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HOSTILITY TOWARD JESUS: PRELUDE TO THE PASSION



By the final Passover of Jesus's life, the plans had been laid for His death. Although He had evaded being captured or being discredited on previous trips to Jerusalem, efforts were now focused to bring closure to what the leaders by this time had convinced themselves was a dangerous threat to the people for whom they had responsibility. At this point the hostility of the elite had coalesced into a plan for action that was well known among the pilgrims coming to Jerusalem for the Passover festival: "And the Jews' passover was nigh at hand: and many went out of the country up to Jerusalem before the passover, to purify themselves. Then sought they for Jesus, and spake among themselves, as they stood in the temple, What think ye, that he will not come to the feast? Now both the chief

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priests and the Pharisees had given a commandment, that, if any man knew where he were, he should shew it, that they might take him” (John 11:55–57).

In our reading of the New Testament, we naturally assume this hostility toward Jesus is consistently found throughout all the Gospels. Here I would like to explore some of the background that helps explain why the Pharisees in particular had initial concerns about the Savior’s actions and then how, over time, those concerns developed into hostility and defensiveness. Seeing how hostility and defensiveness develop in interactions with Jesus recorded in the New Testament can help us better understand the opposition the Savior faced from the leaders of the Jews in the last part of His life.

While we have more records of encounters between the Savior and the Pharisees than between the Savior and any other group in the New Testament, it is important to recognize that it was not the Pharisees who were solely responsible for the efforts to end the Savior’s life. The chief priests and the Sadducees had their own religious and political concerns that led them to oppose Christ and develop hostility toward Him over time.

The Pharisees were split by different schools of thought, and those who lived in different areas were not directly connected to one another. Thus, interactions in Galilee may not have had an immediate influence on the feelings of those in Jerusalem.¹ In this paper I will, however, focus on the accounts of interactions between the Savior and the Pharisees with hope of clarifying how people seeking to be loyal to the truth may become hardened and hostile when they are challenged to rise to a higher level. In giving an

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in-depth look into one of the groups that were influential during the life of Jesus, I hope we can see a general pattern of righteous people deciding how to respond to a call to repent and become more holy.

In covenanting with the children of Israel, the Lord commanded, “Ye shall be holy; for I am holy” (Leviticus 11:44). The effort to seek holiness and separate themselves from the world around them was both a challenge and a source of identity for the Israelites throughout their history. This pursuit of holiness continued beyond Old Testament times, into the intertestamental era and the time of the Savior’s mortal ministry. During the intertestamental period and the life of Jesus, hellenized culture pressured the Jews to leave the standards of the covenant. Their distinctiveness in diet, circumcision, and Sabbath-day observance were held up to ridicule. One small Jewish group that actively resisted this pressure was the Pharisees. Their efforts focused on ritual purity in food preparation and eating as well as careful observance of the Sabbath. Their strict efforts to live the law of Moses and bring the holiness of the temple into the lives of all the Jews grew out of this defensive position. In their efforts to find holiness, they also criticized others who did not keep their standards.

The New Testament accounts of the Pharisees’ critique of the Savior and His followers can be better understood when seen in this historical context. Their beliefs about the nature of holiness help to explain their initial concerns about the Savior. When Jesus was criticized for His failure to follow the Pharisees’ understanding of holiness, He responded to their critique with teachings that pointed to the true nature of holiness. Interestingly, He frequently

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used the words of Old Testament prophets to make His point, teaching that the divine nature of holiness had already been revealed. As He gave these rebukes to His critics, they were in a position to change their perspective and seek a higher form of holiness. But, as with all inspired chastisement, they were also free to harden their hearts and resist His teaching. As we shall see, for the Pharisees who debated with Jesus the general pattern was that of resisting the call to repentance. When these Pharisees refused to rethink what it meant to be holy, their defensiveness turned into hostility and fueled their active resistance to the Savior and His call to holiness.

