

One

THE COUNTERFEIT

Sadly, too often I listen to Christians talk, or read what they write on their social media, and I am struck by the fact that they sound more like the Pharisees than they do like Jesus. The Pharisees represent the worst of religion in the New Testament. They are often seen battling with Jesus, judging, condemning, and stubbornly refusing to soften their hearts to Jesus' entreaties because of their absolute certainty in their righteousness and right beliefs. Yet they were people of deep commitment, and they were committed to zealous religious practices like Bible reading, praying, fasting, and tithing—applying their giving even down to the herbs in their garden. Here is the tricky part: two thousand years later, we know them as the bad guys of the story. But to the majority of the Jewish people in their day, they were the guys in the white hats who everyone looked up to, respected, and sought to emulate.

Today it is possible for us who read our Bible, pray, go to church, and do a host of other positive and accepted spiritual activities to have attitudes that more closely resemble the Pharisees than Jesus. And yet we may view ourselves as the good guys, just like the religious leaders of Jesus' day. How do we know when we are slipping into these patterns that rob us of authentic spiritual life?

Let's look closely at the Pharisees so we can see when and where this attitude of religion is creeping into our spiritual journey. I will, at times, refer to this as the "spirit" of religion. I am not specifically talking about a demonic spirit—though I will say that people who fall into these patterns of religion may have demonic spirits influencing them and even need deliverance. Mostly, I am referring to a set of beliefs, behaviors, and attitudes that are toxic to authentic spiritual depth and intimacy with God. These are the things that characterized the Pharisees who opposed Jesus and misrepresented God's heart to those they interacted with.

Let's examine six key characteristics of religion so we can break free from its clutches.

Fear

First, religion is rooted in fear. Legalism, for example, is a fear-based attempt to control people. Legalism takes the holiness standard of God and adds to it because the legalist is afraid God's standard isn't good enough. For example, God makes it clear that we should not be drunk. Drunkenness is a sin. Paul says in Ephesians 5:18, "Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead be filled with the Spirit." As Paul points out, the problem with drunkenness is that it

leads to poor choices in life. Drunk driving often leads to innocent people being killed. Drunkenness sometimes causes people to compromise their moral standard and sleep with someone other than their spouse or to force sex upon someone who is saying no. Drunkenness (addiction) is the number one predictor in our society that someone will grow up in a home afflicted with domestic violence. This is why God commands us not to be drunk; God doesn't want us to get drunk because He loves us, and He loves those around us.

With all this said, the Bible does not say that you cannot drink. The legalist, however, is afraid that if people drink, they will get drunk, and debauchery and horrible consequences will result. So they state, firmly, "You cannot drink." It is a fear-based holiness standard that one-ups the holiness standard of God and causes us to try to control people. We don't trust people to make good decisions, so we seek to control them.

The Pharisees were notorious for laying heavy burdens on people because of their fear-based controlling religious standards. Jesus said of the Pharisees and teachers of the law, "They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them" (Matthew 23:4). They used a "catch and condemn" form of religion, not only coming out of their own unprocessed fears, but seeking to instill fear in others so they would be shamed into following the Pharisees' moral standards. Matthew says, "Then the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap him in his words" (Matthew 22:15). The Pharisees often laid traps for Jesus; they tried to catch him saying something wrong so they could condemn him. This was their approach to religion. They didn't have a sense of self-acceptance because they were shame-based legalists, so

the only thing they had to offer others was condemnation. They saw Jesus as a threat to their power and control, so they tried to catch him doing things that were wrong so they could condemn him before all the people.

Romans 8:1 tells us, “Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” Jesus said, “For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him” (John 3:17). Jesus’ purpose in coming was to release us from condemnation. He doesn’t have any condemnation or judgment to offer; He has come into the world to save us from sin, judgment, and condemna-

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tion. His arms are open to anyone who will humbly come to Him. This catch-and-condemn attitude of the Pharisees is not the heart of Jesus. It is the spirit of religion. Jesus wasn’t focused on pointing out everyone’s wrongdoing; He came to offer people a path to for-

giveness and hope. He came to display God’s love.

