

The Pharisaical Lens Series

Part 1: What is a Lens?

- I. Introduction
 - a. Perhaps your parents told you to “walk a mile” in someone else’s shoes before you spoke with them. The idea is in order to understand someone, you have to see the world through their eyes.
 - b. When it comes to reading and interpreting texts, we all interpret text through some sort of lens. The default lens is “your own shoes”, meaning your own biases, your modern times, your cultural perspectives, etc.
 - c. We’re often reminded to apply context when we read, like textual context. Textual context is reading text considering the passage in which it appears (i.e. “read above and below the text”). This is, of course, a good idea, but there are many more important contexts to consider.
 - d. Cultural context is reading a passage with knowledge of and consideration for the culture of the author and audience. This is especially necessary when reading text written by and to a culture different from your own.
 - e. Historical context is another important type of context. Historical context is the awareness that the people who created sources were living at a time which may have held opinions and beliefs that are very different from one’s own time. This is especially important if the audience to which a passage was written existed in the distant past.
 - f. Cultural and historical context are both extremely important when interpreting the Bible. The newest parts of the Bible were written 2000 years ago, and the Old Testament and much of the New Testament was written to the Jewish culture. Things have changed by leaps and bounds since then, and the Jewish culture differs in just about every way conceivable from other world cultures. The Jews of Jesus’ time even differed significantly from the modern Jewish culture.
 - g. Taking all of this into account, why would we think we should be able to just pick up the Bible and start reading it? That’s how I approached the Bible. Certainly, one can extract a lot of information reading the Bible—things like the characters, their interactions, the stories, etc. But what about applying the Bible to one’s life and making the Bible a central part in all the decisions we make? Or, what if you’re a theologian and you’re creating doctrine for your church?
- II. Where to Learn about 1st Century Judaism.
 - a. Interpreting the Gospels (the first four books of the New Testament) is at least as difficult as the interpreting the rest of the Bible, but I’d argue it’s even more difficult. The reason is the God himself is a character directly speaking and leading discussions.

- b. “What would Jesus do?”, is a frequently used mantra of Christians. It is a good question to think about when deciding something, but does anyone know what Jesus would do?
 - i. “He’d act in a loving way.” Okay, but what is a loving way for Jesus? Can anyone say that when they read the four Gospels, they could predict what Jesus was going to say or do next? The answer is “no” (even if you think it’s yes in your case).
 - ii. One of Jesus’ defining characteristics is unpredictability. To put yourself in Jesus’ shoes, you’d have to know the very nature of God.
 - iii. So, what are we to do? Since it’s difficult to understand the culture and history of the author, the next most important thing is to understand the culture and history of the audience: the Jews of the first century AD.
- c. How does one learn the Culture and History of the 1st Century Jews?
 - i. Well, there’s the Old Testament. That’s a great start. There’s a four-hundred-year gap between the Old and New Testaments, but arguably, their culture did not change much in that period.
 - ii. There’s the Gospels themselves, but that’s a bit circular. One can piece together some things, though, by looking at the Gospels altogether.
 - iii. There’s the history of nations around the Jews, namely, the Romans. There is a Roman historian whose work survives to this day, Tacitus, who mentions Jesus, but that’s not going to get us very far.
 - iv. There’s the Apocrypha, books outside the Biblical “canon”. 1st through 3rd Maccabees is an excellent source for around the time of the Maccabean Wars of 167 to 160 BC. The Maccabees revolted against the Seleucid Empire (one of the four offshoots of Alexander the Great’s Empire). Miraculously, they won and founded what is called the Hasmonean dynasty, which ruled from 167 to 37 BC, part of which was fully independent—from 104 BC when the Seleucids finally gave up to 63 BC when the Romans invaded.
 - v. Flavius Josephus’ Antiquities. Josephus was a Roman-Jewish historian, military leader, and traitor (from the Jewish perspective) who lived from 37 AD until 100 AD, and his works were compiled into a book called Antiquities of the Jews (or just Antiquities for short). He gives accounts of Pontius Pilate, King Herod, John the Baptist, the Pharisees, Sadducees, the Essenes, James the brother of Jesus, and *may* have mentioned Jesus. The problem is his works were preserved by the Catholic Church, and very likely modified to give extra-biblical credence to Christianity ([See here](#)).
 - vi. The Mishnah (to study repeatedly). These are the consolidated oral traditions (done by Judah the Prince) of many Jewish rabbis which was assembled around 200 AD. It’s difficult to know which rabbis existed before and during Jesus’ time. Most of them likely lived after the

destruction of the Second Temple in 70 AD. Nevertheless, they contain much important information about the Pharisees and Jewish thought. The oral traditions are referred in the Gospels in Matthew 15:2 and Mark 7:5: “Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders?”

- vii. The Midrash (to interpret). Midrash is expansive Jewish Biblical exegesis written by rabbis. While not canonical, it is mentioned in the Old Testament twice in 2Chronicles 13:22 and 24:27. It is very important for learning how the Jewish teachers interpreted much of the Old Testament.
- viii. The Talmud (the teachings). Comprised of the Mishnah and the Gemara. The Gemara (means “finished”), is text embedded into the Mishnah with basically, the “final say” of Jewish rabbis. Another important text to understand Pharisaical teaching.

III. The Pharisaical Lens

- a. That brings us to the title of this series. It an idea of mine to try to simplify what one needs to know about Jewish history and culture to interpret the Gospels properly. Rather than having to read all the books and history listed above, here’s what I have learned that I think is important. Yes, there’s a lot of trust here. I do recommend reading these yourselves, but clearly most people don’t have the time.
- b. Over the next seven weeks, I’m going to go through each of the following concepts:

Part 2: The Tradition of the Elders, aka The Hedge

Review from last week:

- We already know that context is necessary to fully comprehend literature, but cultural and historical context are hard to come by with the Bible because it's old (its newest parts were written 2000 years ago) and written to an extremely unique culture (the Jews).
- Much of it is lost to time, but texts do remain: The Bible itself, the Apocrypha, the Talmud (the Mishnah with commentary called the Gemara), the Midrash, the Pseudepigraphal writings, and the historical writings of Josephus in his book *Antiquities*.
- Therefore, we need to squeeze as much as possible out of these texts.
- The Pharisaical Lens is set of postulates about the Pharisees which allows one to interpret the Gospels more correctly and fully.

