees are not unique to the time

period in which they lived. The class of Pharisees stood for the religious right; conservatism at the expense of truth. We can see today in Christendom a legal, ritualistic influence that would take the traditions of Church Fathers and elevate them to the level of scripture. They were liberal in the sense that they went beyond scripture, but legal in the sense that they made traditions into laws. They would emphasize works - an outward form - without the inward reality. The class of Sadducees stood for the religious left; liberalism at the expense of truth. We can see a similar evil today in Christendom in the form of rationalistic theology which denies the inerrancy of the Word of God, and teaches men to live as they want without regard for eternity. If the Pharisees were adding to the Word, the Sadducees were subtracting from the Word. If the Pharisees were guilty of superstition, than then Sadducees were guilty of skepticism.

Pharisees	Sadducees
<i>Ritualism</i>	<i>Rationalism</i>
<i>Superstition</i>	<i>Skepticism</i>
<i>Added to scripture</i>	<i>Subtracted from scripture</i>
<i>Right-wing</i>	<i>Left-wing</i>
<i>Represented common-folk</i>	<i>Represented ruling class</i>

One important difference between the two is how the Lord dealt with them. He warned His disciples of the "[leaven](#)" (or, evil doctrine) of both the Pharisees and Sadducees. Yet He would occasionally dine with a Pharisee for the purpose of exhorting him, but He never set a foot into the house of a Sadducee. Why is skepticism darker and more dangerous than superstition? Because once the authority of the Word of God has been set aside, there is no recourse for the Spirit of God to set right a person's course. We might at least have something in common with a legal minded Christian because we agree that the Bible is the Word of God. But where is the ground of common fellowship with a skeptic? We can never come to agreement if his only standard is that which is right in his own eyes. However, both are dangerous, and we must be warned of them. The flesh in each of us is a little of the Pharisee, and a little of the Sadducee. At one point both joined together to tempt the Lord (Matt. 16:1) and both joined together as one Sanhedrin to crucify the Lord.