



### Troubles ahead

1. As soon as Jesus began His ministry, He helped countless people who were weak, sick and poor. Yet we find certain people plotting to kill Jesus within days of His ministry. Already in Nazareth some people tried to throw Jesus off the cliff. Now we see series of confrontation between Jesus and His antagonists in the Galilee region. And each time their hostility against Jesus grows bitter.
2. Who were these Pharisees? They were outwardly pious, but inwardly deadly – with ‘self-righteousness’. Pharisee means ‘separated one’. In Jesus’ days there were only 4-5000 Pharisees, but they were very influential in the religious life of Israel. They were convinced that their nation was not able to recover because they were not keeping the law of Moses. Everybody was asking, why was God allowing the sad history of His chosen people to continue? Pharisees had the answer. Scribes wrote out the law of Moses according to the Pharisees’ system, dividing them into different sections. The law of Sabbath had 49 separate chapters on the work not permitted on Sabbath. It was impossible for the common people keep the law under Pharisees & scribes’ interpretation. And they were constantly adding new rules. It was ridiculous.

### A. Confrontation 1: Question on Fasting (5:33-39)

1. *“Why do the disciples of John fast often and make prayers, and likewise those of the Pharisees, but Yours eat and drink?” (5:33)*
  - a. After attacking Levi, Jesus’ disciple, now they boldly turn to Jesus and begin *attacking His disciples’ spirituality*. It is an indirect attack on Jesus. They cleverly align themselves with John the Baptist here, whom they actually rejected. This is nasty, knowing John’s witness about Jesus and Jesus’ approval of John.
  - b. OT required fasting one day each year on the Day of Atonement. The purpose of fasting was to: (1) ‘humble ourselves’ (afflict our souls); (2) ‘take away pointing of fingers’ (self-righteousness); (3) help the weak & poor (C.f. Is 58). Pharisees added rules and set certain times for fasting & prayer.
  - c. Many Pharisees were fasting to show off to others. They even rubbed ash on their faces to look pale, to make sure everybody knew they were fasting! They prayed in the street corners, so everybody could see them praying. When they gave donation, they advertised their gifts. Funny to us, but they were serious!
2. *“Can you make the friends of the bridegroom fast while the bridegroom is with them?” (5:34)*
  - a. Jesus was not teaching against fasting but against ‘hypocrisy’. This He hated the most. Note Jesus said (1) ‘when you fast’, not ‘if you fast’ (Matt 6:16); (2) “Do not let your right hand know what your left hand is doing.” (Matt 6:3). Fasting must reflect our ‘inner life’. We do not fast because everybody is doing it or to ‘look spiritual’. Same applies to all spiritual discipline, including prayer.
  - b. Here Jesus makes an extraordinary claim – “I am the Bridegroom.” This is Jesus’ FIRST claim in the gospels. In OT God Himself is the Bridegroom (c.f. Is 61:10; 62:5), a prophetic picture of God as the ultimate fulfilment of all human longings and desires. Jesus claims this divine title as the desire of all human soul. While He was present with His disciples, they were celebrating, not fasting! Even the Pharisees excused newly wedded people from fasting.
  - c. Then Jesus made an interesting comment about the future fasting of His disciples: *“But the days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them. Then they will fast in those days.” (5:35)*. In the future, Jesus’ disciples will voluntarily fast because they miss Jesus’ presence! They will fast because of the real inner spiritual hunger for greater intimacy with the Lord. Those days are now.
3. Jesus tells them two parables: (1) new patch on old garment; (2) new wine in old wineskin.
  - a. These two parables have the same meaning: (1) The new patch will pull on the old garment and both will be ruined. (This gives insight into Jesus’ humble upbringing); (2) The new wine will ferment and burst the hardened old wineskin. Jesus did not come to patch up the old religion of Judaism, but to bring a radically new way of living out faith. It is the new way of relating to God ‘from inside out’, not the old way of ‘from outside in.’ Jesus is in essence saying, ‘the old and the new cannot mix. You cannot add what I teach on top

of what you teach. And you won't like the new because you are used to the old. Not many of you will like what I am bringing.' The new has the Christ in the centre.

## B. Confrontation 2: Question of Sabbath (6:1-5)

1. In Round TWO, their attack gets stronger. Pharisees attack the disciples for breaking 'their version' of the Sabbath law. On a Sabbath day, they were walking through fields, and plucked some grain and ate them.
  - a. According to OT, travellers were permitted to help themselves in the grain fields in such ways to satisfy their hunger (Dt. 23:25). This was not stealing. Pharisees were accusing them of: (1) plucking of the grains – 'reaping' (2) rubbing them in their hands – 'threshing'; (3) throwing away husks – 'winnowing'; (4) eating – preparing for food. The disciples 'broke' FOUR distinct Sabbath laws in one mouthful! [Talmud sees reaping and grinding of corn bigger in quantity than a dried fig as culpable' (Shabbat 70b)]
  - b. Note, if you left a safety pin on your clothes on a Sabbath, it is sewing. If you wear false teeth that is carrying a burden. If you went out with a walking stick and leave a trail on the path, that's ploughing. Even today, Sabbath law applies on the elevators and coffee machines.
2. Jesus' astonishing reply
  - a. Jesus referred to David's conduct in 1 Sam 21:3-6. The 'bread of presence' was for the priests to eat after their temple service (Lv. 24:5-9). Yet David and his hungry men who were running from Saul, asked for the holy bread and ate them. This was not condemned as wrong. What is Jesus saying here? '*Saving human life is more important than keeping certain ceremonial laws.*' Jesus put saving life FIRST, religious observance SECOND.  
  