Often when we are infected by the spirit of religion, we struggle to feel accepted before God. We wrestle with shame. Shame makes us feel like we aren’t good enough; if people knew us, they would not accept us. We are broken, damaged, unlovable, and irreparable. When we feel shame, we usually tend to be hard on ourselves, hard on others, or both. The next time you find yourself being hard on yourself or feeling like you need to crawl across glass to come back to God after falling into a besetting sin, recognize that you are acting on fear: the fear that you aren’t good enough to be accepted in Christ. Paul said, “The Spirit you received does not make you slaves so you

live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship” (Romans 8:15). You have been adopted in Christ and have firstborn son status—you are an heir of God and a coheir with Christ (Romans 8:17). Don’t let the enemy reduce you into religious slavery again.

Our judgment of others most often comes out of our unprocessed wounds. Our judgments reveal more about us than they do about others. We judge others because we haven’t come to peace with God and ourselves through Jesus’ death. We know that we are forgiven, but we still don’t feel forgiven. We know that we are loved, but we don’t feel loved. We know we are accepted, but we are still striving to gain God’s approval. We have hurts and wounds that are festering within us, and when someone bumps up against us, we judge them through the unprocessed pain in our soul. The problem is that often we are so used to the pain that it has become normal to us, and we do not realize it is tainting our judgments. The next time you catch yourself thinking negatively and critically about another person, ask yourself: *Where is that coming from? What unprocessed wound of mine may have led me to these negative judgments?*

Fear also makes us self-centered. The Pharisees were consumed with themselves. They felt threatened by Jesus because of His growing success and fruitfulness. They were afraid that Jesus’ growing popularity would diminish their importance in the eyes of people. They loved the applause of the people, but now Jesus was attracting the crowds. Even Pilate recognized that it was because of envy that they wanted to kill Jesus (Matthew 27:18). Our envy of others comes out of our own fear—fear that someone else will surpass us in success, in rec-

ognition, in love. Our fear causes us to be self-focused and lose our way.

Fear gets us focused on minutia and causes us to miss the big picture. The Pharisees were focused on the little things. Jesus said to them, “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill, and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy, and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel” (Matthew 23:23, 24). When we become religious, our fear-based approach to life and God causes us to miss the big picture and obsess about the wrong things. We dig in our heels on secondary issues. We die on the wrong hills, but we don’t know we are doing it. We make a living attacking others for what they do wrong or for their wrong beliefs, and we become more known for what we stand against than for who we stand for. We feel we are in the right because we are unwilling to humble ourselves and admit when we are in the wrong. We feel threatened, irritated, and aggravated by people’s behaviors and beliefs, and we don’t really know why; we just assume it’s because we are right and they are wrong. But Jesus wasn’t that way; the Pharisees were.

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Jesus said the main thing is to love God and love people. Yet some people, in their fear, are seeking to guard their version

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of the truth, but in their effort to hold onto the truth let go of love. I've had people attack me because they claim I am a false teacher over the subject of deliverance ministries. If we sat down and could have a reasonable discussion, we would likely agree on every single major doctrinal issue: who Jesus is, the doctrine of the Trinity, the inspiration of the Scriptures, salvation through faith in Jesus and His work on the cross only, and so on. Yet they cannot allow themselves to have an honorable and loving conversation with someone who disagrees with them on certain secondary doctrinal themes. Often our fear causes us to lose the big picture, lose sight of the most important things, and become ungracious, all in the name of God, over smaller doctrinal issues that do not take up much space in the New Testament. That's religion.

Religious people struggle with a core of fear. They are motivated by fear. Fear is a powerful and primal emotion, so when it gets stirred up, we often become heated, angry, defensive, and lose our way. Often at Soul Care Conferences during a question-and-answer time, I will remark to a person that their question is motivated by fear. People will ask me, for example: "How do you protect yourself from the enemy when you are doing all these conferences and all these deliverances?" Or "What if you're doing deliverance and a spirit jumps on you?" Or "If we are doing deliverance, will a demon leave a person and enter us or our children?" Do you hear the fear in those questions? Do you think Jesus ever asked himself any of those questions? Do you think Jesus wandered around and fearfully thought: How will I protect myself from all the demonic attacks because I am doing deliverance ministries? Will the demons jump on me? Will they attack my mother? Jesus never asked himself questions like these because they are rooted in

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fear. Here is a key principle to remember: *When we ask ourselves a question that Jesus never would have asked himself, that is most often a fear-based religious question.* If we are going to break free from religion, we have to recognize how often we are motivated by fear. If we fail to recognize it, we are in bondage to it.

