



Shaped to Serve

Sunday, March 12, 2017

Sadducees and Pharisees: The Legalistic Bureaucrats

Some Background

Think Democrats and Republicans or Whigs and Tories. Think differing denominations of the Christian church. Think opposing parties of any kind, and you've got the right frame of mind to discover an interesting group of ancestors.

The Sadducees and Pharisees were competing political and religious parties in Jerusalem whose conflicts dated back as far as 500 B.C.E. and extended well into the time of Jesus' ministry. At the root of their quarrels was each party's distinct vision of Judaism.

The Sadducees were a small but very influential group of priests who represented the authority of priestly privileges and the more aristocratic families. They based their practices on the teachings of the Pentateuch, recognized only the written letter of the Torah, emphasized the importance of the temple, and rejected the notion of life after death. They were part of the old, established upper class and made their nobility known.

The Pharisees—the largest group of religious leaders in Jesus' day—were less concerned with the temple. The Pharisees emphasized the importance of Mosaic laws and prophetic values. They were open to rabbinic interpretations in addition to the written texts of the Torah, as well as the possibility of an afterlife or resurrection.

Despite their contrasting views of political and religious propriety in Jerusalem, both groups did agree on one thing—Jesus of Nazareth was trouble. His messianic following rubbed them all the wrong way. Jesus' ministry threatened the existing structure that was advantageous to the Sadducees. The Pharisees watched jealously as people began to follow Jesus. At first, they did their best, without success, to trap him with tricks and riddles. The Sadducees attempted to expose Jesus' position on the afterlife and resurrection (Mark 12:18-27). The Pharisees tried to play gotcha with Jesus' position on

paying taxes to Rome (Matthew 22:15-22). Ultimately, the groups joined forces and conspired with the temple leaders to have Jesus silenced for good.

Teacher Homework: Read some key passages about the Sadducees and Pharisees: Matthew 9:9-13, 22:15-22 / Luke 6:6-11 / John 3:1-21, 7:45-52, 19:39.

Youth Mindset: Youth are hypersensitive to the actions and reactions of the seemingly legalistic authority figures in their lives. Look at Nicodemus' struggle as you help kids distinguish between positive and negative visions of authority.

Opening Activity

Play Three Headed Monster by inviting 3 students to line-up shoulder-to-shoulder where everyone can see them. Ask a simple question such as “what did you have for breakfast today?” The monster responds one head and one word at a time until the answer is complete. Form new monsters as you move to tougher questions. (How do we breathe? Why should we believe in Jesus? etc.) Talk about the way multiple opinions complicate meaningful answers.

Watch the Video

Show the video: “Sadducees and Pharisees: The Legalistic Bureaucrats.”

- What surprised you about the Sadducees and Pharisees?
- What does it feel like when you are competing with another person or another group? How do people form groups and alliances?
- Does it really matter what social group you are in?

Rules are Rules

The Pharisees had a habit of turning simple, straightforward rules into overly specific and minute details. They meant well, but sometimes they lost perspective. What might have caused the Pharisees to become so finicky? Ask the group for examples of the most finicky rules they have ever encountered. Come up with some familiar rules as well: no horseplay at the pool, chew with your mouth closed, wear your seatbelt, be home by curfew, clean your room. Have them work with others to break down each rule into as many hyper-specific, finicky, commands as they can. Share a few with the whole group.

- How can hyper-rules blur the original intent of a rule? How do hyper-rules get in the way of our beliefs today?
- How did the beliefs and practices of the Pharisees and Sadducees keep them from believing in Jesus?

Closing Ritual

Nicodemus was a Pharisee, but also very close with Jesus. He met with him under cover of darkness to discuss with Jesus about his purpose and God's calling. Why do you suppose Nicodemus met with Jesus under cover of darkness? Do you think that Nicodemus felt like he was pulled in multiple directions because of his friendship and desire to learn more from Jesus?

Share in "highs and lows" from the week. Prayer together, this week under cover of darkness, asking for Jesus to enter into the space, knowing that our prayers are heard by our Loving God, who intimately cares about each of us.

Take-Home Question

Pray for people in authority this week. Do you think that people in authority are using laws to help or hurt people? Give examples of each, and whether you believe them to be right or wrong, pray for them just the same.