

If the Pharisees had a theme song, it would have been ‘Trust and Obey.’ (he sings) We trusted that we would be punished if we did not fully obey. The God we knew was a harsh God, one we wanted to obey... completely. So, perhaps we have something in common with you? Obeying God fully and completely. But we Pharisees take a lot of heat from you; that we were hard-headed and hard-hearted...maybe you shouldn't be so quick to be so critical.

Our solution to the problem of disobedience was to think through every way a commandment could possibly be violated, and then make commandments not to do any of those things. In our minds, those secondary commandments were just as important to obey as the primary commandments. With a harsh God, we didn't want to take any chances, and we didn't want any of our people to take chances either.

It sounded good in theory, but in practice, this didn't work out so well. It turns out that people are very innovative in ways to disobey, and we just couldn't make and enforce secondary laws fast enough. By the time of Jesus, we had identified 613 commandments in the Old Testament, and we had promulgated thousands of related laws.

By the time of Jesus, we were so focused on following laws that we forgot the basics of what God wanted from us. I find it hard to believe that some of you- haven't done the exact same thing, and maybe continue to do the same thing.

One of the things the common people loved so much about Jesus was his simplicity. He said things that made sense to people without being burdensome. Through his sermons and stories, he basically said, “Be this way, don't be that way.” Many of the Pharisees wanted to believe it was that simple, but we were not willing to risk disobeying God even in the slightest.

Things got even more complicated as politics began to get in the way. The Jewish leaders came mostly from two groups. Pharisees were well-meaning, but could easily get lost in theological details. The Sadducees were wealthier, but were more politically minded than sticklers for theological details. Between us, we ruled the Jewish people living in Israel. However, we Jewish leaders were under the direct authority of the Roman Empire. We were accountable to them to make sure taxes were collected and there was no civil disobedience. We were quite willing to sacrifice a few well-meaning revolutionaries to keep peace in the country. The fact that we kept our power as a consequence didn't hurt either.

John the Baptist had taught us a valuable lesson. As long as John stayed in the wilderness and castigated sinners, all was well. But when his followers became too numerous, and when he criticized the Roman-backed king, John was put to death. Overnight, the threat to us and to Rome disappeared. When Jesus began to amass followers, many of whom had followed John, we Pharisees began to keep an eye on him. And we knew Herod was watching Jesus, too. Jesus did not do himself any favors by doing much of his preaching only a few miles from Herod's base in Tiberias.

At the first, Jesus seemed like a local folk hero. He had grown up in Galilee, and talked the language of the common people. There was nothing to fear because he was uneducated and did not seem to have any political aspirations. We completely misread the situation.

Jesus began to gather thousands of followers as news of his teachings and healings began to get around. He offered a simpler way of being religious, the crowds flocked to him, and quit coming to us. And whenever we had confrontations with him, it seemed like he always walked away the winner. Our authoritative position was fading fast, and none of us liked it.

I was one of the Pharisees who was caught in the middle. I wanted to obey God, but could see that our teachings were becoming too burdensome. I believed Jesus was a borderline blasphemer, but many of the things he said made a lot of sense. Jesus was putting me, and many others of my group, in a very precarious spot.

I decided to follow Jesus for a few days to see what I could personally observe. It was easy to get permission to go because the Jewish leaders wanted more information about this trouble maker. They wanted me to spy on Jesus, I just wanted to see what all the fuss was about.

It took me a little over a week to walk from Jerusalem to the Sea of Galilee, but once I got there it was surprisingly easy to find Jesus and listen to him teach. I reached the northwest edge of the Sea, and found a large group of people waiting near the shore. Someone said they were waiting for Jesus to finish praying so they could hear him teach. I looked up on the small hillside and there was a motionless figure. After about an hour, the figure started moving toward us. One of the men nearby joked that we were fortunate, Jesus had prayed for only a couple of hours.

I suppose I expected to see a teacher in fine robes come strutting down the hillside before arrogantly sitting in front of his disciples. Instead, I saw a rather ordinary young man in a poor man's robe come to sit with his friends and share some bread. One of his friends said, "Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples." I started to sit down myself, because I was expecting to hear a long, bombastic prayer that one of my colleagues might have taught. Instead, I heard this simple prayer: "Father, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. Forgive us our sins for we also forgive everyone who sins against us. And lead us not into temptation." And then, he stopped. I was flabbergasted, reeling from Jesus starting his prayer by calling God... his father!