If you are beginning to see that you have some fear motivating you, then you have to frequently stop and ask yourself: Is this thought, question, action, desire, or emotional reaction motivated by fear? Would Jesus think this way or act this way? Be honest, and don't let fear rule your life—it will always make you religious.

If we have read our Bible or gone to church for a while, we know the solution to overcoming fear. Many of us have even memorized this verse: "There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear" (1 John 4:18). But if you quote the verse, and don't overcome the fear, that's just religion. If you quote the verse, but don't live it out, you are missing out on the freedom Jesus has made available to you. Knowledge without transformation leads to religion. You are substituting your knowledge of the truth for authentic, victorious Christian living. So it's not enough to know it; you have to live it. The verse goes on to say: "The one who fears is not made perfect in love" (1 John 4:18). If we are still wrestling with fear-based questions, fear-based motives, and fear-based actions, it's because love has not been perfected in us. We have the right words, we

know the right verses, but we haven't figured out how to live out our faith so that we're experiencing Christ's victories. And that is the very nature of religion: what we know hasn't made its way into our *living*. We have to live it, not just declare it, quote it, and talk about it. Earlier in the text John said, "And so we know and rely on the love God has for us" (1 John 4:16). See, it isn't enough to know it, we must learn how to rely upon God's love in such a way that it drives out fear. That is when we have moved from religion to authentic experience.

In my books *Soul Care*, *Spiritual Authority*, and *The Soul Care Leader*, I talk about how I learned to rely on the love of God. There is more information there if you need a breakthrough in this area. But the short version is I learned to hold onto the truth of God's love by renewing my mind with the truth, in Scripture, about who I am in Christ, and by listening to the Spirit's testimony that I am deeply loved by God (Romans 8:14). I learned to live like a deeply loved person by relying on God's love day by day.

I had a fear of not being loved that caused me to wall up with silence in my early years of marriage. I would have a desire or expectation or goal that Jen wasn't meeting, and I would feel hurt, and I would choose silence. It was a wall of self-protection, and it was manipulative, and I had to get to the place where I learned to rely on God's love and give up my silence. I didn't give myself permission to continue to act in these silent, manipulative ways. I apologized to Jen, asked her forgiveness, and gave her permission to call me on it if I did it again. And I learned to rely on God's love.

When I could feel the silent walls coming up within my soul, instead of acting on those emotions, I went to Jesus. I sat in His presence. I renewed my mind and listened to the Spirit

testify that He loved me. Then I asked myself and God: “How would a deeply loved person act?” I submitted myself to God and did what He asked: I went and had a direct and honest conversation with Jen without resorting to silence. I learned how to ask her directly for what I wanted, without demanding that she do it, or punishing her with silence if she didn’t do it. Day by day I learned to rely on God’s love, and it drove out that fear of not being loved.

Too often in the church we ask the wrong question. We ask people, “Do you know you are loved by God?” If people have read their Bible and gone to church, they will know the right answer. But it’s the wrong question. The right question is: *Are you living like a deeply loved person in all your human interactions?* That’s when you have broken free from fear and are living out your faith in an authentic way. If you are still defensive, passive-aggressive, and insecure, then you know you are loved by God, but you aren’t living like a deeply loved person. Lots of people know they are loved by God and yet live like unloved people—they are insecure, full of self-doubt, defensive, slow to apologize, slow to admit wrongs, always have to be right, are anxious, easily offended, or some combination, or many, of the above. James says, “Faith without deeds is dead.” If you know you are loved by God, but you’re living like an unloved person, your faith is dead to you; it isn’t making any difference in your freedom and fullness in life. We have to integrate the love of God into our daily existence so we live like deeply loved people. That’s authentic faith!

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Sadly, Christians are often the most fear-based people I know, and this is utterly unbecoming a son or daughter of the King. We can overcome in Christ. How big a role does fear play in your life? Where is fear motivating you? Are you living under judgment or condemnation because of fear? Are you living like a deeply loved person? Has love been perfected in your life sufficiently to drive out fear-based responses to life's unwelcome circumstances?

