

When “Book, Chapter, Verse” Becomes A Bad Thing

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Few Bible characters take as much of a beating from our pulpits today as the Pharisees. It seems everyone wants his turn in taking a swipe at them. To be labeled a modern-day “Pharisee” is considered one of the worst things you could be called. We almost can’t even utter the name “Pharisee” without scowling.

Jesus was pretty severe with them too, calling them “hypocrites” (Mark 7:6), “sons of the devil” (John 8:44), and “whitewashed tombs” (Matt. 23:27). He pointed at them when raising the standard of righteousness for His followers: “For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5:20).

The Pharisees loved to debate the technicalities of the Law of Moses. They were so

preoccupied with hair-splitting that they lost sight of the spirit behind the law. Thus, Jesus rebuked them:

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. (Matt. 23:23)

Jesus did not discount the importance of observing the “minor” details (are *any* of God’s commandments small matters?). He did, however, criticize the Pharisees for forgetting the foundational principles upon which the law was built.

The Pharisees were commended for their meticulous keeping of the law and the prophets (Matt. 23:2-3, 23). Like them, we too must care about the details (Isa. 42:21; John 14:15; 1 John 5:3). However, while the Pharisees diligently studied the Scriptures and knew lots of facts (John 5:39), they “did not have the love of God within them” (John 5:42). **They reduced the law of Moses, with its 613 commandments, to a cold, legal document with loopholes to be exploited.**

They saw the absence of specific commands in Scripture as *permission*. “The law doesn’t say it’s wrong to hate my brother; it only says I can’t kill him” (Matt. 5:21). “The law doesn’t say it’s wrong to lust after a woman; it only says I can’t commit fornication with her” (Matt. 5:27). “The law doesn’t say it’s wrong to divorce my spouse; it only says I have to do it through the proper legal channels” (Matt. 5:31). “The law says my oaths should be made in the name of God, therefore it must be okay to lie if I’m not under oath” (Matt. 5:33).

The Pharisees totally missed the point of God’s law.

Just like the Pharisees, many people today point to the absence of specific commands in the Bible as *permission*. “The Bible doesn’t say I have to go to *every* church service.” “The Bible doesn’t say it’s a *sin* to gamble.” “The Bible doesn’t say how long my shorts have to be or how loose my jeans have to fit.” These are the words Pharisees utter. Such statements demonstrate a failure to see the foundational principles behind God’s law.

The Pharisees weren’t wrong for keeping the law. They were wrong for being hypocrites about it – claiming to be God’s people when their hearts were *anything but* (Matt. 15:8).

How ugly it is when we pretend to care about keeping God's law when we're really just longing for *license*.

After listing several specific sins that will keep someone out of heaven, the apostle Paul concludes the list with the words, "and things like these" (Gal. 5:21). In other words, "You're smart enough to know what kinds of things disappoint God, even if they aren't directly stated in Scripture." God doesn't want us to limit our faith to "book, chapter, verse." He wants us to go *deeper*.

Woe to Christians if we ever stop caring about the explicit and implicit commands of the Bible. We should demand "book, chapter, verse" preaching and continue trying to be "people of the Book." **But true people of the Book don't always need "book, chapter, verse" to know what displeases God.** The Bible doesn't stop with a period at the end of the book of Revelation. It must go on to change us into holier, righteous people - people who obey God's Spirit (not just His letter) because we *love* Him (1 Cor. 13:1-3; John 14:24).