

The Pharisee Checklist: Just Who's Running Your Church?

So are the Pharisees running your church?

Interesting question.

How would you know? And perhaps, more appropriately, how would you know if that was *you*?

You could argue that since the religious leaders nailed Jesus to the cross, there's no way you would have done that. But seriously, how would you know? If you really read the Bible—I mean *really* read it—it's pretty challenging.

I read stories like Matthew's calling in [Matthew 9](#) and think, *I might have been frustrated by Jesus too. When a person hangs out with hookers, criminals and other morally sketchy people, I'd question him as well.* Which of course, would squarely put me in the company of the Pharisees.

Hence my worry.

How do you know the Pharisees aren't running your church?

How do you make sure that Pharisee isn't you?

I'm Not A Pharisee...I'm Just Righteous

In many Christian circles, *Pharisee* is just a bad label. We throw it at someone we don't like, we disagree with or generally think should suffer. But as I pointed out in this piece ([The Top 10 Things Pharisees Say Today](#)), the Pharisees are more nuanced than commonly thought to be.

Part of the tension we lose in the dialogue today is that the Pharisees really tried to be righteous. They knew their Bibles as well as anyone. Their devotion was, purportedly, deep. And Jesus said they missed the boat. His [most scathing words](#) were reserved for people who claimed to be speaking for God.

So what are the signs that the Pharisees are running your church? What are the signs that *you* might be that leader?

1. Your leaders like to show off

Check those stats. Did you see how many downloads that message got? How many likes that photo picked up? Or that visitor who said he thinks you're as good as that mega-preacher guy?

Or, worship leaders, think about your mad guitar skills or your new V-Neck or fierce beard.

Or admin types...check out the bullet proof system I put together.

Sigh.

We all want to be better, or cooler (even though [cool church is dying](#)), don't we? But sometimes in our pursuit to improve our skill, we lose our soul.

Here's a key distinction.

When you're focused on how **you're** doing more than you're focused on how the **people you're serving** are doing, you've kind of lost the game. When you're more focused on your performance than you are on the mission, there's trouble ahead. Stop showing off. Stop trying to get better for the sake of trying to get better.

Focus relentlessly on serving God and serving people, and an amazing thing might happen. You'll likely get better.

But at that point, you might not even notice. Which would be awesome.

2. Everyone thinks they're a little better than everyone else

One of the big differences between the Pharisees and the 'sinners' Jesus hung out with, is how they felt about themselves. The Pharisees thought they were right. That's dangerous territory for leaders because often we think we're right or that our positions (theological or philosophical) are right.

So, do you think your view is simply better than others? Or that you're better than others? A little less sinful? A little more together? A little smarter? A little wiser? Spend a lot of time criticizing others and asserting how right you are?

There's the Pharisee.

3. There's this love of money thing going on

Money. Could there be a more fun topic in the church?

Ministry *needs* money to run on. I get that. As a general rule, underfunded ministries are ineffective in the long run. This is true of any ministry or charitable organization. I actually agree with Dan Pallotta that the most important causes in the world should be the most generously funded. (If you haven't heard his [TED talk, stop reading this blog post and watch it.](#))

And in church world and non-profit world, there's a constant push to expand the mission, so there's regular pressure on giving.

And I think talking about money in church can be wonderful. I really do. Giving, after all, is a spiritual discipline. In the same way I need to read my bible, pray, serve and invest in people who don't know God, I need to give. All of these things are part of what I do as a Christian.

We all need money. And ministries need money. But when you start to [love money](#)...you're in trouble.

So how do you know you might love money?

Here are some thoughts.

- When you're excited about what the money is doing for *you*, not what it's doing for the *mission*, you've crossed a line.
- When you refuse to have any financial accountability or wise people (to whom you're accountable) speak into the details of your financial life, you've allowed money to become a master, not a servant.
- Or, answer this: if your church cut your wages, would it also cut your joy (assuming you could find enough money to live on elsewhere)?