Pride

Second, religion is characterized by pride. The Pharisees were too proud to examine their faulty worldview, and that led them to miss who Jesus was. They were too proud to admit when they were wrong and too proud to learn from Jesus or others. If you are only open to learn from those you already agree with, you aren't learning much.

We often become proud in our religious practices; we take pride in our devotional lifestyle of Bible reading, prayer, church attendance, and service, just like the Pharisees did. They loved public prayer and the admiration of people. Jesus said of them, "Everything they do is done for people to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long; they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; they love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to have people call them 'Rabbi'" (Matthew 23:5-7). But if we take pride in our religious practices, we will inevitably lose our way on the journey to intimacy with God, because God opposes the proud. These practices will become an end in themselves, not a means to an end. They will become a measure of our maturity, not an aide

to our maturity. They will become a means to be seen as spiritual rather than to develop true depth with God. The purpose of reading your Bible is not to know the Bible; the purpose of reading your Bible is to encounter the living God. God gave us the Bible so we could know Him personally, not know about Him.

When you get to Heaven there won't be any need for a Bible because you will have God Himself. If we read our Bible without encountering God, we will likely grow proud of our disciplines and our Bible knowledge, and yet grow distant from God because of our pride.

The Pharisees complained to Jesus that the disciples were not following the traditions of the elders; they weren't ceremonially washing their hands properly before they ate, the Pharisees protested. Jesus pointed out how they twisted the intent of the law for their own purposes. And then he quoted Isaiah and applied it to them when he said, "You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you: 'These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain'" (Matthew 15:7-9). It is far too easy to allow our religious practices to become a scorecard to measure our maturity rather than a compass to lead us to encountering God Himself. Sometimes the result is that we read our Bible and pray because that's what good Christians do, but we aren't encountering God in the text; we are gaining knowledge and improving our opinion of ourselves as spiritual people.

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Again, too often we ask the wrong question. We ask someone, “Are you spending time with God?” The right question: “Is your spiritual rhythm working?” Your rhythm is what you do on a daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly basis to grow in intimacy with God and in Christlike maturity. Are your practices of Bible reading, prayer, fasting, service, and the like producing spiritual maturity? Are you becoming more loving? Do you love God and love people more this year than you did last year? If not, you may be doing the right things, but you may be growing more religious in the process. Jesus said the first and most important law is love. So be honest: are you becoming more loving? Would the people around you tell you that you are? Ask them, and don’t defend yourself if they don’t think so! Do you feel peace and joy? The fruit of the Spirit begins with love, joy, and peace. So, are your spiritual efforts making you experience more love, joy, and peace? Are you experiencing more of God’s presence, hearing his voice more clearly and frequently in your life? Jesus said that His sheep would hear His voice (John 10:27). Are you representing Jesus well to those around you? When they are with you, do they love Him more?

When we are more concerned with being right than we are with being in right relationship, then our spiritual journey is amiss. When we are more argumentative than we are loving, our spiritual practices aren’t truly helpful. I was a part of a Bible study when I was in my twenties. It was a multigenerational, multidenominational group that was truly enriching. The group was great for me spiritually and relationally in the year between college and seminary. After my first year of seminary, I went back to the group to visit my friends. We ended up in a theological debate over Calvinism versus Arminianism. No

one was disrespectful, but after the debate, after everyone else had gone home, the leader of the group very gently and graciously spoke to me. He said that he felt I had lost some of my passion for Jesus in my zeal to gain knowledge. I had become more theologically astute, but less on fire for God. I was getting caught up in the learning, and my theological opinions, and I was missing the big picture. I went home and repented. The most important things are to love Jesus and love people. If all our learning doesn't make us more loving, something is seriously off in our souls, and we are becoming more like the Pharisees and less like Jesus.

A.W. Tozer, in his book *The Pursuit of God*, wrote, "The world is perishing for lack of the knowledge of God, and the church is famishing for want of His Presence. The instant cure of most of our religious ills would be to enter the Presence in spiritual experience, to become suddenly aware that we are in God and God is in us. This would lift us out of our pitiful narrowness and cause our hearts to be enlarged" (Tozer, *The Pursuit of God*, Christian Publications, Camp Hill, 1993, p. 36).