The man had said only a few sentences, and my mind was spinning! Then Jesus launched into a story about a man who wanted to borrow loaves of bread from a friend late at night. It was a rather odd story to answer a request to teach his disciples to pray. Made no sense to me. But he followed with some sayings that made me understand that he really did think of God as his father.

“Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.” I began to get a glimpse that not only was God a father, but could he be a good father? My worldview of rules upon rules upon rules was beginning to crumble. And it only got worse from there.

“Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?”

My mind was in tatters. God is good. He wants good things for me. I don't have to act in fear. And the Holy Spirit is the best of all gifts...and I don't even know who or what the Holy Spirit is. I went from being a know-it-all Pharisee to a babbling fool in a matter of minutes. And Jesus hadn't even finished his breakfast.

When he cast out a demon, someone accused him of casting out demons through the power of Satan. It only took a second to demolish that line of thinking. And then Jesus talked about Jonah and how the Gentiles repented at Jonah's teaching, so how much more the people who rejected Jesus' teaching would be punished. Again, reeling from his comparing himself... to the prophet Jonah?! I heard a familiar voice come through the crowd.

“Master, come eat with me.” It was the voice of a Pharisee I had often heard teach at the Temple. The man tried to sound humble, but his smugness and pride are all that came through. Jesus accepted! I immediately sought to join the lunch, and my credentials from Jerusalem were enough to get me in, although I was not invited to recline at the main table.

Jesus hadn't even been given his amuse-bouche before he launched into a tirade against the Pharisees. Certainly not a polite thing for a guest to do to his host. Guess he knew his host was a slimeball, so Jesus probably didn't care. Ceremonial washing, careful tithing, seats in the synagogue, and other things we Pharisees highly valued were shredded by Jesus. He showed how we had taken important things and destroyed their value by our prideful intentions and actions. When one of the lawyers protested, Jesus gave the teachers of the law even more criticism.

The Pharisees and teachers of the law were beside themselves with rage, damaged pride everywhere. They besieged Jesus with questions. He turned the tables on them every time! They were angry enough to begin making plans to kill him.

When Jesus finished talking with the Pharisees and teachers of the law, he turned to the crowd of thousands that wanted to hear him speak, and he continued to rail against the Pharisees and the damage they did to people who were truly seeking God. It was a train wreck, in slow motion. I wanted to turn away because my pride was hurt, too, but I couldn't! I could not quit listening to a man who made so much sense.

Then, I thought I got a break. Someone in the crowd yelled, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me." Even I was offended that such a greedy person would interrupt the Teacher. Jesus turned and said to the crowd, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions."

And, that was it for me. My mind was blown completely to smithereens, whatever those are. All kinds of greed? How many did I know I had? Life doesn't consist of an abundance of possessions? Then why am I chasing possessions and position and comfort and reputation?

I heard a bunch of phrases about not being anxious, and building treasures in heaven, and giving to the poor, and on and on and on. Jesus was giving me a graduate course and I couldn't even add two plus two any longer.

My lists of precious rules had lost their importance. My reasons for being a Pharisee... destroyed. All I had to do was love God and obey him through my love. What could I do? Was I willing to give up my family and fortune and core beliefs to follow this simple, country teacher?

I guess you are faced with those very same questions, aren't you? I wonder what you'll do?

I should probably end with that question, but like a good Pharisee, I want to prove my intellectual superiority by dispelling one of your beliefs. Because of some of Jesus' teachings, many people believe Jesus spent his entire life in Israel, and that he only taught Jews. Many people also believe that all of the Pharisees were always enemies of Jesus. None of those things are true.

While Jesus was in the middle of his ministry in Galilee, some Pharisees came to him to warn him about Herod Antipas. Herod had killed John the Baptist and would have little compunction about killing Jesus. These Pharisees sincerely wanted Jesus to leave Galilee, the area ruled by Herod.

I can't say that Jesus immediately left because of their warning, but it was during that time period that Jesus took his disciples out of Israel, to the area of Tyre and Sidon. There were other times when Jesus left Israel, and he clearly taught Samaritans and other non-Jews from time to time.

It should not have been a surprise to his followers that they would eventually make disciples of Gentiles all over the world. But in many ways, his followers were as captive to their emotional

beliefs as we Pharisees were. It was going to be almost two decades before the followers made a concerted effort to evangelize non-Jews, but you will have to read about that in Luke's other book, *Acts*.

As a Pharisee, I admit I had a difficult time learning from Jesus. My education, my rules, my striving, made it really hard. But here is one thing I did learn. I should not have a "cardio scalero", a term similar to your medical term, cardio sclerosis. It means that I should not have a hard heart. And neither should you!