Money makes a wonderful servant in ministry, but a terrible master.

4. There's too little compassion

In some leadership circles, lack of compassion is worn as a badge of honor. I used to joke about mercy not being one of my spiritual gifts. Okay, sometimes I still joke about my natural lack of compassion.

Ironically, sometimes a lack of compassion helps you lead well. If you are too empathetic and overly sensitive to how people feel, you will get dashed on the rocks of leadership. Jesus had to push past a lot of competing voices to accomplish his mission. So did Moses, Paul and myriad other leaders.

But as committed as Jesus was to truth, he was exceptionally compassionate. He was frequently moved with compassion. And he [rebuked the Pharisees](#) for their lack of it.

God's compassion is why you're a Christian in the first place. And if you haven't noticed, people outside the church aren't much attracted to compassionless, self-righteous leaders.

If you lack compassion...repent.

I have repented and am repenting. I've got a long way to go, but God will make the compassionless more compassionate if you ask him.

5. Leaders expect others to do what they don't do

Practice what you preach is one of the oldest mantras around. And yet, if you're a preacher, it can be very hard to do.

You can convince yourself you're exempt, or you're just being 'obedient' and teaching what you're supposed to teach, when you know you're only half walking the walk.

Cue the big buzzer.

Pretending to be something we're not and claiming privileges we don't extend to others are [2 of 5 things I listed here](#) that give pastors a bad name with unchurched people. And remember, those of us who teach actually get [held to a higher standard](#) than others.

So, teach with fear and trembling. And humility. And accountability.

6. No one's closer to God

Strangely enough, the Pharisees were anxious to win converts. So am I.

Yet Jesus condemned the Pharisees, [pointing out](#) that they travel over land and sea to win a single convert but in the process, they make him twice as much a son of hell as they are.

Gulp. So...here's a question.

Are people closer to God after following you?

Sure, not everyone will be. We've all read the [parable of the sower](#).

But after 3 to 5 years, do most people look more like Jesus or less like Jesus? Or to use another metaphor [Jesus used](#), is there fruit? If you claim to be growing an orchard, where are the apples?

Sure, we're not perfect. We're being sanctified over time by the Holy Spirit. But overall, people should be moving closer to Jesus.

Are they?

7. The leaders are jealous

Spend even a few minutes in the Gospels, and you'll see the Pharisees and other religious groups get jealous of any advance any other group makes. Each group wanted to be on top. If the Saducees won, the Pharisees lost. If Jesus made more disciples than they did, their blood boiled.

So how's your heart with that church down the road...the one that's growing? How's your heart when you hear some other church picked up yet another one of 'your' families? Hate it when other people they tell you they love listening to X's podcast at the gym?

The jealousy thing even [infected John the Baptist's disciples](#). But John got it right...*it's not about him. He must decrease. Christ must increase.*

See what John did there? He said it out loud. He gave public recognition and praise to Jesus.

That's what breaks the power of jealousy.

If you're jealous, publicly praise whoever you're jealous of. Celebrate them. It will break the darkness inside. That will also give you a clear heart and mind to get on with your mission. After all, you likely live in a region where there are thousands...okay, tens or hundreds of thousands...of unchurched people. Focus on that.

What Do You Think?

Please know, I write this not to make the church worse, but in the hopes that in some tiny way it makes the church better.

I need to look in the mirror. Everyone who leads a church does. Far too much is at stake.

The church has enough critics (just read through the comments on this blog, any newspaper piece on religion, or pretty much any online place that talks about the church). But if we take the criticism we usually reserve for others and prayerfully apply it to ourselves, we'll get better. We will.

And we have to. I believe the church is the hope of the future.

So we just need to get better and healthier. And when we do, we'll be far more effective.

Any additional signs you see that show that you may have turned Pharisee?

> [Read more from Carey.](#)