

for the Pharisees and Scribes? After all, for the Jews forgiving sins was only something God could do and Jesus' actions would have been tantamount to blasphemy.

### **Jesus, Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathaea**

If it was not for a few passing comments in the Gospels and Jesus meeting with Nicodemus (Jn.3) a Pharisee, then the impression might be of a complete condemnation of all Pharisees and Scribes. However, we know from Luke's gospel (ch.7, 11 and 14) that Jesus accepted invitations to the house of Pharisees and it is clear that some Pharisees and scribes did come to believe in Jesus, although they did so in secret (Jn.12). Some are even shown as warning Jesus about a plot to kill him by Herod Antipas (Lk.13), Nicodemus is shown as trying to present a defence of Jesus (Jn.7); while it is revealed that another member of the Jewish Council or Sanhedrin, Joseph of Arimathaea, had not consented to its actions over Jesus' death (Lk.23). He is mentioned as collecting Jesus' body for burial in all four Gospels.



### **Jesus and the Sadducees**

The Sadducees are mentioned by name much less frequently in the Gospels than the Pharisees and Scribes. However, they also receive condemnation from Jesus (Mtt.16) 'beware the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees' (although in the parallel passage in Mk.8 and Lk.12 they are not mentioned by name). Matthew also presents John the Baptist condemning their behaviour, calling them and the Pharisees a 'brood of vipers'. In several passages Jesus condemns their leaders under the general expression 'the chief priests'.

The only passage in which they appear prominently under the name Sadducees is to ask Jesus about the resurrection in the context of levirate marriage (Mtt.22 //Mk.12 // Lk.20), and then Jesus criticises their lack of understanding of the Law, but again this criticism appears in the context of his development of the law.

## **Jesus in the Gospels**

### **12. Jesus and the Scribes, Pharisees and Sadducees**



### **Questions For Reflection**

1. Was Jesus' teaching really any different from that of the Pharisees?
2. As a Jew, should not Jesus have observed the Sabbath?
3. Is the parable of the Pharisee and Tax collector relevant today?

## Conflict with the Establishment

A striking feature of Jesus' ministry is its clash with the guardians of the traditional order, the **Scribes, the Pharisees and the Sadducees**.



**The Scribes** were the intellectuals of the Jewish community, and guardians of the Law and its interpretation. As such they had the title Rabbi. **The Pharisees** were a lay religious party or sect within Judaism that revered the Law but also believed in the oral tradition. Many Pharisees were also scribes and they interpreted the law in a very detailed and mechanistic way. **The Sadducees** were the priests, responsible for the Temple, the ritual sacrifices and worship on the Jewish feast days. They only followed the Torah or written law and disagreed with Pharisees on several issues, notably the existence of angels, belief in resurrection and a day of judgement.

One important area of concern for the Pharisees was the fact that Jesus seemed to avoid the requirement of the Commandments to keep holy the Sabbath day. They are depicted in the Gospels as checking on him to see if he would perform any miracles on that day (Mtt.12, the cure of the man with a withered hand, Jn.5 the cure of the sick man at the pool of Bethesda, Jn.9 the cure of the blind man), or do any kind of work (Mtt.12, his disciples pick corn).

They were also concerned that Jesus' and his disciples failed to follow the requirements of ritual washing (Mtt.15, Lk.11).

On these occasions Jesus stresses the importance of the spirit of the law over its letter, **'if you understood the meaning of the words 'mercy pleases me not sacrifice' you would not have condemned the blameless'** and **'it is permitted to do good on the Sabbath'** and **'you have made God's word ineffective by your traditions, hypocrites!'**

## Jesus Condemns the Pharisees

Jesus' denunciation of Pharisaic morality reaches its climax in Matthew 23. He accuses them of hypocrisy, of not doing what they preach, and of vanity, dressing splendidly to attract attention and taking the place of honour at banquets and the synagogue.



Matthew places a sevenfold indictment against them in the preaching of Jesus, accusing them of corrupting converts, of valuing an offering over the sacred place of the offering, of failing to adhere to the spirit and most important aspects of the Law 'justice and mercy and good faith', and of being hypocritical in intention and behaviour.

Luke (ch.18) presents Jesus addressing those who 'prided themselves on being upright and despised everyone else' with his parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector in the Temple praying.

It is clear that Jesus wants a morality based on good motives not on outward appearances or scrupulous adherence to unimportant details, and it must be based on a living love of God and neighbour that upholds the most sacred aspects of the Law.

## Jesus and Jewish Belief

The Pharisees are also depicted questioning Jesus about aspects of the Law and Jewish belief: whether divorce is permitted (Mtt.19), where Jesus recognises the Mosaic principle but argues it away; what is the greatest commandment (Mtt.22); when is the coming of the Kingdom (Lk.17); does not adultery deserve punishment by stoning? (Jn.8).

Of particular outrage to the Pharisees and Scribes is Jesus' claim to forgive sins, which they considered a blasphemy (Mtt.9 // Mk.2 // Lk.5, the cure of the paralytic; Lk.7, the woman who anoints Jesus' feet). Yet, is this really a surprise and should not we have some sympathy