We need to have more than knowledge if we are going to become people of true depth; we must have encounters with the living Christ that lead us to Christlike transformation. Paul said, "Knowledge puffs up while love builds up" (1 Corinthians 8:1). When we encounter Jesus, we are changed by His love, and we become like Him. When we grow in knowledge without encountering Jesus, we become proud and all too often misrepresent Jesus to those around us.

Speaking of the early church fathers and their shaping encounters with God, Tozer wrote: "They habitually spoke with spiritual authority. They had been in the presence of God and

they reported what they saw there. They were prophets, not scribes, for the scribe tells us what he has read, and the prophet tells us what he has seen. The distinction is not an imaginary one . . . we are overrun today with orthodox scribes, but the prophets, where are they? The hard voice of the scribe sounds over evangelicalism, but the church waits for the tender voice of the saint who has penetrated the veil and has gazed with inward eye upon the wonder that is God. And yet, thus to penetrate to push in sensitive living experience into the Holy Presence, is a privilege open to every child of God” (Tozer, *The Pursuit of God*, p. 40).

How can we represent Jesus well if we haven’t encountered Him but only know about Him? How can our flame burn hot for Jesus unless we are encountering His holy presence? We may burn hot for our theological opinions, our biblical interpretations, and our ministerial contributions, but that is not

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the same as burning hot for Jesus. My greatest passion in life is to love Jesus and represent Him well to everyone I encounter. I need to know Him to do that, not know about Him. It is in my encounters with Jesus that I have been transformed. I can’t represent Jesus well without being marked by His presence. It is in my experiences with Jesus that I have fallen in love with Him more and more.

If we are going to break free from religion, we must develop authentic humility. God is irresistibly attracted to the contrite

of heart, but the proud walk alone. Authentic humility begins with honesty, ends with responsibility, and somewhere in the middle is death to self. When we die to self, we stop making it all about us, and we make it all about Jesus. Proud people cannot admit they are wrong. They spin, defend, blame, justify, and deny. Proud people are too wrapped up in their own opinions and feel the need to prove they are right. Often this is rooted in shame and insecurity, but shame is merely pride wrapped in self-disgust. Shame, pride, and insecurity all make life too much about us. It is not easy to admit wrongdoing. It is difficult to humble ourselves; it goes against our sinful nature.

In the early years of marriage, when Jen and I hit our biggest marriage snag, one of the primary things that was preventing us from moving forward was our inability to humble ourselves and admit wrongdoing. I kept defending myself. One day the Lord spoke to me in my inner being and said, “Only insecure people defend themselves. Every time you defend yourself you are deflecting the truth I offer to help you grow.” I had to learn how to cultivate humility and own my part. I had to resist my feelings of defensiveness and die to self, and instead listen and learn to take ownership for my wrongs.

The good news is that I have grown. My daughter Darcy called me one day and said, “Dad, I got angry with the child I was babysitting today. I called him over and held him in my arms and apologized to him. We cried together.” Then she paused and said, “I learned that from you, Dad. You never did something wrong as a parent except I remember you apologizing for it.” I think the two most important things you can do as a parent are, first, to demonstrate love and communicate love to your children; second, to apologize when you blow it.

Now, I wish I could tell you I have reached the point where I don't feel defensive anymore, but sadly, that is not true. Recently, someone attacked me on a public platform, and my immediate reaction was anger and defensiveness. I vented for a few minutes to Jen. Then I apologized to her, got back on the true foundation of Jesus' love for me, blessed those who cursed me, and let it go. It took me ten minutes to get past it. I would love to get to the place where I am humble enough that I feel no anger, defensiveness, or angst when I am criticized, but I am not there yet. I long for that day. In the meantime, I try not to respond in the moment. I don't counterattack, I don't defend myself; I do my best to avoid all imaginary conversations with the person in my head. I process it with Jesus and get back to living off my identity in Christ as a deeply loved child of God.

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I'm not the man I want to be, but I'm not the man I used to be either. I used to stew over these sorts of things for days, holding imaginary conversations with the person in my head. Now, most of the time, I can get past them in a matter of minutes. I am making definite progress making life less about me. That is the way of the authentic spiritual journey. We love God more, we love people more, and we make life less about us.