

## 99 Remember, Paul was a Pharisee

You know, I think that Pharisees get a really bad press, and I do have a sneaking admiration for them. They recognised that God had called the Jews and given them a very special task: to set up God's kingdom on earth – to bring the good news to **all the nations**:

*I will surely bless you, and I will multiply your descendants like the stars in the sky and the sand on the seashore ... And **through your offspring all nations of the earth will be blessed**, because you have obeyed My voice. Gen 22:7ff.*

*The people walking in darkness have seen a great light ... For to us a child is born, ... And he will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. ... **He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom**, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and for ever. Is 9:2ff*

They had studied their Bibles, and they knew the Messiah would come, and I think they were really concerned that when Messiah did come they should be really ready. So that they should living Godly lives, as (their) Bible taught them. But they did make one tiny mistake: they concentrated too much on the minutiae of how we should **behave**, and forgot the importance of their **attitude** to God and to one another.

To be fair, the Pharisees of Jesus' day weren't the first to make this mistake – the people of God had been doing it for centuries, over and over and over again. Thankfully too, God is very patient and forgiving. God allowed them ('given them over', Rom 1) to suffer the natural consequences of their wrong attitudes (usually captivity), but then rescued them and restored and redeemed and renewed them, and encouraged in them right attitudes: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, etc.

And I have a fellow feeling with the Pharisees because, as I've explained in my articles, I too was enthusiastic about the Bible and studied it, to make sure I, and others, got things right – and I've spent many a year explaining to others what they needed to do to get to heaven.

Paul (Saul), however, was a better Pharisee than me; he at least recognised that it wasn't about how I could (we could) 'get to heaven', but that we should be looking for a Messiah to set up his kingdom here on earth. But Paul's 'Damascus road experience' was to realise that the very person he saw as flouting many of God's laws (laws that Saul felt helped us to get close to God) was actually the One he'd been waiting for, to rescue, restore, redeem and renew, and to encourage the right attitudes: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, etc. No wonder he then got very excited.

I really do have a fellow feeling for Paul. I'm just cross that it has taken me almost 50 years as a Bible-believing Christian to see the folly of setting up a carefully crafted set of guidelines for 'what you have to do to become a Christian and get to heaven'.

I found a passage yesterday that sums it up for me:

*He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant – **not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life**. Now if the ministry that brought death, which was engraved in letters on stone, came with glory, ... will not the ministry of the Spirit be even more*

*glorious? If the ministry that **condemns** men is glorious, how much more glorious is **the ministry that brings righteousness!** 2 Cor 3:6–10.*

(And I don't believe that 'righteousness' here refers to right **behaviour!**)

Finally, I'd like to apply this passage my thinking about homosexuality. What is God's main concern? Obviously, it's rescuing, restoring, redeeming, renewing, and to encourage right attitudes: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness and self-control etc. But what does that look like when it comes to sexual issues?

I think our prime concern should not be particular sexual actions, but the attitudes of our hearts. So *my* prime concern must be *my* attitude which, I have to admit, has not been good. Without even bothering to study the Bible on the issue, I *knew, without any doubt*, that homosexual acts were wrong – the Bible clearly condemns them – so people who do such things need to repent. And we Christians should stand up against the forces in our society that are saying such behaviour is acceptable. History shows that societies that allow such things tend to decay.

Maybe I never really articulated my thinking as clearly and strongly as that, but that's what was underneath my polite exterior.

Now let me try to articulate my current feelings on sexual issues. I think God is very unhappy when, sexually, we fail to have, for instance, love and patience and faithfulness and self-control. I think I can safely say that God hates it when women are exploited as sexual objects and when relationships break down for whatever reason and children get hurt and exploited and ... listen, I don't need to name all the damaging ways in which we treat each other – we can all list them, and sadly we can all see them in today's society.

Having now *actually* studied my Bible, I have failed to find any convincing proof that the private sexual activity of a loving couple is something that God feels strongly about. What I have found, following Romans 1:26,27, is the whole of Romans 2, where Paul condemns me for my judgemental attitudes, which are so corrosive to society. Indeed, **God** condemns me, but God will, thankfully, forgive me if I repent.

So what would Jesus do/think/say if he were alive today? Would he go on gay pride marches? Maybe, but I know for sure that there would have been quite a number of gay people in Jesus' band of followers.

Is it a coincidence that until 2/3 years ago (i.e. in my 'I am right' days) I had never even knowingly spoken to a gay person? Whatever, God has recently changed that situation, to my real delight and joy. My world is becoming a more wonderful place day by day.

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