

# THE FACE OF THE PHARISEE

John 9:13-23

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“Some of the Pharisees said, ‘This man is not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath.’ But others said, ‘How can a man who is a sinner do such signs?’ And there was a division among them” (Jn. 9:16).

**T**he movie *Jane Eyre* begins with a horse-drawn carriage pulling up the drive of a small country estate. A man emerges. He is tall, dark, with grotesque features, bushy black eyebrows, and a menacing scowl. Philip Ryken writes, “Those familiar with the iconography of the modern film already will have guessed the man’s occupation. Anyone this diabolical must be a minister.”<sup>1</sup>

As the sinister man stands in the door, he is solemnly introduced as the Reverend Mr. Brocklehurst. The purpose of his visit is an inspection of the young Jane Eyre, who is a candidate for admission to the school of which the reverend is headmaster. Jane is an orphan, and her aunt is hoping to pack her off to boarding school.

“Your name, little girl?” asks Rev. Brocklehurst.” “Jane Eyre, sir.” “Well, Jane Eyre, are you a good child?” At this, Jane hesitates, and her aunt intervenes, “Perhaps the less said on that subject the better, Mr. Brocklehurst.” With that, the minister calls for the orphan girl to stand before him. “Do you know where the wicked go after death?” he asks menacingly. “They go to hell,” Jane replies. “And what is hell? Can you tell me that?” “A pit full of fire.” “And should you like to fall into that pit, and to be burning there for ever?” “No, sir.” “What must you do to avoid it?” he asks. Here, Jane’s catechism fails

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<sup>1</sup> The illustration taken from Philip Graham Ryken, *My Father’s World* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2002), 121.

her, so she has to think a bit. Finally, she answers, “I must keep in good health, and not die.”

When Charlotte Brontë’s novel, *Jane Eyre*, was first published in the mid 1800’s, many readers criticized her portrayal of the Reverend Brocklehurst as anti-Christian. So in the second edition, Brontë wrote a preface to explain her purpose. She asserted that her motive was not to undermine but rather to strengthen the church. She was not assailing Christ, but those who falsely called themselves Christians. She wrote, “Self-righteousness is not religion. To attack the first is not to assail the last. To pluck the mask from the face of the Pharisee, is not to lift an impious hand to the Crown of Thorns.”<sup>2</sup>

Long before Charlotte Brontë, there was the apostle John, and his portrait of the Pharisees’ face is every bit as chilling as Brontë’s Reverend Brocklehurst. Of the many scenes that might have inspired Brontë’s character, none is more vivid than that of the Pharisees’ examination of the man whose eyes had been restored in John 9.

## TWISTED MINDS

**I**ndeed, we might well have Brontë’s imagery in mind as we read John 9:13, “They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind.” Jesus had come to this blind man and sent him to wash in the Pool of Siloam. When the man washed, his eyes were opened to see for the first time in his life. When he returned, his neighbors were buzzing with amazed curiosity. Not knowing what to think, they sent to the Pharisees for advice.

In the interview that followed, John sketches a portrait of the Pharisees. Right from the start, their concern focused not on *what* had happened, but *when* it had happened: “Now it was a Sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes” (Jn. 9:14). For this reason, the inquiry quickly turned into an inquisition.

In fact, Jesus did not violate God’s law, but only that of the Pharisees. God’s law taught that on the seventh day “You shall not do any work” (Ex. 20:10). But the Pharisees took it upon themselves to define in

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<sup>2</sup> Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1993), v.

minute detail what was and was not “work,” spelling out 39 categories of activities that they said violated the Sabbath.

In healing the blind man, Jesus had violated the Pharisees’ law in three different ways. The first was when he spat on the ground and made a ball of clay, since they defined making clay as manual labor. Secondly, while the rabbis permitted healing on the Sabbath in the case of someone who was dying, they forbade it in cases where the patient could wait. For instance, a doctor was not allowed to treat a toothache, and a person with a sprained ankle was forbidden to apply a cold cloth. Thirdly, there was a specific injunction against applying saliva to the eyes, which Jesus had done in healing this man.

Why would Jesus violate such clearly defined rules? The first reason is that Jesus did not accept the authority of human traditions, especially when the rabbis’ rules were in conflict with the intention of God’s law. So Jesus not only ignored but openly violated the Pharisees’ code. Jesus may even have placed the mud pack on the blind man’s eyes especially to offer a public challenge to the Pharisees.