I. Introduction

- a. What drove the Pharisees was the punishments the Jewish nation had endured in the past. They saw that the God meant business when he pronounced curses for Israel as a nation for disobedience of the Mosaic Law (Read Deut 28:36-37).
- b. Therefore, for the sake of the nation, they took it upon themselves to police all Jews. It was not enough for the priests and leaders to be righteous: *the whole nation needed to be*.
- c. It was also a benefit for them to excommunicate questionable Jews as they would no longer be in the nation.
- d. They had to make the Law capable of being followed by even the simplest of the people. To that end, it would be very beneficial if a set of life principles could be established where, if followed, one would never come within the bounds of breaking any of the laws. This is called "The Tradition of the Elders" in the Gospels (Mat 15:2 and Mark 7:3,5).
- e. It was also important to identify the Messiah, as he would clean up disputes between the various Pharisaical sects about the interpretation of certain laws. They also believed the Messiah would take the reins, so to speak, from them and be responsible for the nation. It was, therefore, of utmost importance to identify the real Messiah and not some imposter.

II. The first hedge

- a. I use the word "hedge" in the sense, "a fence or boundary, often made from bushes".
- b. The use of hedges to avoid sin is part of human nature.

- c. Humans think they're being smart, but, in actuality, hedges make the law seem more difficult, abstract the law from the individual (i.e. they don't need to know anything about the original law), and tend to expand to encompass even more.
 - d. Gen 3:3 versus Gen 2:17
 - i. Adam likely was responsible for communicating the one law to Eve.
 - ii. Perhaps Eve asked questions about why, so Adam thought it would be easiest if they just avoided the tree altogether.
 - iii. But picking and eating fruit from the tree is far more difficult to do than merely touching the tree. One could forget and lean on the tree, or trip and fall on the tree. So, the hedge might be extended to, "don't go near the tree".
 - iv. It was necessary that they eat from the Tree of Life. What if by creating this hedge they decided not to eat from it either?
- III. The example of the man born blind
- a. John 9:13-34 is a great passage for understanding not just the Tradition of the Elders but within and between the lines of passage is contained most of the Pharisaical lens. [Read John 9:13-34]
 - b. Why would the Pharisees even care about Jesus healing a man born blind? Because they set themselves up as the police of the Law and identifiers of the Messiah.
 - c. Work was possibly done on the Sabbath which would be a violation of the Sabbath Law and punishable by death. The actual Sabbath Law (Exo 20:8-11, Exo 35:1-3, and Deut 5:12-15) says "On it you shall not do any work". *But was healing work?* The only specific types of work listed in the Torah are agricultural (Exo 34:21), cooking and starting a fire in your dwelling (Exo 35:3), and not traveling too far (Exo 16:29). Although most people in the community were farmers, the Pharisees had to interpret the law more generally for any type of work. Neh 13:15-16 shows the Jews considered any type of commerce as work. The fact that the Pharisees conducted a trial of sorts here in John 9 says even they were not sure (v16 "so they were divided).
 - d. The Messiah had to obey all the Laws, therefore, if he violated any law, he could not be the Messiah. As an impostor, he would have committed blasphemy and needed to be killed, but to execute someone requires two or three witness (Deut 19:15) therefore they had to get some witnesses.
 - i. Had the witness been a child (under 13 years old before their Bar or Bat Mitzvah), then his parents would be responsible for his actions. But this man was older than that and that's why his parents deferred (v21 "He is of age").
 - ii. The healing of a man born blind was one of the three messianic miracles. This is why it says in v32, "Nobody has ever heard of opening the eyes of

a man born blind.” Presumably, someone had heard of healing a blind person who was not born that way.

- iii. A person being born blind was seen as a sign of divine judgement: either the parents or (somehow) the fetus had sinned. This is another reason why they brought in the man’s parents. This can also be seen in John 9:1-3 where the disciples wanted to know who had sinned. Jesus clarifies that no one had sinned.
- iv. The Pharisees concluded it was the man who had sinned in v34: “You were steeped in sin at birth”.
- e. The man may be seen as toying with the Pharisees but there’s more to it.
 - i. v27, “Do you want to become his disciples too?” Really, he’s asking them, “Have the Pharisees concluded that Jesus is the Messiah?”
 - ii. If the man was one of Jesus’ disciples, the miracle could be explained away (the man was in on it), but he did not say he was one of Jesus’ disciples—the Pharisees are twisting his words.

IV. The hedge of washing one’s hands

- a. Mark 7 and Mat 15 talk about this, but Mark has some explanations so let’s look at that one.
- b. Read Mark 7:1-5.
 - i. First, washing one’s hands was not mandated by the Mosaic Law. The Pharisees were referring to their tradition of ritual handwashing. Handwashing was required for priestly duties (Exo 30:19,21) or if you touched a person with a discharge (Levi 15:11). There were other ways a person could become ritually unclean, so by always washing one’s hands before eating, they would avoid any possible law breaking.
 - ii. v3-4 are great because it shows there were many traditions that did not deal with direct violations of any law but were bloated extensions of the purification rituals.
- c. In verses 6-13 Jesus says why hedges are ultimately wrong: they lead to the breaking of actual laws. The example he gives is a bit complicated, but he shows how the actual law, “Honor your father and mother” is broken by the tradition of the elders known as Corban. Under Corban, one could set aside their tithe or offering before it was required by law to be given so that it would be available at the given time. Therefore, the hedge protecting the laws on giving intersected and violated the law of honoring one’s parents.

V. Summary

- a. Once you understand the concept of hedges, you’ll be able to identify its use elsewhere in the Gospels.
- b. You’ll also be able to identify it in your own church and your own life.