THE PHARISEES' VISION OF HOLINESS

The Pharisees' opposition to Jesus centered on critiques of food practices and Sabbath observance that went against their understanding of true Judaism. At the center of the Pharisees' concern was their confidence in what the Gospels refer to as "the traditions of the elders" (Matthew 15:2; Mark 7:5), also known as "ancestral tradition."² A central focus of the law of Moses concerned the sacrifices in the temple and the strict rules governing the ritual purity of the priests while they officiated and ate at the temple. While other Jews of this time believed that these regulations in Leviticus applied only to the priests in the temple, the Pharisees' goal was to bring the holiness of the temple into every home through applying these laws more broadly.

The Pharisees had recently developed a vision of what they believed the law of Moses meant for the holiness of all Jews. The Pharisees' revolutionary claim was that the ritual

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temple holiness described in the law was God’s will for all Jews, not just the priests.³ All could obtain this holiness by eating “secular food (ordinary, everyday meals) in a state of ritual purity *as if one were a Temple priest*. The Pharisees thus arrogated to themselves—and to all Jews equally—the status of Temple priests.”⁴

This desire to bring the purity and holiness of the temple into their homes meant that the Pharisees had to take very seriously a number of things associated with food and eating. It led the Pharisees to focus on the purification of vessels and the washing of hands to make the meals ritually pure. Ritual purity also explains their emphasis on tithes because for them proper tithing of food made the “food ritually acceptable.”⁵ To keep this level of holiness, it was also essential not to eat with those who did not observe these laws.⁶ This combined effort to keep the ritual holiness of the family table is known as table fellowship. As we shall see, much of the Pharisees’ initial opposition to Jesus arose over questions of His or His disciples’ food practices, particularly as they reflected a breach of table-fellowship regulations. Their critique was that they were not following the standards of holiness.

When we see how the Pharisees sought to live exemplary lives in ordinary circumstances, we can better understand their concerns and see where their Achilles’ heel lay. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus explained that the Pharisees’ righteousness was a high bar that His followers had to surpass: “For I say unto you, That except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:20). When we realize that

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the Pharisees were trying to live a holy life in a world they saw as unclean, we can better identify with their efforts to be righteous, as well as their efforts to justify or defend themselves. Recognizing that their efforts and even their initial opposition grew out of their desire for righteous lives, we more easily “liken them unto ourselves” (1 Nephi 19:23).

CRITIQUES AND RESPONSES

Once we understand the Pharisees’ vision of holiness, we can see why they would have had concerns about what they saw as lapses in Jesus’s and the disciples’ behavior, and we can better explain why they opposed it. As we examine the critiques of the Pharisees who are described in the Gospels and the Savior’s responses in calling them to a higher level of holiness, we can see the escalation of resistance and hostility that eventually led them to seek His death.

The Pharisees’ resistance to the call to rethink holiness helps to explain the source of their hostility to Jesus. It is also helpful to note that the Savior was challenging the Pharisees’ role in interpreting the law. His challenge to their vision of ritual holiness surely could have provoked a hostile reaction as it threatened the social status of the Pharisees as the interpreters of the law. But while this context helps to explain pressures and motivations, the response of hostility is not, however, simply a political question. At its core, hostility reflects personal choices and spiritual responses. The hostility we find described in the Gospels was informed by a particular context, but, more

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importantly, it was a universal spiritual phenomenon—the “universal sin” of pride.

The pattern of questioning turning into hostility because of the Pharisees’ defensiveness increasingly characterizes the hostile interactions of the Pharisees and the Savior. We’ll look now at two concerns raised against Jesus: that He was eating with sinners and that He was eating with unwashed hands. We can see that these questions grew out of the Pharisees’ understanding of the law of Moses. Their religious commitment to ritual purity put them in a position of opposition to what they saw Jesus and His disciples doing. In His responses to their questions, Jesus shows the Pharisees that scripture itself points to a higher form of holiness. In realizing that they are being told that their efforts at spiritual excellence are falling short, they are in a position where—depending on their response—they can be humbled or develop hostility.