People always have a tendency to erect their own rules as a way of thinking themselves righteous by their works. Some religious people say that one must never go to the movies, or dine in a restaurant that serves alcohol, or wear stylish clothes. But these prohibitions are not found in the Bible. Worse, such rules are fairly easy to keep, so that some people think themselves righteous by observing them. Man-made rules encourage us to look down proudly on others rather than to humble ourselves before God. In contrast, God’s perfect and holy law is designed to show us our sin and bring us to God for mercy.

How should Christians respond to such man-made traditions? Matthew Henry tells us what Jesus did: “He would not seem to yield to the usurped power of the scribes and Pharisees. Their government was illegal, their impositions were arbitrary, and their zeal for the rituals consumed the substantials of religion; and therefore Christ would not give place to them, by subjection, no not for an hour.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 6 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, n.d.), 5:819.

The Pharisees did not appreciate Jesus' view, and it was in part for his many violations of their Sabbath laws that they sought to take his life. But they had a problem, for though he broke their rules, Jesus had displayed divine power to heal. Hoping to get around this, they asked the man how he got his sight. "He said to them, 'He [that is, Jesus] put mud on my eyes, and I washed, and I see'" (Jn. 9:15).

So before the Pharisees could condemn Jesus they had to explain his ability to restore sight. Immediately, therefore, some of the Pharisees sought to discredit the healing. They argued that Jesus "is not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath. But others said, 'How can a man who is a sinner do such signs?' And there was a division among them" (Jn. 9:16). William Hendriksen has called this "the battle of the syllogisms."<sup>4</sup> A syllogism is a logical formula working from a premise to a conclusion. One side argued that since all people who are from God keep the Sabbath, and since Jesus broke the Sabbath, he could not be from God. But the other side argued that since a sinner cannot do God's works, the man who had done this miracle must not be a sinner and instead must be from God. These two different ways of thinking – one involving a serious error – produced two different attitudes to Jesus.

The Pharisees were not wrong to investigate the miracle. Both the Old and New Testaments advise this, since there are both good and evil powers in the world. When Moses turned his rod into a snake, for instance, the Egyptian sorcerers did the same. The problem was that the tests they applied were not biblical. This is why the Pharisees were divided. So what should they do? A hint is given them by the former blind man. They asked, "What do you say about him, since he has opened your eyes?" He said, "He is a prophet" (Jn. 9:17).

This is significant, because the place where Moses told them how to test a miracle-worker was in his instructions for how to identify a prophet (Dt. 13:1-5). Moses taught that if a man claimed to be from God and seemed to perform miracles, his teaching should be tested for faithfulness to the Bible. In other words, the Pharisees should have evaluated Jesus' actions by inquiring of God's Word. Had they

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<sup>4</sup> William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1953), 82-83.

honestly done so, they would have found that Jesus' teaching on the Sabbath was the biblical one and that he was proved to be a prophet.

Perhaps the greatest danger in studying a passage like this is to assume that this describes other people – people who lived long ago and far away. But the key to benefiting from this passage is to see just how much like these Pharisees we often are.

The Pharisees were distorting the truth. They took God's Sabbath day of rest and made it the single most unpleasant day of the week. Christians have often done this. It is not that there are no rules for God's Sabbath: God commands us to rest from work and focus on him (Ex. 20:8-10; Isa. 58:13-14). But the Pharisees twisted those rules so that instead of a blessing they were a burden. They used the Sabbath for their own purposes rather than for God's: to promote works-righteousness instead of divine grace. James Boice comments, "They were ready to kill Jesus for breaking the Sabbath, but they were not prepared to let him heal on it."<sup>5</sup>

Whenever we distort and twist truth it is for one reason: to serve our own purpose and agenda. We see this in marriage. God commands wives to submit to their husbands and husbands to lovingly minister to their wives, but these commands are sometimes employed by husbands in the service of abuse and by wives for control. We see the same in the political arena, when outrageous justifications are provided for laws that flagrantly violate the basic morality of God's commands. Why does this happen? Because political leaders value their own careers above God's will. We see this in the church. Whereas the Pharisees twisted the Sabbath law by making it a burden, most Christians today twist the Sabbath law by simply ignoring or denying it, even though it is one of God's Ten Commandments. Why does this happen? Because Christians are more committed to their worldly recreations than to God's holy Word. The question we all should ask is, Where might I be distorting the truth? The place we will find it is the sin we want to justify, the duty we want to neglect, the love we want to withhold, or the situation we want to control.