Part 3: Introduction to the Messiah Identification Protocol

Review from last week:

- We talked about the Tradition of the Elders. It is important to know that the Pharisees subscribed to these oral traditions that were built on top of the Mosaic Law. It's impossible to know all that this encompassed but suffice it to say that they were "hedges" around the Mosaic Laws that would keep people from ever approaching the bounds of breaking one of the laws.
- It may sound like a good strategy, but it makes an already impossible-to-follow set of laws even more debilitating. It makes God even more distant. It makes one feel even more unacceptable and detestable by their God. It also separates one from the laws themselves.

In Part 1 I mentioned *The Antiquities of the Jews*, a book by Flavius Josephus towards the end of the first century AD. I found this description of the Pharisees by him in [Book XIII](#), Chapter 10, Section 6:

The Pharisees have delivered to the people a great many observances by succession from their fathers, which are not written in the laws of Moses; and for that reason it is that the Sadducees reject them, and say that we are to esteem those observances to be obligatory which are in the written word, but are not to observe what are derived from the tradition of our forefathers. And concerning these things it is that great disputes and differences have arisen among them, while the Sadducees are able to persuade none but the rich, and have not the populace obsequious to them, but the Pharisees have the multitude on their side.

It is likely because of the last point, namely, that the Pharisees had the unwealthy, typical multitude on their side that we see so much of them in the Gospels. The Pharisees believed it was incorrect to receive income from sharing the word of God, whereas the Sadducees believed the opposite. Therefore there were far fewer Sadducees and they reached a much smaller (albeit more powerful) segment of the population.

- I. Introduction – what was the Messiah Identification Protocol (the MIP)?
 - a. The term is made up (I just made it up), but what it refers to appears to be real.
 - b. The idea is the Pharisees got together, likely around the beginning of the first century BC, and created a protocol (a code of correct conduct and set of procedures for a task) for how they would identify the messiah. The protocol contained things like:
 - i. What to expect in the messiah.
 - ii. What would distinguish the true messiah from imposters.
 - iii. How to inspect a candidate messiah in order to validate or invalidate his claim.
 - c. You find this directly in the Gospels. It is based on the behavior of the Pharisees in the Gospels and projecting it backwards knowing their tendencies.

- d. I have scoured the internet looking for Pharisaical writings detailing such a protocol. The *sefaria.org* site ([link in the description](#)) was very useful. It contains searchable versions of all important Jewish texts.
 - e. The closest I found was expectations of the messiah in the Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Sanhedrin, Chapters 10 and 11, especially pages [93b-99a](#), [99b-100a](#), and [113b-116a](#).
 - f. In this absence of historical documents, which may even be lost to time, we have to infer the protocol from the Gospels themselves.
- II. What would the MIP look like in action?
- a. A search of the Gospels for “Pharisees” returns more than 90 hits. Why is this? Why were they such important characters in the Gospels? Partly is because of what Josephus said, “Pharisees have the multitude on their side”, but also because, as the de facto spiritual leaders of the Jews, they felt they were the only ones who could properly and accurately identify the messiah.
 - b. It is estimated that the Pharisees numbered in the range 6 to 8 thousand! Clearly not all of them could interview or hang around a potential messiah candidate. They would have to appoint a group of high-ranking, respected members.
 - c. As the messiah was expected to be sinless, the group would have to follow a potential candidate around to make sure they broke no laws. At least in the beginning, they wouldn’t want to interfere, so they would just observe. After observing, they would want to ask about questionable choices or actions. *They might even want to put the candidate into situations where a decision must be made.*
 - d. The messiah might not declare himself a candidate initially. Perhaps they would hear of a messiah candidate from the masses or even run across him themselves. Nevertheless, a candidate would have to make a declaration at some point.
 - e. The messiah would have to fulfill all of the prophecies given in the Torah—at least the prophecies the Pharisees *thought* were about him. But some verses were more obvious as prophecies than others.
- III. Where would the Messiah come from?
- a. Isa 11:1, “A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.” It’s clear he will be a descendant of David (Jesse was David’s father), but much thought “branch” referred to Nazareth because Nazareth has the same consonants as the Hebrew word for “branch”, NZR. In Hebrew only the consonants are given, and the vowels are specified by markings above and below the letters (jots and tittles).
 - b. Micah 5:2, “But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.”
 - c. Therefore, the messiah had to be from the City of David, Bethlehem, but somehow related to the city Nazareth as well. (Note: Jerusalem is the official

“City of David”, but David was from Bethlehem, and it was also called the City of David in the Tanakh/OT)

IV. Miracles

- a. Many prophets in Jewish history performed amazing miracles, so it was expected that the messiah would perform miracles; but this would not *make* someone the messiah but only a candidate messiah.
- b. Isa 35:5-6 was the main prophecy. “Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy.” Isa 51, 53 and 61 also contain verses which referred to messianic miracles.
- c. Leprosy was seen as divine judgement. Exo 4:6, Moses’ hand, Num 12:14-15 Miriam afflicted for speaking against Moses, and 2 Chron 26:18-21: King Uzziah unlawfully burnt incense in the temple.
- d. Birth defects were seen as divine judgement against the fetus, his parents, or his ancestors.
 - i. Exo 4:11, “The Lord said to him, “Who gave human beings their mouths? Who makes them deaf or mute? Who gives them sight or makes them blind? Is it not I, the Lord?”
 - ii. Exo 34:7, “Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation.”
- e. Demon possession was considered divine operation.
 - i. The book of Job shows how Satan accused Job behind the scenes. It showed that possession was not necessarily about judgment but was nevertheless caused or allowed by God.
 - ii. 1 Sam 16 (v14) ,18 (v10) , and 19 (v9-10) record David causing a demon to depart from Saul by playing a music.
 - iii. It is thought the Jews created a procedure to exorcise a demon from an individual by getting the demon’s name and the commanding him to leave by the power of the Living God. An article from Haderek Ministries talks about this [here](#).

Next week we’ll spend more time on this, showing the MIP inferred in the Gospels and how Jesus went along with the Pharisees expectation and assumptions—yet they still did not declare him the Messiah.

Part 4: Messiah Identification Protocol Revealed in the Gospels

Today I want to talk about how we can see the Pharisees in action following the Messiah Identification Protocol in the Gospels.