Eating with sinners. New Testament accounts suggest that Jesus was invited to participate in the Pharisees’ table fellowship (see Luke 11:37, Luke 14:1), but we also learn that others He ate with were an affront to the Pharisees. Understanding the concept of table fellowship helps us see that by eating with others that were ritually unclean Jesus would also threaten the purity of His Pharisaic hosts. The tax collectors, or publicans, were specifically excluded from the Pharisees’ table fellowship.⁷ In the first account of eating with publicans and sinners, we learn that the “scribes and Pharisees murmured against his disciples, saying, Why do ye eat and drink with publicans and sinners?” (Luke 5:30) or “Why eateth your Master with publicans and sinners?” (Matthew 9:11; see also Mark 2:16). For the Pharisees, those

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who keep the ritual cleanliness of the priests in their homes allow the holiness of the temple to reside in the home. But in order to keep this level of holiness, it was required that they eat only with others who were equally obedient.

The initial “murmuring” about eating with publicans and sinners is met with Jesus’s teachings that the “whole need not a physician, but they that are sick” and “I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance” (Matthew 9:12–13; see also Mark 2:17; Luke 5:31–32). On its face it might not be clear how these comments would rile the “scribes and Pharisees” because they would naturally concur that the sinners and tax collectors were sick and did need a physician. They could see themselves as righteous and the others as unworthy. One of our greatest challenges as righteous, law-abiding people is to recognize that we all sin. To the extent that our observance of the law becomes our sense of justification before God, then admitting that we are flawed will not be an option. Then, at all costs, we must exactly keep the law and judge others who do not. In Matthew’s account, the Savior points out this universal tendency in His accusers with an additional phrase that calls the questioners into question and invites them to a higher level of holiness.

In Matthew 9:13 we read that between the statements about the sick and His mission to call them to repentance, an additional comment is, “But go ye and learn what that meaneth, I will have mercy, and not sacrifice.” This is a quotation from the prophet Hosea chastising the unrighteous Israelites: “O Ephraim, what shall I do unto thee? O Judah, what shall I do unto thee? for your goodness is as a morning cloud, and as the early dew it

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goeth away. For I desired mercy, and not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings. But they like men have transgressed the covenant: there have they dealt treacherously against me” (Hosea 6:4, 6–7).

Jesus is challenging the scribes’ and Pharisees’ interpretation of scripture in telling them, “Go ye and learn what that meaneth.” Their understanding of holiness, which required strict adherence to the requirements for priests’ ritual purity, had become for them “sacrifice” and “burnt offerings.” Jesus is challenging their fundamental conception of holiness and the law by questioning their focus on their own ritual purity while ignoring the spiritually sick among the covenant people.

In using this quote from Hosea, Jesus suggests that His questioners, like the wicked Israelites, were misunderstanding God’s will and the nature of God’s holiness as they placed their self-justifying obedience over compassion for the less obedient. “For I desired mercy, and not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings” (Hosea 6:6). Imbedded in the context of the quote we find a prophetic critique of the ultimate lack of depth and staying power of self-justifying righteousness: “O Judah, what shall I do unto thee? for your goodness is as a morning cloud, and as the early dew it goeth away” (Hosea 6:4). While “by faith was the law of Moses given,” Jesus is pointing here to “a more excellent way” (Ether 12:11), a kind of compassionate righteousness that exceeds “the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees” (Matthew 5:20). He is pointing to a righteousness based on the mercy of God rather than the belief that we can be justified and saved by our own obedience to the law.

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Another debate over the nature of holiness is found in the Pharisees' opposition to the Savior's table-fellowship practice and His subsequent questioning of the questioners in Luke 15. Here "the Pharisees and scribes murmured, saying, 'This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them'" (Luke 15:2). Jesus responds to their critique with the parable of the ninety-nine sheep that are safe and the one sheep that is lost in the wilderness. The imagery of a lost, vulnerable sheep replaces His earlier explanation of the sick needing a physician, but the challenge to the spiritual caretakers is the same. While their concern was based on their desire to maintain the table fellowship that would make their tables as holy as the altar of the temple, Jesus was, however, challenging them to look to an even higher vision of holiness. Just as Hosea had challenged the wicked Israelites to seek "the knowledge of God" rather than merely the temple worship of "burnt offerings" (Hosea 6:6), here Jesus challenges those spiritual leaders that would be holy by describing the nature of divine holiness seen in the imagery of God's care for His covenant people as shepherd (see Ezekiel 34:11–12, 16).