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<sup>5</sup> James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John*, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 2:707.

## COLD HEARTS

If the first characteristic of false, Pharisaical religion is the twisting of truth, a second characteristic of the Pharisees was their cold hearts. This comes through in their absence of joy at the blessing the blind man had received. Nowhere do they show the slightest appreciation for the wonderful fact that a man born blind had been given his sight. James Boice puts it this way: “The man... had been blind for the whole of his lifetime, and now he was healed! We might expect the leaders to have rejoiced with him. But did they? Not at all! Instead, we see them dredging around in the dark recesses of their minds to discover what they can do about this unfortunate event.”<sup>6</sup>

Two features stand out when we consider the Pharisees’ cold hearts. First, they showed not the slightest concern for the individual. We can imagine the look on their faces as they heartlessly quizzed this man who had just experienced the great deliverance of his life. Second, they showed no excitement over this display of divine power. Matthew Henry comments, “Their enmity to Christ had divested them of all manner of humanity, and divinity too.”<sup>7</sup> This man who had trusted Jesus experienced something that many other new converts have experienced: their greatest discouragements will often come from outwardly-focused religious legalists within the church.

Seeking to preserve their case against Jesus, the Pharisees moved on to interview the man’s parents. The fact of this healing was a problem to them, so they set out to solve or at least discredit the evidence. John tells us: “The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight, until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight” (Jn. 9:18).

Imagine the sorrow of these parents over their long suffering son. But now they are dragged before a threatening inquisition. John notes their fear, since the religious leaders “had already agreed that if anyone should confess Jesus to be the Christ, he was to be put out of the synagogue” (Jn. 9:22). The parents were pawns, and they would

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<sup>6</sup> Boice, 2:708.

<sup>7</sup> Matthew Henry, 5:819.

become victims if their testimony threatened the Pharisees' position. Therefore, instead of lauding Jesus for healing their son, they answered as evasively as they could. Yes, the man was their son, and, yes, he was born blind. "But how he now sees we do not know, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself" (Jn. 9:21). This was not a very noble response, as these parents abandoned their son to face the music himself. But it was a predictable reaction to the Pharisees' intimidation.

The example of these Pharisees again provides a lens on our own sin. Even if they had been right about the Sabbath – though they were not – there is no excuse for their lack of concern for this human being and their lack of joy for this display of God's grace.

For the Pharisees, this man was a means and not an end. They looked on him as an instrument or a tool. But all through the Bible, human beings never are portrayed as mere means. Man is the image-bearer of God, and thus every person is an end, never a means. The man Jesus had healed was a threat to the Pharisees' agenda, just as Jesus was. And because of that agenda – which was all about their own power, prestige, and position – they were heartlessly cold to the miraculous change that had taken place in his life.

But I wonder how many people have seen the look of the Pharisee on our faces. We can know that we are like them if we do not rejoice in the blessings that come to every single person we encounter – whoever and whatever they are. Are we happy for the other guy who gets a promotion when we were passed by? Or do we look for reasons to discredit him? If we are opposed to a certain candidate for public office, do we at least appreciate whatever virtues he or she displays? Or do we simply despise the human being for what he or she represents? Are we delighted when a homosexual activist receives a medication that relieves him from the suffering of AIDS? Or do we really wish he would just die? Certainly, we are never glad for the evil someone might do with the blessings God has given. But whenever people are involved, the people themselves matter very greatly.

Since we all have agendas, how do we keep our agendas from making our hearts cold? The only way is to make God's agenda the chief among our own. What is God's agenda? Jesus expressed it in two

great commandments: to love God and to love our neighbor. These are the two great ends in God's great agenda! The problem is that we love ourselves instead of loving God and other people – at least until Jesus Christ enters our lives. Jesus is the One who gives us a love for God and for others, and faith in Jesus will always produce the agenda of God's two great commands. This is why Paul said, "The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love" (Gal. 5:6). When Jesus is the light of our world – when we see in him all we ever will need – forgiveness, acceptance, glory, and power from God – only then does his agenda give us a sincere love for God and others.

## HARDENED WILLS

The third feature of these self-righteous Pharisees is their stubborn unwillingness to believe. This is made plain in John 9:18, where we read that they "did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight, until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight." This means that after speaking with the parents, the Pharisees *did* know that the miracle was true. But even then, their hardened wills would not relent, and they sought only to suppress the proof about Jesus. John tells us that "if anyone should confess Jesus to be the Christ, he was to be put out of the synagogue" (Jn. 9:22).