Review from last week:

- We talked about the possibility that the Pharisees had prepared methods for interviewing candidate messiahs to determine if they were an imposter or the real deal.
 - As the recognized leaders of Judaism, it would make sense that this responsibility would fall to them, and it would make sense that they would prepare for it ahead of time.
 - Imagine if we had to do this in modern times. The powers-that-be never leave anything to chance. They think about a myriad of potential scenarios before they happen and come up with protocols and contingency plans to handle them so that they're not caught flat-footed.
 - Perhaps a modern-day example of this would be, "What should we do if extraterrestrials make their presence undeniably known to the public?" Though it may not be public, you can be darn sure the various 3-letter agencies have plans for what to do.
 - It would make sense that they would appoint a group of respected members who would follow the candidate around to make sure they did not sin, violate any prophecies, and fulfill all prophecies.
 - As gatekeepers of the Tanakh (the Law, Prophets, and the Psalms and is the Old Testament of the Christian Bible) they would not trust anyone else to do this task.
- I. The Pharisees interrogate John the Baptist (John 1:19-27, also Mat 3:1-12, Mark 1:1-8, and Luke 3:1-18).
- a. Jewish Rabbis had meticulously gone through the Tanakh to identify prophecies about the Messiah and the coming Kingdom of God, and there were prophecies about a person, possibly Elijah, who would appear beforehand to prepare the way for the Messiah (Mal 3:1 and Mal 4:5 and maybe Isa 40:3).
 - b. This is why they were concerned about John.
 - i. John helps them out by declaring that he's not the Prophet or the Messiah. Note: The Jews were not certain if the prophecies about "The Prophet", about whom Moses prophesied in Deut 18:18, and the Messiah were about two different individuals or not.
 - ii. But John does claim to be the one about whom it was prophesied, "Make straight the way of the Lord" in Isa 40:3.
 - iii. Looking at all 4 of the passages about John, it is clear he is saying the Messiah is now amongst the people and will soon make his appearance.
- II. The Pharisees silently observe the candidate messiah.

- a. They had to make sure the candidate observed all the Laws of Moses.
 - b. There were prophecies that the Messiah would be righteous/sinless Jer 23:5-6, Isa 53:9-12 (no violence nor deceit, “the Lord makes his life an offering for sin”, “he will bear their iniquities”, “bore the sins of many”, and “made intercession for the transgressors”). Gen 22:8 was also thought to refer to the Messiah (“God himself will provide the lamb”).
 - c. The Paralyzed man in Luke 5:17-26 (also Mat 9:8 and Mark 2:3-12). In verse 21: “The Pharisees and the teachers of the law began *thinking to themselves*.” This is because they were still in the “observing phase”. Note: The Pharisees did not expect the Messiah to forgive sins, but by doing this Jesus was declaring himself to be God.
 - d. Nicodemus visits Jesus at night. John 3:1-21. Nicodemus was on the MIP group. It was still the observation phase, but he felt compelled to talk to Jesus, so he went to him at night. Note: It is unlikely he went at night because he was afraid the people would know he had questions and therefore didn’t know everything.
 - e. Look for “knowing their thoughts/hearts/mind” or “thinking to themselves” early in the Gospels.
- III. The Pharisees would then question and test the candidate possibly set up situations.
- a. Mat 12:1-8 esp. v2: “Look! Your disciples are doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath.” As a teacher, it was Jesus’ responsibility to make sure his students also followed the law and that he call them out if they are about to break a law. Note: v6 Jesus is claiming to be God, “one greater than the temple”.
 - b. Mat 15:1-9 esp. v2: “Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders?” The Pharisees expected Jesus and his disciples to follow their traditions so as not to risk breaking a law.
 - c. Mat 19:3, the Pharisees raise the question, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?”
 - d. Woman caught in adultery in John 8:3-11. The Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery (let’s assume that to be true) in order to trap him. This is a bigger minefield than you probably know. Exo 23:2 “Do not pervert justice by siding with the crowd”. Deut 22:22 and Levi 20:10: both need to be executed. But they were focused on the woman and likely the trap was that the Jews could not perform executions by Roman law.
- IV. The Pharisees would make sure the candidate performed the Messianic miracle.
- a. There were prophecies about miracles that Messiah had to perform: Heal the blind, deaf, mute, and lame (Isa 35:5-6). Possibly Leprosy, as it was a divine judgement against Miriam and King Uzzah. Healing the mute could also be associated with impure spirit/demon possession, so it can be assumed the Messiah would also drive out demons.
 - b. Therefore, the Pharisees (likely) got together and combined miracles to come up with at least three miracles only the Messiah could perform:

- i. A person with Leprosy. Mark 1:40-45. v43: “go show yourself to the priest” and follow Levi 14:1-32 (a whole bunch of priestly duties which had never been done in Jewish history).
- ii. A person born blind. Blind + divine birth defect. John 9:1-34. You can see the divine birth defect notion in v2 “who sinned...” You can tell this is a Messianic Miracle by how the people react in v8-12 and how the Pharisees react and call a trial in v13-34.
- iii. A mute demon-possessed person. Mat 12:22-37. v22 See how they brought Jesus the man? v23 See how the people reacted, “Could this be the Son of David?” The people definitely knew about the Messianic Miracles too. Note: Another theory says the Jews had a procedure for exorcising demons to which Jesus referring in Mat 12:27, “...by whom do your people drive them out?” Acts 19:13 says, “Some Jews who went around driving out evil spirits tried to invoke the name of the Lord Jesus.” Mark 9:38 and Luke 9:49 say, “we saw someone driving out demons in your name...” Therefore, it is clear that Jewish exorcisms predated Jesus. We see Jesus asking for the name of a demon in Mark 5:9 during his exorcism of the man from Gerasene. This man was not mute, but it was thought that one “trick” of demons was to cause the possessed to be mute which would thwart exorcism attempts.