Jesus teaches the Pharisees who disapproved of eating with sinners that as contemporary spiritual leaders the Good Shepherd should be their model. His use of the parable of the ninety and nine suggests that in their focus on their own holiness in table fellowship, they are instead following the example of the ancient "shepherds of Israel" (Ezekiel 34:2) who, concerned with their own advantage, ignored those that were lost. The prophet Ezekiel had been commanded to "prophesy against the shepherds of Israel, prophesy, and say unto them, Thus saith the Lord

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God unto the shepherds; Woe be to the shepherds of Israel that do feed themselves! should not the shepherds feed the flocks?” (Ezekiel 34:2). In this extended critique against the spiritual leaders of ancient times, the Lord tells them that they have ignored the lost sheep: “And they were scattered, because there is no shepherd: and they became meat to all the beasts of the field, when they were scattered. My sheep wandered through all the mountains, and upon every high hill: yea, my flock was scattered upon all the face of the earth, and none did search or seek after them” (Ezekiel 34:5–6). Those leaders set to represent God cared for themselves and not for those they could have helped. In comparing the lost sheep and the sinners who were in need of help, Jesus delivers a prophetic rebuke to the Pharisees who sought their own table-fellowship holiness by not eating with sinners.

This neglect of the lost is placed in direct contrast to the care given by Jehovah as the Good Shepherd: “For thus saith the Lord God; Behold, I, even I, will both search my sheep, and seek them out. As a shepherd seeketh out his flock in the day that he is among his sheep that are scattered; so will I seek out my sheep, and will deliver them out of all places where they have been scattered in the cloudy and dark day. . . . I will seek that which was lost, and bring again that which was driven away” (Ezekiel 34:11–12, 16). The holiness and goodness of the Good Shepherd was found in His loving care of those who were scattered and lost. Christ’s rebuke against the contemporary “shepherds of Israel” carries with it an invitation to a higher way as He points to the true holiness of forgetting self and reaching out to the lost sinners. But, as with all spiritual correction,

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this response opens up the possibility of resentment and defensiveness in the hearer.⁸

Not washing hands. As the Gospel narratives proceed, an escalation in hostility to Jesus can be seen in the new questions raised by those among the Pharisees. In the earlier issue of eating with sinners, concerns were raised about His and His disciples' practice, but in these exchanges there was no immediate reaction to Jesus's calling the questioners' own holiness into question. When Pharisees begin to question Him about not washing hands, we see an escalation of hostility toward Jesus. In Matthew 15 and Mark 7, the question is put to Jesus why His disciples do not also follow "the tradition of the elders" in the washing of hands before eating (Matthew 15:2; Mark 7:3). The earlier comments about eating with publicans and sinners may have implied that these others' ritual uncleanness would diminish the holiness of Jesus and His disciples. In the challenge about not washing hands, they are being accused of not being holy by not living up to the Pharisaic interpretation of how to bring the temple's holiness to every house in Israel.

Christ responds to these accusers' question of holiness by taking on the issue of the authority of the "tradition of the elders" (Matthew 15:2; Mark 7:3). He first illustrates the problems in setting up something beyond the law by discussing how another practice sanctioned under their tradition can be a justification for not keeping the commandments of God (see Matthew 15:3–6; Mark 7:9–13).⁹ He also quotes Isaiah's description of a hypocritical people

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and describes it as a prophecy of His accusers (see Matthew 15:7–9; Mark 7:6–8).

In the prophetic critique found in Isaiah 29:13, the Lord describes a people who appear to want holiness, but their hearts and their understanding are not right with God. The Lord speaks against those who “draw near me with their mouth, and with their lips do honour me, but have removed their heart far from me, and their fear toward me is taught by the precept of men” (Isaiah 29:13). It is not just the lack of correlation between hearts and words, but also “their fear toward me is taught by the precept of men.” This fits directly into Jesus’s questioning the authority of the “tradition of the elders” and in Mark precedes His very strong comment that “for laying aside the commandment of God, ye hold the tradition of men, as the washing of pots and cups: and many other such like things ye do. And he said unto them, Full well ye reject the commandment of God, that ye may keep your own tradition” (Mark 7:8–9). In the version of Isaiah that Jesus quotes, the critique on false worship is particularly strong: “But in vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men” (Matthew 15:9; see also Mark 7:7).