Why would the Pharisees so stubbornly reject Jesus, despite his saving power? The reason is that they did not want the kind of Savior he was. They resented what it implied about them. They wanted to be affirmed by God on their own merits, not forgiven through a Savior. People object to Jesus today for the same reason. They object to confess their sin before God and admit their need for the kind of Savior Jesus is, the Lamb of God who died for our sins (Jn. 1:29).

We saw earlier that the Pharisees twisted the truth because they wanted to use God's Word to challenge others, but not themselves. But if you will seriously face what the Bible says, you will find that when it talks about sin it is talking about you. "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God," the Bible says (Rom. 3:23). If you will accept this truth, then you will long for a Savior. But if you reject it, you will have to twist the truth in willful unbelief. This is why Jesus said that those who follow him will know the truth; "You



will know the truth,” he said, “and the truth will set you free” (Jn. 8:32).

## CHRISTIANS ON TRIAL

So far, we have focused our attention on the Pharisees, since they are the chief actors in this scene. But when we consider the experience of the man whose sight was restored, we learn important truths about Christians in this world.

The first is the inevitability of conflict. A follower of Jesus will be placed on trial, so don't be surprised when this happens to you. The world rejects the truth of God's Word and twists it to serve its sinful agendas. God's blessing in you offends a world that does not want to bend the knee to Jesus or acknowledge its need of salvation, and every attempt will be made to discredit God's power in your life.

Second, this man shows that believers can also be certain of God's grace when under trials. What else can explain this man's composure and strength against such dreadful opposition? James Boice observes, “Even though conflict will come, you can know that God will not abandon you in the conflict – any more than he abandoned the man who had been born blind... In his hour of need divine grace did not fail him but rather enabled him to witness a good confession.”<sup>8</sup>

Third, conflict because of your faith in Christ will bring many benefits to you. Two of these benefits stand out here. The first is that as he answered their questions and thought about what had happened, the man's knowledge of Jesus grew. All through this chapter we see a steady growth in his understanding. At first he simply referred to Jesus as “the man called Jesus” (Jn. 9:11). But as he was forced to think and talk about what happened he realized that Jesus must be a true “prophet,” that is, one who speaks and acts for God (Jn. 9:17). Later on, he comes to see that Jesus is the One sent from God (Jn. 9:33). By the end of the chapter, when Jesus returns to minister to him, the former blind man acknowledges him with a full faith in Jesus

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<sup>8</sup> James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John*, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 2:709.

as “Son of Man” and “Lord” (Jn. 9:35-38). This is what God wants for you: to come to a full understanding of Jesus and his saving work.

Furthermore, we see the man’s witness to Jesus growing sharper. More and more, the man sticks to the basics: what has Jesus done and what happened when he trusted Jesus. He made his words count and he delivered them without fear. He knew that his confession that Jesus is the Christ would get him kicked out of the synagogue – with all the dreadful social, religious, and economic implications that carried. But he had personally experienced the saving power of Christ, so he delivered his witness with clarity and without fear.

## ONE PERSON WHO MATTERED

**I**n all of these verses, there is only one really authentic person. It wasn’t the neighbors who couldn’t make sense of the healing without an expert opinion. It certainly wasn’t the Pharisees, who saw all of life through a power grid. It wasn’t the blind man’s parents, who wouldn’t risk their status even for their own son. The only authentic person in this account is the man who was healed of blindness. He alone was starting to live in truth. Why? Because his eyes had been opened. He alone was undaunted by harsh treatment. Why? Because he had gained a true hope. He was not intimidated by abuse. Why? Because he had experienced something real. He could tell what was false and contrived, and its influence on him had died.

There was only one truly authentic person present, and for him there was only one thing – one person – that really mattered. He did not seem to care what his neighbors thought; he did not mind how the Pharisees treated him; he was not torn up because his parents let him down. What mattered to him was Jesus.

Why Jesus? Because Jesus had opened his eyes, when no one else could. Jesus will do that for you, if you will trust in him. Jesus showed him there is power from God and therefore a reason to hope. Jesus has power for you, too, if you will walk with him in faith. And Jesus mattered because he was so real. Jesus had no agenda but truth and grace. Do you want to lead a real life – one that rises above the cold hypocrisy of this world? It will require you not to worry about the opinions of others, the hardships of life, or exclusion from the in-

crowd. But if you will make Jesus the one person who really matters to you, he will open your eyes to the light; he will be your light to walk no more in darkness.