V. Summary

In summary, it cannot be unequivocally proven that the Pharisees had an official protocol, but it makes a lot of sense, is in-line with their way of thinking, and is evidenced in the Scriptures. If such a protocol existed and contained elements beyond the prophecies in the Old Testament, then the Messiah would not be held to such elements (the Pharisees might argue that), but were he to accomplish them for their sake, one would expect them to readily proclaim him to be the Messiah. The fact that they didn't and even had to resort to illogical claims like Jesus using the power of Beelzebul, shows how hard their hearts were, and more importantly, that they were wrong—Jesus is the Messiah! He fulfilled every prophecy about him and more!

Part 5: The Old Covenant is a Curse

Today I want to talk about the true purpose of the Mosaic Laws, aka the Old Covenant. I don't think I would have the guts to call it a curse had the Apostle Paul not done so no less than four times. More correctly, Paul says that those who pervert the Gospel of Christ with the Law and who rely on the works of the Law are under a curse (Gal 1:8,1:9, 3:10, and 3:13) from God.

Review from last week:

- Last week we finished up the Messiah Identification Protocol, the set of procedures the Pharisees contrived from Messianic prophecies and their own expectations in order to correctly identify the messiah.
- Unfortunately, it didn't work—not because Jesus failed to accomplish each step of the protocol, but because Jesus didn't fit their preconceived notions of what a messiah candidate should be.
 - They broke their own protocol, which contained miracles they said only the Messiah would be able to perform and attributed the miracles instead to Satan.
 - In Mat 12 where Jesus casts out a demon from a blind and mute person, this is precisely what the Pharisees do. Jesus says it can't be by Satan's power because that would mean Satan's kingdom is divided, and in any case, whose power do they use? I could just see the Pharisees using this logic when they were creating the protocol. "What if Satan could do this?" "No, only the power of the Living God can cast out a demon." Naturally, we have no way of knowing if this is how it took place, but it would explain why Jesus said, "So then, they will be your judges."—that is, the very Pharisees who created the protocol.

- I. The Old Covenant allowed the Messiah to come.
 - a. Paul is the ultimate apologist for the Law and the ultimate apologist for the Gospel. How can this be? It's because everything from God has a purpose.
 - b. The Law was entrusted to the Jews and the Messiah could only come from the nation entrusted with the Law. Rom 3:1-2.
 - i. The Jews were chosen by God because of the faithfulness of its ancestors like Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David. God hand-picked Israel to be the bearer of the Law.
 - ii. Only the Law contained atonement. When a Jew broke a law, they would do what was prescribed in the Law to atone for their law breaking. When they broke laws and weren't aware of it, the annual Yom Kippur would atone for it. In this way, the Jews remained the purest of all nations.
 - iii. The downside was that they were exposed to curses for breaking the Law. Deut 28:20, 25, 36. This meant there would be a lot of misery for all the Jews.

- c. After the Fall and before the Law, all mankind had to go by is the knowledge of good and evil. That is, always do good and never do evil. But humans were not designed to handle this knowledge, so the world quickly devolved into chaos and were nearly wiped out by the Flood. For six generations after the Flood, God searched the earth for a person who would put his trust in him and found Abraham. Abraham was given the promise: Gal 3:16-19. Why then was the Law given at all? Because of transgressions until the Seed had come.
 - d. When God finally sent the Messiah, being the bearers of the Law would mean little if they didn't recognize him. This was the case for many of the Jews. As Jesus put it in John 8:39-44. "If God were your Father, you would love me" and "Because you are unable to hear what I say, you belong to your father, the devil!"
- II. The Old Covenant exposes sin.
- a. Much of Paul's writings discuss this, but Rom 7 encompasses the turmoil. Read Rom 7:7-14.
 - i. v7 The Law is not sinful—it defines and exposes sin.
 - ii. v14 Humans are unspiritual, slaves to sin.
 - b. Rom 7:21-35. We want to do good, but evil is always "crouching at our door". What is the remedy? Jesus Christ our Lord.
- III. The Law makes humans self-righteous or desperate.
- a. Luke 18:9-14. This is the epitome to the Law.
 - b. Those who fool themselves into thinking they obey the Law don't need God—their obedience and discipline are all the need. They despise and look down on those who can't be as "good as them". They feel like these sinners are anchors, weighing them down and keeping Israel from being pure.
 - c. Those who are honest with themselves realize their only hope is God's mercy. The Law exposes their sin and drives them to desperation. They are humbled and ready for the New Covenant.
 - d. Don't follow part of the Law. Are you or your church interested in the Sabbath laws? Or maybe the dietary laws? If you're honest with yourself, you won't be able to follow these either. But if you really want to be desperate, try following all of the Law. It won't save you, but it will make your heart ready for the Gospel. This is why both John the Baptist and Jesus started their ministries with, "Repent for the Kingdom is near!"
- IV. Is your New Covenant basically the Old Covenant?
- a. Jer 31:32 says the NC will not be like the OC.
 - b. Is your gospel a set of rules defined by your church enforced through shame and accountability? Does your gospel make you feel separated from God, disappointing to God, or loved by God only in spite of the wretch you are? This is the OC wrapped in the forgiveness of Jesus which relies on the mercy of God.
 - c. The New Covenant is not about sin, mercy, and judgment—it is about life, grace, and freedom.

- d. If hearing that the Old Covenant is a curse offends you, check your gospel. Gal 3:2-5.

V. Summary

- a. The Pharisees see themselves as followers of the Law because of their ability to follow their traditions.
- b. It's very important to see the world through the eyes of the Pharisees when reading the Gospels.
- c. They think their hedge will save them, but their hedges are not close to being big enough.

Next week we'll talk about two parts of the lens: how Jesus himself lived under the Old Covenant and how Jesus exposed the flaws in the hedge by showing how they weren't big enough.

Part 6: Jesus Exposes the flaws in the Hedge

Today I want to talk about a very important topic. The other parts of the lens we've covered in Parts 1 to 5 are, naturally, also important, but one could look at them as just "interesting tidbits about the Pharisees". In a way, today's lesson is Jesus himself applying the lens. Jesus knew the Pharisees' strategy for themselves and the people to live by the Law of Moses, and he knew its flaws and how it could create a false impression that one was following all the laws when they weren't. Using their own method of "hedges", called "the tradition of the elders", Jesus aimed to show them the reason why their system was insufficient was because their hedges were far too small.

