

Pharisees are us (Mark 7:1-8, 21-23)

Jesus is not accusing the Pharisees of an early form of Pelagianism.

by [John Ortberg](#) in the [August 23, 2003](#) issue

I grew up in an era before video, *Veggie Tales* or Bible-based computer games. I was raised, at least in terms of religious education, on the flannelgraph. To this day, although I know that the scriptures are peopled with characters of texture and nuance, I think of Bible people and see pastel paper figures pressed on a felt board.

Perhaps the most flattened characters were the Pharisees. They were presented as foils against which the virtue of New Testament heroes stood out in sharp relief. When the Pharisees got into a fight with Jesus over handwashing, the flannelgraph reduced the story to a simple battle of bizarre legalism and a Lady Macbeth-like obsession with purity versus simple, sanctified common sense. We all knew whose side we would have been on.

But over the past few decades, we've learned that things were not quite that simple. Gregory Peck, not long before he died, said that if you're going to play the part of the devil you have to look for the angel in him, and if you're going to play an angel you have to look for the devil in him—a kind of actor's "hermeneutic of charity." We may need to do this with flannelgraph characters. What else might have been going on in Mark's chapter seven besides a simple contest between legalism and common sense?

James Dunn notes that in the first century a disproportionate amount of rabbinic attention was devoted to three areas of the law: dietary rules, Sabbath-keeping and circumcision. This was in spite of the fact that rabbis would not have claimed these as the central aspects of God's will for humanity. They knew that the essence of the law was the *shema*—the loving of God with heart and soul and strength. So why the relentless focus on dietary laws, circumcision and Sabbath-keeping?

The answer, Dunn says, involves “identity markers,” or boundaries. All groups of human beings have a tendency to be exclusive; they want to know who is inside and who is out. So they adopt identity markers—visible practices of dress or vocabulary or behavior that serve to distinguish who is inside the group from who is outside.

For instance, if you were driving along in the '60s and saw a Volkswagen van plastered with “Make Love Not War” bumper stickers, with a long-haired, tie-dyed, granny-glasses driver, you’d know you were observing a hippie. If it were the '80s and you saw a BMW driver wearing Gucci shoes and a Rolex watch, you’d know you were observing a yuppie. Every fraternity or sorority has its own uniform.

With this in mind, the attention given to the purity codes in the first century becomes clearer. As Tom Wright says: “The Temple cult, and the observance of Sabbaths, of food taboos, and of circumcision were the key things which marked out Jew from gentile, which maintained and reinforced exactly the agenda, both political and religious, of the hard-line Pharisees.”

Jesus is not accusing the Pharisees of an early form of Pelagianism, of trying to earn their justification by strenuous moral effort. He does not regard these laws as bizarre or outlandish. Perhaps most important, he does not reject his own religious culture. He agrees with the Pharisees that God’s work in human history is happening precisely through the life and destiny of this people of Israel.

But now, he says, the kingdom is breaking into human history in a new and unexpected way. It means the end for the “kingdom of the gentiles,” although the kingdom of God will triumph not by “paying back the gentiles in their own coin,” as Wright says, but by turning the other cheek and walking the second mile. The identity markers that will proclaim the authenticity of the people of God will be a circumcised heart and a diet of justice and love. Then people will not simply try to do right things; they will be the kind of persons who *want* to do right things; they will be clean “inside.” Jesus saw this not as the repudiation of Israel’s ancient dream, but as its ultimate fulfillment.

Here is where Jesus’ words become as convicting in our day as they were to the Pharisees, for the struggle of Mark 7 is a struggle inside every human being who seeks to take faith seriously. There is a self-righteousness in me that does not want to die. There is something inside me that is not bothered when others are excluded, that *wants* others to be excluded, that feels more special when I’m on the inside and

somebody else is not. There was something in me—even when I was young—that enjoyed looking at the flannelgraph and thinking about how much wiser and more loved by God I was than those foolish, exclusive Pharisees.

Henri Nouwen wrote that it is very hard to stop being the prodigal son without turning into the elder brother. Any time people are not experiencing authentic transformation—as in Mark 7:21-23—they will inevitably be drawn toward some kind of faith characterized by boundary markers. We will look for substitute ways of distinguishing ourselves from those on the outside. The boundary markers change from century to century, but they all reinforce a false sense of superiority, fed by the intent to exclude others.

Ironically, the one human being who was perfectly free from self-righteousness is the only one who was completely righteous. The least exclusive member of the human race is also its most exalted. The only person who has ever been truly free of a messiah complex was the Messiah.