



Dear heavenly Father, we worship You this morning with our tithe and offerings. We pray for the courage to put You first in our lives. In the name of Jesus, amen.

MAY 29, 2021

When the Pharisees refused to put God First

Putting God first can be difficult. What can we learn from the Pharisees, who refused to put God first?

Pharisees and teachers of the law were among the most respected people in Israel in the early first century. They had dedicated their lives to the study and practice of scripture. Most could recite the Torah by heart and tried to follow each of its precepts. Their ability to follow the Bible with extreme precision gave them a sense of safety and pride. After all, God promised to bless those who keep His commandments.

When Jesus started preaching, however, he turned the law from something difficult to follow to something impossible to follow. Jesus pointed to the principles of the law, such as love and compassion. This was a profound disruption to the hierarchy of the Pharisees who valued wealth and positions of authority. On one occasion Jesus addresses them directly:

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithe of mint and anise and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone. Blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!” (Matthew 23:23, 24).

The Pharisees would go to the extreme of counting how many new leaves of mint grew in their garden and would take the 10th leaf to the temple. Jesus was very direct with these religious leaders who fol-

lowed the law to the minutest degree but failed to see justice, mercy and faith as the reason the law was given. Jesus was clear: continue counting the leaves of mint but seek justice, mercy and faith.

In light of this, two things are no longer surprising. The first is the fact that Pharisees were the main force behind killing Jesus. They could not bear a teacher who rejected the hierarchy they had established for themselves. The second event that is no longer surprising is how many marginalised people followed Jesus. These were the people who had been told they weren't good enough for God and should stay out. Jesus reminded everyone that no-one is good enough, and God was ready to accept them exactly as they were and then transform them.

It is easy to see these same dynamics in every church today. Some are extremely faithful to God in everything. Others seem to struggle to keep up. God reminds us that none of us are good enough. We are welcomed into the Kingdom of God through Jesus and His Spirit is transforming us to be like Jesus. Putting God first means that we should count our mint leaves and act with compassion.

The Pharisees refused to put God first. The consequences were terrible for them and the people around them. God's love compels us to put His Kingdom first, while the Pharisees' example is a warning for us today. As the deacons collect the tithe and offerings, we are challenged to put God first.