

FACT SHEET ON THE PHARISEES

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“The history of interpretation has favored negative images of the Pharisees, even without a concrete basis in the Gospel accounts. And often, over time, this view has been attributed by Christians to Jews in general. In our world, such negative stereotypes have unfortunately become very common. One of the oldest and most damaging stereotypes is precisely that of “Pharisee”, especially when used to put Jews in a negative light... [T]o love our neighbors better, we need to know them, and to know who they are we often have to find ways to overcome ancient prejudices.” Pope Francis, May 9, 2019¹

The Pharisees regularly appear in the gospels as both critics *of* Jesus and targets of criticism *by* Jesus. The Gospels accuse them of hypocrisy, spiritual blindness, greed, arrogance, faithlessness, hard-heartedness, conspiracy, nullifying God’s word, and rejecting God’s plan for them. Although sometimes grounded in debates about specific religious practices, this polemical rhetoric has mushroomed into misconceptions about Jews and Judaism in general.

MISREPRESENTATIONS	CORRECTIONS
MISREPRESENTATION 1: The name “Pharisee” means “Separate.” The Pharisees separated themselves from others whom they viewed as less morally or ritually pure than themselves.	CORRECTION: The name “Pharisee” could derive from the verb “to separate” or from the verb “to interpret,” but no ancient testimony exists to corroborate either possibility. <u>Neither</u> etymology supports the inference that Pharisees felt themselves to be superior to others. In later Jewish tradition, the terms <i>parush/perushim</i> were reserved for people who were very <u>humble</u> , who separated themselves from worldly ambition. The ideal of separation from negative behavior is central to God’s call to holiness. Followers of Jesus <u>shared</u> this ideal, calling themselves “the holy ones.”
MISREPRESENTATION 2: Pharisees were the religious authorities of Jesus’ day.	CORRECTION: Pharisees had no formal power to impose their will on anyone. They were respected teachers. Most Jews adhered to their traditions <u>voluntarily</u> because their general liberal and egalitarian positions, <u>aligned</u> with popular practice.
MISREPRESENTATION 3: The Pharisees’ arrogant elitism alienated the common people.	CORRECTION: The common people <u>supported</u> the Pharisees, often against the priests/Sadducees. Pharisaic practice extended, in a liberal way, priestly practice, such as handwashing, to all of Israel.
MISREPRESENTATION 4: The Pharisees’ application of God’s commandments was burdensome and oppressive.	CORRECTION: In Matthew’s gospel, Jesus makes this accusation but provides no examples (23:4). The few Pharisaic practices we know about do not support this characterization. Other contemporary critics charged the Pharisees with being too <u>lenient</u> , especially in the matter of punishments.
MISREPRESENTATION 5: The Pharisees were obsessed with ritual purity, which excluded and devalued others.	CORRECTION: All Jews – including Jesus – cared about ritual purity. Being ritually impure did not exclude or devalue people, and no gospel story suggests that it did. Most contemporary critics accused the Pharisees of <u>loosening</u> rather than strengthening the boundary between the sacred and the ordinary. Far from being puritanical extremists, the Pharisees were innovators who sought greater flexibility in how Israel might fulfill God’s call to be a holy nation.
MISREPRESENTATION 6: The Pharisees were unanimously hostile toward Jesus and his followers.	CORRECTION: In John’s gospel, the Pharisee Nicodemus <u>defends</u> Jesus against his detractors. In Luke’s gospel, Pharisees <u>repeatedly</u> invite Jesus to dinner despite his often harsh criticism of them; they even warn him of a plot against his life by Herod Antipas. In the Book of Acts, Pharisees either maintain a principled neutrality toward Jesus’ followers (refusing to condemn them) or become followers themselves. In Matthew’s gospel, Jesus <u>advocates</u> adherence to Pharisaic norms (23:1-3) and upholds their pursuit of righteousness as the “gold standard” his own followers must <u>surpass</u> in order to enter God’s kingdom (5:20).

¹ https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2019/may/documents/papa-francesco_20190509_pont-istitutobiblico.html

MISREPRESENTATION 1 NOTES: (See Joseph Sievers and Amy-Jill Levine, eds. *The Pharisees* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2021])

- See Craig E. Morrison, “Interpreting the Name “Pharisee”” pp. 3-19 in *The Pharisees*.
- On *parush* interpreted as separation from worldly ambition, see Abraham Skorka, “The Perushim in the Understanding of the Medieval Jewish Sages” pp. 292-301 in *The Pharisees*.
- On separation from negative conduct as central to God’s call to holiness, see Lev 10:10; 19:2; Mt 13:49; 25:32; Heb 8:26.
- On “holy ones” as a self-designation for the followers of Jesus, see Rom 1:7; 1 Cor 1:2; Eph 5:3-5; 1 Th 3:13.