Review from last week:

Last week we talked about how all who lived by the Old Covenant were under a curse. Not just any curse, but *curses from God*. Those who could "fully obey the Lord your God and carefully follow all his commands" (Deut 28:1) would receive great blessings from God, which were listed in Deut 28:3-13, but those who "do not carefully follow all his commands and decrees...all these curses will come on you and overtake you" (Deut 28:15). The curses are listed in Deut 28:16-68. So, there are 11 verses of blessings and 62 verses of curses. This doesn't seem like a very good deal, yet because of this burden bestowed on God's chosen people, "all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Gen 12:3)—through the Messiah, Jesus Christ.

- I. Jesus Lived under the Old Covenant.
 - a. This may seem like a given, but I find most people I speak to do not understand this fully. We must view everything Jesus did and said under the lens, "Jesus was under the OC and must obey *and teach* the OC." We cannot simply say, "Well Jesus said in such-and-such a verse..." so we should do this too. And yet that's precisely what Christian churches do and have done since the beginning of Christianity.
 - b. Mat 5:17-19. Many interpret this to mean the OC never went away and is just as important now. They miss Jesus' condition for the OC to end: "until everything is accomplished". If this hasn't happened yet, then, indeed, we are still under the OC; but it would also mean Jesus' mission failed. As Paul puts it in 1Cor 15:17, "If Christ was not raised from the dead, your faith is worth nothing and you are still living in your sins." Jesus' death on the cross, where he said, "It is finished" and his miraculous resurrection from the death *mark that the OC was accomplished!*
 - c. One might think that "God is above the law", but he's not because he created the Law and was born under it as the human, Jesus. We can be sure his parents had him circumcised on the eighth day and that he had his bar-mitzvah when he was 13, after which he became responsible for observing the law himself.
 - d. But he was not a normal human—he was the Messiah, God in the flesh, and as such, had to perfectly all of the laws all of the time. Specifically, the Pharisees

and teachers of the law would have “started the clock” after Jesus’ adult baptism by John the Baptist. After this ritual purification and recommitment to the law, the Pharisees would have seen any breaking of a law as an absolute sign that he was not the messiah.

- e. We read about Jesus’ baptism in Mat 3:13-17, Mark 1:9-11, Luke 3:21-22, and John 1:29-34. There are only a few parts of the story of Jesus that appear in all four of the Gospels, and I believe that this shows Jesus’ baptism was important. But how did this ritual of adult baptism tradition begin?
 - i. Exo 12:48-49 gives the law for how a Gentile could convert to a Judaism. The Gentile himself and all males in his household were to be circumcised. Specifically, this was so they could celebrate Passover with the Jews, but this clearly meant he was now a “convert to Judaism” as the passage reads, “he may take part like one born in the land”. Mat 23:15 and Acts 2:11, 6:5, and 13:43 all refer to “converts to Judaism”.
 - ii. Numbers 19 give the laws for ritual purification in water. Verse 9 says, “it is for purification from sin”, and verse 10 says, “This will be a lasting ordinance both for the Israelites and for the foreigners residing among them”.
 - iii. Therefore, it’s clear a Gentile could convert to Judaism through circumcision (for the males), and the Jews including ritual washing for cleansing their past sins.
 - iv. You can see in my article on the WitheredFigTree.com, ["The Original of Baptism"](#), but the Pharisees did not trust a Gentile to do this purification washing on their own—it had to be overseen, and this is likely how the ritual form of baptism, with a baptizer saying some words and then immersing the “baptizee” in water, evolved.
 - v. Why is this important to the baptism of Jesus? Because we’re trying to see the Gospels through the eyes of the Pharisees and they created a new tradition, which is really a hedge of sorts, whereby an adult Jew could recommit their life to Judaism just like a Gentile becoming a Jew for the first time. They would get a new, fresh, clean start. Did God honor this? It seems so. It is unlikely that John the Baptist started the practice.
 - vi. If this were honored by God, why wouldn’t one just recommit their lives every day? It seems the Pharisees saw this as a cop out, but the Essenes did just that—starting each day with ritual washing (and maybe regular washing, too).
- f. All the Gospels mention Jesus’ baptism by John. They all mention the Spirit and/or a dove coming on Jesus. Matthew, written to the Jews, adds, “it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.” Did this mean Jesus wasn’t righteous? No. I believe it can be interpreted, “so that the Pharisees will recognize that you’re righteous starting from now and start the clock of your candidacy for

messiah"? Perhaps. Whatever the reasons, Jesus did use this event to publicly declare that he was starting his candidacy as Messiah.

II. Your hedges are far too small.

- a. Jesus points this out in several places, but by far the longest and best examples of this are found in the Sermon on the Mount in Mat 5-7.
- b. Here's a rule of thumb I use to recognize that Jesus is proclaiming, "your hedge is too small": he says something outlandish. "You must gouge your eye out", "you must be perfect", "you must hate everyone", and "you must execute yourself" are all great examples.
- c. If you don't recognize Jesus is saying "your hedge is too small", then you'll think Jesus is creating a new law in the constitution of the New Covenant. If you do this, then you'll end up with a Gospel that is way harder to follow than the already-unfollowable Old Covenant. Yet, again, this is precisely what churches do.
- d. How does the church get around this? I call it, "Soft Law". "Soft Law" is the practice of reinterpreting an outlandish statement of Jesus into something more reasonable and bearable. There's a scene in Monte Python's "The Life of Brian" that frames this humorously. Jesus says, "Blessed are the peacemakers", but out at the edge of the crowd they hear, "Blessed are the cheesemakers". A religious man immediately reinterprets Jesus: "Well, obviously it's not meant to be taken literally; it refers to any manufacturers of dairy products." Hilarious!
- e. What are the preposterous statements of Mat 5? Here's a list (I've done some summarizing as you'll see): "Your righteousness must surpass the Pharisees", "anyone who is angry is in danger of the fires of hell", "leave your gift at the altar if there's anyone that has something against you", "settle all matters outside of court", "if you look at a woman lustfully, you have committed adultery", "you cannot get a divorce", "make no oaths", "fulfill ever commitment you make", "let evil people abuse you with no defense", "if someone sues you give them even more than what they demand", "give and lend to anyone who asks", "love your enemy and those who persecute you", and "be perfect like God".
- f. Behind each of these is a hedge that protects a law of Moses, and Jesus is saying the hedge is way too small and must be extended if one is to guarantee that they will never break a law of Moses. As the hedges grow, they will inevitably overlap with other hedges and cause you to break a different law. It's like whack-a-mole!
- g. Let's look at Mat 5:27-30 as an example:
 - i. The law is "Do not commit adultery" given in Exo 20:14 and again in Deut 5:18.
 - ii. The hedge is, "Avoid looking at women. Make your culture such that women are out of the public view most of the time or accompanied by a male family member chaperone and not showing any of themselves."
 - iii. The extended hedge is, "Do think any lustful thoughts. If this is a problem, then gouge your eye out. If your hand is 'acting on lust', cut it off." This

