

Lesson Supplemental – The Pharisees and the Sadducees in the First Century

Refer to Supplemental on “The Pharisees” and “The Sadducees” for more content and details.

Hypocrisy is the practice of claiming to have moral standards or beliefs to which one's own behavior does not conform. This is the term often used to describe the Pharisees and Sadducees in New Testament scripture (Matt 23). Against the backdrop of history and their respective roots, this label may not necessarily be fair, as both group tries to hold true to a set of religious standards against the infiltration of religious compromise. We know that, for both groups, their belief system is based on the same sources; namely, the Torah. What separates the two group -- religiously -- is their interpretation of the Torah, and practice therein of this interpretation.

The Pharisees versus The Sadducees

The aim of the Pharisees was to ensure the survival of the Jewish faith against the wave of religious compromise and political threat. The basis for their defense of the Jewish faith against these compromises and threats lies in their belief in the Torah, and to adhere to the practices outlined in the Torah. New Testament Scripture also infer that, in addition to the Torah, they also observe the "tradition of the elder" as an equal to the Torah (Matt 15:1-3; Gal 1:14). This practice of observing the tradition of the elders was also observed by Josephus in *Antiquities* as a point in difference between the Pharisees and the Sadducees. Moreover, the Pharisees adopted a set of "purity" regulations – a majority of which were set forth in Leviticus 11 and 15 – which they understood to be applicable to all life. These "purity" regulations concern the proper observance of religious rituals that distinguishes the "clean" from the "unclean" referenced in the Gospels.

The Sadducees, on the other hand, seem to hold to a belief system that evolves based on historical or political circumstances. Like the Pharisees, they also believed in the Torah, but only in the written form (ignoring the oral form; ignoring the tradition of the elders). As a result, many of the key components of their tenets of faith agrees with that of the Pharisees, with only minor differences in emphasis.

Politically, these two groups seem to be diametrically opposed to each other, with one group (Sadducees) being more accommodating to the political winds of change than the other (Pharisees).

According to Josephus, the critical difference between the Pharisees and the Sadducees is found in their posture towards the Law and tradition. The Pharisees are viewed to be the most accurate interpreters of the Law, while the Sadducees are viewed as secondary behind the Pharisees. Key differences between these two groups can be found in their interpretation of the Law and their attitude towards oral tradition, which includes the following:

- Fate versus Free Will - The Pharisees holds everything to fate and to God; that the providences of God direct the lives of individuals. The Sadducees, however, believes each individual have personal free will, and each individual is personally responsible for determining their own fate. They do not believe in God's providence in individuals.
- Death and Resurrection - The Pharisees believe that every soul is imperishable; that there is continued existence of the soul after death. The Sadducees does not believe in the resurrection; but rather that the soul dies with the body (Matt 22:23; Mark 12:18; Acts 23:8).

- Observance on Oral Tradition - as mentioned previously, the Pharisees adopt the practice of observing the tradition of the elders. For the Sadducees, only what was written down in the Torah was thought to be normative for religious life. They reject any form of oral tradition.

Summary Analysis on the Pharisees and Sadducees in the New Testament Period

It is generally acknowledged that the Pharisees and Sadducees, though both may have existed prior to the Hasmonean period, gain prominence during that period when the practice of the Torah was challenged by various policies that imposes religious compromises to the Jewish faith; namely, the Hellenization of religious beliefs and the combining of the priesthood with the kingship. The question that needs to be asked, then, is why are both groups characterized negatively in New Testament Scripture? If we assume that the infiltration of religious compromise to the biblical standards is to be characterized as "bad," then whatever opposes this religious compromise – the advocacies of the Pharisees and Sadducees -- must not be bad. Thus, the "purity" practices that both group imposes, which keeps the Jews from compromising their belief system, should probably be characterized as "good."

However, if we stake the claim that the ministry of Jesus Christ is good, then whatever opposes the ministry of Jesus Christ must not be good. This is where the negative characterization of the Pharisees and Sadducees is rooted. This negative characterization is likely not due to their roots or practices of their religious faith, but rather, the motivation behind their opposition to the ministry of Christ. If we were to give both groups some benefits of doubts, that the ministry of Christ may have been viewed skeptically by both groups as another compromise to religious faith, then it is understandable why they so stringently oppose to the ministry of Christ, as they view it to be yet another attempt to compromise their established set of "purity" practices.

Alternatively, it may also be argued that both groups may have taken their "purity" practices too far to such a degree where the Laws of God that was meant to be good, they have made it into a burden. This latter characterization is likely to be more accurate towards the Pharisees than the Sadducees; given that this was precisely how Jesus characterizes them (Pharisees) in Matthew Chapters 15 and 23. To be fair, not every Pharisees are characterized as being opposed to Jesus Christ, particularly in the Gospel of Luke, where the Pharisees are portrayed in a more balanced way.