

Not of God:

The Pharisees and Election

by Bruce Henning

You Pharisee!”

Today, those are fightin’ words. But during the Lord Jesus’ earthly ministry, people would have seen Pharisees as the good guys. In contrast to the Sadducees, they were known for their commitment to the Law. It is no wonder then that their disbelief in Jesus’ claim to be the Messiah was a huge stumbling block for the Jews in general.

For the Apostle John, the Pharisees’s lack of faith, and their persecution and murder of Jesus, would have been a big obstacle to his Gospel’s purpose of convincing readers that Jesus is the Christ (John 20:31). If the truth about Jesus was so obvious, then why didn’t the majority of the Pharisees believe in Him? As the leaders themselves argue, “Have any of the rulers or the Pharisees believed in Him?” (John 7:48).

Some of the rulers did believe (John 12:42-43, 19:38), but what about the rest? How could God’s people, who studied the Scriptures in detail and looked for the Messiah, have so completely missed Him? How can it be that, “He came to His own and His own did not receive Him” (John 1:11)?

As an effective, Spirit-led communicator, we would expect John to address this thorny problem, and he does not disappoint. Unfortunately, the passages that address the Pharisees’s unbelief are often misread as support for unconditional election. A closer examination shows that they expose the Jews’s hypocrisy in claiming to be God’s people. They reject Jesus as the Christ not because *He* isn’t who He claims to be, but because *they* aren’t who they claim to be!

SOME DID NOT BELIEVE BECAUSE THEY DID NOT BELONG TO GOD

The first conflict between the Lord Jesus and the Jews that John records occurs in chapter five. After hearing His claim to be equal with God, they seek to kill Him (5:18). The Lord defends His claim in 5:31-47, by pointing to four witnesses that should have persuaded any reasonable Jew: John the Baptist, His own ministry, God the Father, and the law of Moses.

If the problem wasn’t the evidence, it could only be one thing...*those examining it*. The Lord Jesus doesn’t restate His case or reason with them further. He knows the real problem is that they never knew God (5:37-38, 42, 44), and didn’t really understand the Law (5:39, 45-47). As long as they were blinded by a false sense of religious security, they would never see the truth.

To get a feel for the shock value of Jesus’ statement, imagine if someone were to ask a Dispensationalist, “If the Bible so clearly teaches dispensationalism, why are there so many amillennialists?” And he answers, “Because they don’t want to know the truth. They’re completely misguided because they only care about modern trends. More than that, they aren’t even born again!” This would be a bold answer to say the least. But that’s what the Lord Jesus said to His opponents. Their problem is their stubbornness (5:40), desire to please men (5:44), an unwillingness to understand Scripture (5:39), and alienation from God (5:37). It’s not an issue of passive miscommunication; it’s active rejection of God’s Word.

In John 6:36-46 the Lord expounds more on their problem. He says, “All the Father has given to Me shall come to Me” (vs. 37) as the *reason* for their unbelief (vs. 36). He repeats Himself in verse 44, “No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws Him.” Their problem was that, despite all appearances, they did *not* belong to the Father. Jesus couldn’t be clearer: “everyone who has heard and

learned from the Father comes to Me” (6:45). They have not come, therefore they have never learned from the Father. He already covered this in chapter five, “You do not have His word abiding in you, because whom He has sent, Him you do not believe” (5:38), and “If you believed Moses, you would believe Me” (5:46). Though these verses are often taken as proof for unconditional election, they actually continue the theme (from chapter five) of exposing the Jews’s hypocrisy.

The Lord Jesus applies what was true of the Jews in general to the Pharisees in chap. 8. Verse 19 repeats the similar refrain, “You know neither Me nor My Father. If you had known Me, you would have known My Father also.” In fact, He goes on to call them “children of the devil” (see 8:42-47).

SOME BELIEVE BECAUSE THEY BELONG TO GOD

But isn’t everyone a child of the devil before they come to Christ? Today, yes. But not at that time. The Gospel of John takes place during a great transition. When Christ came, some already had a relationship with God the Father, but many didn’t.¹ There *were* people who were of God and so heard His words (8:47). In verses like John 6:37 and 10:27, some people believe *because they already were God’s people*.

Anna and Simeon belonged to the Father before the advent of the Lord Jesus. As a result, God ensured that when the Messiah did come they would believe in Him, even though He was only a baby! (Luke 2:25-38)

The blind man in chapter nine is the same “of God” category. He is willing and eager to believe in Christ (John 9:36). Unfortunately, the chapter break interrupts the Lord’s explanation of what has happened with the Pharisees. This is what the good shepherd discourse is all about: “The sheep hear His voice and He calls His own sheep by name and leads them out” (10:3).

In 10:26, the Lord repeats why the Jewish leaders didn’t believe. Unlike the beggar, they were not of God. But it wasn’t too late. They weren’t permanently stuck as “non-sheep.” Christ soon invites them to become His sheep (10:37-38). Doing that, however, would require seeking God’s truth above man’s opinion (5:44), and humbling themselves to admit they were blind (9:41).

APPLICATION

Throughout his Gospel, John shows that the Jew’s rejection of Jesus was *not* grounded in insufficient evidence; rather it was because although they thought they were of God, they actually weren’t. To see these passages as proof for unconditional election distracts us from the warning against vain religion.

There are many like the Pharisees today. They say they are experts in religion, yet they vehemently oppose the gospel. This cannot be. Despite degrees, appearances, or popularity, they have the same problem as the Pharisees. They are not of God. “If they were of God, they would hear God’s words” (John 8:47).

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¹Henning is alluding to the fact that OT saints believed in the coming Messiah for everlasting life (cf. Gen 15:6, John 5:8, Rom 4:1-8), though they did not yet know who the Messiah was.