way you'll avoid breaking the law and going to hell (albeit with fewer body parts).

- iv. The modern "soft law" is, "Try not to lust. If you do tell somebody so that you'll be embarrassed and ashamed. If that's not enough, remove all temptations like TVs, movies, and the internet."
- v. Why doesn't any of this work? Because we'll always find ways to sin in our minds. Cutting things off (literally and figuratively) only creates reminders of why we cut them off.
- vi. Will any of this make one closer to God? Absolutely not! It just brings condemnation, alienation, and separation. But if this results in desperation for God's mercy and fertile ground in one's heart for the New Covenant, then the Old Covenant has fulfilled its purpose.
- vii. But if one is able to fool themselves that they're "winning" and their hedge is working, it produces a false sense of righteousness. This produces self-righteousness and a judgmental attitude toward others.

III. Summary.

- a. Hedges don't work—not then and not now.
- b. There is no way to be holy. Accept God's grace, be baptized and receive the Holy Spirit, and live by the New Covenant.

Part 7: If You Want to Hang with Jesus

Review from last week and note about this series:

Last week we talked about how the Pharisees system for obeying the Law of Moses, called the Tradition of the Elders, did not work because the hedges they created for staying outside the realm of breaking a law were not nearly big enough. Were they big enough, they would overlap with each other and cause one to break a real law when trying to stay outside the hedge of another. Jesus points out this was already happening in Mat 15, where the tradition of Corban could cause an individual to break the 5th commandment, “Honor your father and mother”.

As since this is the 7th part of the Pharisaical Lens, let’s not forget the purpose of the lens. Are the words of Jesus the constitution of the New Covenant? That’s the standard position of theologians that the lens seeks to answer. The answer it gives is, “No, for the most part, they are not”. Jesus had many purposes. First, he had to fulfill the Law of Moses so that he could be a perfect sacrifice for the sins of the world and the curse of the Garden. He also had to show that the Pharisees and the Jews were not fulfilling the law, lest they think he was breaking laws and could not be the Messiah. These purposes required provocative statements to shock individuals and open their minds to the truth.

If modern readers of the Gospels think Jesus’ words are the constitution of the New Covenant, even if they appropriately distinguish the figurative from the literal, they will arrive at a Gospel that is harder to follow than the Law of Moses. Surprising to many, Jesus’ purpose was not to define the New Covenant. Had it been so, he would not have waited until his last night to speak directly about the Holy Spirit. The job of defining the New Covenant would be the responsibility of the Holy Spirit as he directed Jesus’ Apostles and disciples.

- I. Do you want to hang with Jesus?
 - a. I use this as a double entendre. Firstly, do you want to “hang out” with Jesus as he lives his life fulfilling the Law of Moses (as only God can do)? Secondly, do you want to hang on your own cross alongside Jesus as he himself is crucified?
 - b. Jesus speaks to different groups and says different things to them. Let’s focus on two groups: 1) The 12 disciples and, 2) Large crowds. (In Luke 10, Jesus also sends out the group of 72, but we won’t discuss this at the moment)
 - c. Jesus sends the 12 disciples out in Matthew 10, Mark 6:6f-13, and Luke 9:1-6.
 - d. Jesus predicts his death to the 12 disciples. In three different occasions in the synoptic Gospels:
 - i. First time: Mat 16:21-28, Mark 8:31-33, and Luke 9:21-28.
 - ii. Second time: Mat 17:22-23, Mark 9:30-33, and Luke 9:43-45.
 - iii. Third time: Mat 20:17-19, Mark 10:32-34, and Luke 18:31-33.
 - e. Jesus also predicts Peter’s denial in all four Gospels.
- II. Are you in the Large Crowds?
 - a. Can we find the constitution of the New Covenant where Jesus addresses them?

- b. I say all this because it's important to know the group Jesus was addressing.
- c. Jesus gives parables to large crowds. Many of these are about the NC but are hidden in the metaphors of the stories.
- d. Jesus provides the cost of following him to large crowds in Mat 8:18-22 and Luke 9:57-62, and in Mark 8:34-38 and Luke 14:25-34.
 - i. In Mat 8 and Luke 9, he's talking to uncommitted people in the crowds. If those in the large crowds want to hang with Jesus in his mission, it will require great commitment. If this were applied to modern times, it would mean you shouldn't do anything that doesn't directly serve the Kingdom.
 - ii. Mark 8 and Luke 14, he's talking about the cost of being around him as he follows the Law. Let's look at Luke 14:25-34. In context, the crowd would not have been thinking about future disciples—they would be thinking about whether they wanted to make Jesus their rabbi. If this were applied to modern Christianity, it would mean disciples would have to hate the parents, family and self; to execute their natures daily; and give up everything. The direct context is to what people in the large crowds would have to do in order to follow Jesus in his mission to fulfill the OC. [Metaphor of following "the Rock" around]

III. Are you one of the 12?

- a. In Mat 16:24, Mark 8:34, and Luke 9:23, we find "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me." after telling them he was going to be killed. The disciples needed to know Jesus was going to be killed and that his execution was a sign that he was the Messiah—not an indication that he wasn't. Many might interpret his death as the opposite, because how could the messiah save the people from oppression if he himself was persecuted and killed by the oppressors? But this is why he also told that about his resurrection.
- b. Would Jesus warn all future disciples they they're going to pay the extreme cost or death?
 - i. This doesn't seem like a good sales tactic, so why would Jesus do this? I believe the cost of following Jesus before his death and after his death are different things.
 - ii. Who was killed before Jesus' death because he was a follower of Jesus? John the Baptist? He wasn't a follower of Jesus. He was killed because he spoke the truth to Herod. We're not aware of any of Jesus' followers who were killed before his death.
 - iii. Anyone killed for being a Christian—something only possible after his death, resurrection, and the beginning of the Kingdom—would be dying for the kingdom and the New Covenant.