MISREPRESENTATION 2 NOTES:

- John’s gospel differentiates the Pharisees from “the authorities” (7:48; 12:42-43). The other gospels likewise distinguish the Pharisees from the chief priests and city elders. Although Pharisees could be found among the ruling class (John 3:1), not all Pharisees were rulers, just as not all members of a political party are state senators.
- On the lack of evidence for Pharisaic (or later rabbinic) authority in synagogues, see Gunter Stemberger, “The Pharisees and the Rabbis” p. 250 in *The Pharisees*.
- On the alignment of Pharisaic norms with popular practices, see Mk 7:3 and Eric M. Meyers, “Purity Concerns and Common Judaism in Light of Archaeology” pp. 41-54 in *The Pharisees*.

MISREPRESENTATION 3 NOTES:

- According to Josephus, Jewish leaders – kings, high priests and aristocrats alike – conformed to Pharisaic norms even if they privately disagreed with them because they feared the common people’s disapproval. See Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 13.288, 296; 18.17; *Life* 12. See also Steve Mason, “Josephus’s Pharisees” pp. 80-111 in *The Pharisees*.

MISREPRESENTATION 4 NOTES:

- Pharisaic practices are discussed in Mk 7:3-4 and in the Mishnaic tractate, *Yadayim* (4:6-8). For evidence that the Pharisees represented egalitarian and innovative practices compared to other Jewish sects, see Vered Noam, “Pharisaic Halakah as Emerging from 4QMMT” pp. 55-79 in *The Pharisees*.
- On the Pharisees’ reputation for leniency, see Mk 7:3-6; 10:1-12; Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 13.295. See also Yair Furstenberg, “The Shared Image of Pharisaic Law in the Gospels and Rabbinic Tradition” pp. 99, 201-204 *The Pharisees*.

MISREPRESENTATION 5 NOTES:

- Jesus’ restoring people to a state of ritual purity is a recurrent sign that the kingdom of God is at hand (Mk 1:40-44; Mt 10:8; 11:5; Lk 17:14). On the ubiquity of purity concerns in Jesus’ society, see Eric M. Meyers, “Purity Concerns and Common Judaism in Light of Archaeology” pp. 41-54 in *The Pharisees*.
- The Pharisees’ complaint about Jesus eating with “tax collectors and sinners” (Mk 2:15-17; Lk 15:1-17) is not about ritual purity. They think Jesus is condoning people who harm others. That their concern is moral rather than ritual in nature is confirmed by Jesus’ response: he wants sinners to repent. Repentance has to do with morality – not ritual purity.
- In Matthew’s gospel, Jesus criticizes two Pharisaic purification practices: hand-washing (15:1-20) and cup-washing (23:25-26). Jesus’ objection to hand-washing is not that it is obsessive but that it is non-scriptural; his objection to Pharisaic cup-washing was that it was not thorough enough. On the significance of cup-washing as a purity ritual, see Adela Yarbro Collins, “Polemic against the Pharisees in Matthew 23” p. 165 in *The Pharisees*.
- For criticism of Pharisees by the Dead Sea Scrolls sect for being lax in their purity practices, see Yair Furstenberg, “The Shared Image of Pharisaic Law in the Gospels and Rabbinic Tradition” pp. 206, 215-218 in *The Pharisees*.

MISREPRESENTATION 6 NOTES:

- Nicodemus’ respect for Jesus appears in Jn 3:1-15; 7:50-51; 19:39. See also Harold W. Attridge, “Pharisees in the Fourth Gospel and One Special Pharisee,” pp. 185-198 in *The Pharisees*.
- Jesus accepts dinner invitations from Pharisees in Lk 7:1-50; 11:37-54; 14:1-24. Pharisees warn Jesus about Herod’s intentions in Luke 13:31-33. For Pharisees’ involvement in the early church, see Acts 5:34-39; 23:9. See also Helmut Lohr, “Luke-Acts as a Source for the History of the Pharisees,” pp. 170-184 in *The Pharisees*.
- Pharisees who are “believers” (Acts 15:5) are still Pharisees; their belief in Jesus Christ does not cancel their Pharisaic identity but rather adds to it. Paul speaks of his Pharisaic allegiance in the present-tense and emphasizes the continuity of his convictions after his encounter with the risen Jesus (Acts 23:6; 24:14-16; Phil 3:4-6). See Paula Fredriksen, “Paul, the Perfectly Righteous Pharisee” pp. 112-135 in *The Pharisees*.