E.g. What will you do with the holy communion bread if there is a starving person? What will you do if you see a child crossing the road under the red traffic light and walking into danger from oncoming traffic?
  - b. Jesus gave another extraordinary reason: "The Son of Man is also Lord of the Sabbath." Jesus gives himself TWO more titles here. (1) The Son of Man. (2) The Lord of the Sabbath. This is just as offensive to Pharisees as claiming authority to forgive sins. Sabbath was divinely instituted by God Himself at Sinai (Ex 20:8-11). It was not a small ceremonial law. No one can remake the Sabbath law except the One who made it in the first place! Therefore here Jesus claims the very authority that belongs to God. God calls Ezekiel 'Son of Man' 84 times, but the one 'Son of Man' reference in Daniel 7 refers to the 'Divine Man' of heaven who comes on the clouds to judge the nations at the end of time. Revelation 1 shows Jesus is this 'Son of Man'.

## C. Confrontation 3: Healing on Sabbath (6:6-11)

1. In round three, Pharisees are ready to launch a direct attack against Jesus for breaking the Sabbath law.
  - a. It was Jesus' custom to enter synagogues on Sabbaths to teach. There was a man who had a withered right hand, and the scribes and Pharisees were closely watching to see if Jesus would heal on Sabbath (6:7). If he did, they had a direct evidence to take him.
  - b. Jesus knew exactly what they were thinking inside. According to the Pharisees if the sickness is extreme that someone might die from it, they allowed a doctor treat the sick on Sabbaths (Yoma 8:6). But if there was no immediate threat to life, they were adamant no such 'healing' work was allowed. So their verdict on this man with withered hand was, 'Not Today'.
  - c. Jesus' understanding the law was 'internal' rather than 'external'. If we entertain adulterous thoughts, then we've already committed adultery inside. To be truly righteous we must be righteous in our thought life as well as in our conduct. All that the Pharisees achieved was on the outside, thus 'whitewashed tombs'.
  - d. Jesus calls the sick man 'to stand in front of everyone' and questions them. "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do evil? Which is right, to save life or to destroy?"(6:9) This shows that in God's sight, Pharisees' ways were evil and destructive to this man's life. Then Jesus backs up His words with action. He commands the man to stretch out his hand and his withered right hand was healed before everyone's eyes. Jesus thrashes the Pharisees, and they were filled with fury (beside themselves with anger - NEB). Later they would collaborate with Herodians ('sinners') to put Jesus to death.

## D. Why did they hate Jesus so much?

1. Jesus challenged their religious authority, but they couldn't fault Him or trap Him. (1) Jesus charged them with OT, 'Have you not heard...' (2) Jesus spoke with such clear logic. 'Sick people need the doctors, not the healthy.' (3) Jesus probed their conscience in public. 'Is it lawful to do good or evil?' (4) He demonstrated power and authority. 'So that you may know, now get up and walk.' Or 'Stretch out your hand.' If you are up against someone who is 'completely irrefutable', what would you do? They realised that if they left Jesus alone, He would destroy their religion completely, and they were right.
2. They also hated Jesus for His claim to authority, a carpenter from Nazareth without a Reverend title, claiming authority like nobody else ever did. 'By what authority are you doing these?' So far Jesus claimed FIVE titles: (1) 'I am the forgiver of sins.' (5:24); (2) 'I am the physician to the sick.' (5:31); (3) 'I am the Bridegroom' (5:35); (4) 'I am the Lord of the Sabbath' (6:5); (5) 'I am the Son of Man' (5:24; 6:5). Jesus' favourite title was 'the Son of Man', ie. human being in Ezekiel and divine being in Daniel. Jesus is saying, "I am God if you have eyes to see." When Jesus laid claim on these five titles, He signed His death warrant.

*"If a perfectly good man appeared on earth, he would be murdered." (Socrates)*

## E. Discussion Questions

1. What was the problem with the Pharisees' practice of fasting? What is the right way and the wrong way of fasting? If possible, share from your successes and failures in fasting.
2. What is the main purpose of fasting in the Old Testament? (Isaiah 58). What is the new model of fasting Jesus taught in Luke 5:35?
3. How was Jesus' interpretation of the law radically different from that of the Pharisees and scribes?
4. Who are the Pharisees today? How can I discern and avoid the same Pharisaic spirit from taking hold in my life?
5. Why did the Pharisees hate Jesus so much? What were five titles Jesus claimed, that stirred the fury in the religious leaders? Do you come to Jesus and acknowledge Him as the Lord of Sabbath, and the Lord of all?