IV. Are you prepared to die?

- a. I am not saying that modern disciples don't need to be ready and willing to give their lives for the cause of Christ, but does it mean that those who do not are not true followers of Christ? Wouldn't we want to run towards persecution and pain to test ourselves if this were the case? Anyone can say they are willing to die for Jesus (and even believe it), but no one truly knows if they have it in themselves unless and until they are directly confronted with it.
 - b. Rom 6:1-7. Anyone who has received the Spirit is *already dead*.
 - c. While condemning one's faith in order to shy away death could indicate they are filled with the Spirit, I do not believe it is a requirement of the New Covenant and therefore negates their salvation.
- V. Summary – you have to understand the group to which Jesus is speaking in order to correctly determine what he's saying, and you have to understand that Jesus is not giving the constitution of the NC or you would arrive at a gospel that is harder to follow than the OC.

Next week we'll wrap up this series talking about some common symbols that the Jews used and therefore Jesus used when addressing the people.

Part 8: Common Symbols

Review from last week:

Last week we talked about what it meant to hang with Jesus as he fulfilled the Old Covenant and was ultimately killed on the cross. The words of Jesus *definitely* mean something to us today, but what they meant to the direct audience must first be established. That is the gist of my blog, theWitheredFigTree.com, and of the Pharisaical Lens.

- I. Why would Jesus use Symbols?
 - a. It may seem obvious, but symbols carry more meaning and often multiple means than words.
 - b. Along with the idea that Jesus couldn't speak directly against the Old Covenant while fulfilling it (Mat 5:19), Jesus used indirect symbolic and figurative references to talk about the coming Kingdom of God.
- II. Important Symbols
 - a. The Kingdom of Heaven – referenced more than 100 times in the Gospels, it represents the spiritual kingdom of God, where Christ is the head and disciples are the citizens (see Col 1:18 and 1Pet 2:4-7).
 - b. The Cross – Jesus was executed on the cross, but before the cross 7 times in the Gospels in reference to one's personal sacrifice. My opinion: I'm not sure if Jesus himself would have wanted the cross to symbolize Christianity or the church.
 - c. The Number 3 and the Sign of Jonah
 - i. Mat 12:38-41 and Luke 11:29-32
 - ii. The Jews likely didn't know Jonah symbolized them, but Jesus did.
 - iii. Jonah, the "reluctant prophet" was commanded by God to preach to the Ninevites. Jesus specifically applies Jonah's three days and *three nights* in the belly of the fish of him being in the tomb for three days and three nights before rising from the dead.
 - iv. Looking at the story of Jonah from this perspective means the Jews were Jonah and they had run from their responsibility to save the Gentiles. Jesus then assumes command and is sacrificed but saves the Gentiles. Jonah 2 can be seen as Jesus' prayer from the tomb. Jonah 3: the gospel being proclaimed (perhaps by Paul). Jonah 4: the struggle of the Jewish Christians to leave the OC and share the NC with the Gentiles.
 - d. The Fig Tree, the Mount of Olives, and throwing the Mountain into the Sea
 - i. Mat 21:18-22 – The fig tree represented the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil and Jesus withering the fig tree symbolized the condemning of mankind's choice to have the knowledge of good and evil

instead of relating to God through his Spirit and grace. See <https://www.thewitheredfigtree.com/?p=80>.

- ii. Some Jews believed olive trees represented the Tree of Life (there is less evidence of this compared to the fig tree representing the other tree). Jesus praying and finding solitude at the Mount of Olives could therefore be a message the mankind should have eaten from the Tree of Life and not from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.
 - iii. In Isa 2:2 and Dan 2:35 and 44:45, the mountain symbolized the temple and God's kingdom. Throwing the mountain into the sea is symbolic of throwing the Old Covenant, where Israel related to God through obedience its laws, away.
 - e. The Temple – John 2:19-22 (and noted by the Jews in Mat 26:61, Mat 27:40, Mark 14:58, and Mark 15:29, good thing John recorded when he said it). Reminder about when the Bible points out references to prophecy. This is one of those times.
 - f. The Shepherd – Mat 25:32 (one who will separate sheep from the goats) and John 10:1-21 (the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for them), indirectly Mat 9:36, Mark 6:34,
 - g. The Vine and its Fruit – Parables of “the workers in the vineyard” and “the two sons” and “the Tenant”, Mat 20 and 21. The Lord's Super – John 15:1-8 the Vine and the branches. The blood of the New Covenant (Mat 26:29, Mark 14:25, Luke 22:18).
 - h. The Lamb – John the Baptist uses this in John 1:29 and 1:35 when he sees Jesus.
 - i. Bread – The Last Super to mean his body (Mat 26:26, Mark 14:22, Luke 22:19). “Bread of Heaven” in John 6. First, he feeds the 5000, but then they chase after him.
 - j. Salt – Mat 5:13, Mark 9:50, and Luke 14:34: Salt is a valuable and life-giving mineral but is gone once it's used or wet.
 - k. Light and Darkness – John 1
- III. Summary – Jesus used many symbols and metaphors, some which were familiar to the Jews and others that were known but used in alternative ways.

Thanks for listening to this series, The Pharisaical Lens. My hope is that a re-reading of the Gospels with the ideas of this lens in mind will bring about new and exciting interpretations of Jesus' interactions with the Jews.

Join me next week for a new series called The Church. This is another challenging subject to modern Christianity and one that is very personal to me.

The Pharisaical Lens