In addition to this strong critique of the Pharisees’ vision of holiness, the situation escalates as Jesus calls “the multitude” (Matthew 15:10) to Him and publicly teaches that being defiled or impure is not a matter of what we take into ourselves. Instead, our concern should be on what we produce: “Not that which goeth into the mouth defileth a man; but that which cometh out of the mouth, this defileth

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a man” (Matthew 15:11). In teaching this “more excellent way” (Ether 12:11), Jesus also directly and publicly refutes the authority and interpretation around which the Pharisees’ understanding of holiness was built.

It is not surprising, then, that at the end of Jesus’s commentary His disciples came “and said unto him, Knowest thou that the Pharisees were offended, after they heard this saying?” (Matthew 15:12). In listening defensively to Jesus’s teaching on holiness, these Pharisees had ears to hear the rebuke but not the invitation.

A similar incident is recorded in Luke 11 in which the questioning of Jesus’s practice is then turned around and He calls the Pharisees’ vision of holiness into question. In this scene it is not the practice of the disciples, but of Jesus Himself that is challenged. “A certain Pharisee besought him to dine with him: and he went in, and sat down to meat. And when the Pharisee saw it, he marvelled that he had not first washed before dinner” (Luke 11:37–38). In response to this questioning of His breach of the “tradition of the elders,” Jesus begins an extensive critique of the danger of disguising the inner self with outward righteousness. These comments touch on several practices associated with the Pharisees’ program of holiness: “[making] clean the outside of the cup and the platter; but your inward part is full of ravening and wickedness” (Luke 11:39), being exacting in tithes, by “[tithing] mint and rue and all manner of herbs, and [passing] over judgment and the love of God” (Luke 11:42). It is, however, significant to note, as in Matthew 23 where similar critiques appear, that these comments are not framed as an attack on the Pharisees’ practices, but rather focus on what they yet lack

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(see Matthew 19:20). Concerning “judgment and the love of God,” Jesus says, “These ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone” (Luke 11:42). It is the sins of omission that become the barrier to true holiness.

As with the incident of conflict over eating with unwashed hands found in Matthew and Mark, this scene in which the Pharisees are chastised leads to heightened tension. Wanting so much to be holy, the Pharisees who were chastised did not want to hear that their efforts were misguided and were falling short. This would be an indictment of their entire way of life and their confidence of being justified before God through their righteous deeds. We learn that “as he said these things unto them, the scribes and the Pharisees began to urge him vehemently, and to provoke him to speak of many things: laying wait for him, and seeking to catch something out of his mouth, that they might accuse him” (Luke 11:53–54). In this defensive response to the Savior’s call to repentance, we can see hostility developing among the Pharisees. The hope of those who spoke with Him to “wait for him” and catch Him saying something “that they might accuse him” came only “as he said these things unto them.”

RESISTING THE CALL TO HOLINESS

What is striking in the New Testament accounts is not that the Pharisees maintained religious or political opposition to Jesus but that some became hostile in that opposition. We have seen here how the Pharisees’ initial concerns centered around ritual cleanliness, although the same pattern holds for their emphasis on the Sabbath day.

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While the Pharisees' understanding of how to live the law of Moses led to their initial opposition to Jesus, it was not their focus on ritual purity that caused their negative feelings. Their hostility toward Jesus was neither earlier fixed as a part of their program, nor was it a given result of the experiences that they had with Him. Their opposition may have been a matter of different beliefs, but the hostility we see reflects the enmity and hardening of heart that grow from pride. This is a pattern that we can see throughout the scriptures and in our own lives.

The Pharisees lived in a time of great challenge for the covenant people. They had a vision of bringing the holiness of the temple into the lives of all the Jews and diligently set about living their lives in harmony with that vision. In this effort they believed that they were living genuinely holy lives. They were trying very hard to keep the highest standards they could. During His ministry the Savior pointed them to a higher level of holiness, portraying sinners not as those who pollute our ritual holiness but as the sick and lost sheep who need the care of those who are well. Hearing this vision of holiness which focused on meeting others' needs rather than merely rejoicing in their own righteousness, they began to recognize changes they could make. The choice was theirs, as it is all of ours, to repent or to harden our hearts. But choosing to resist the call to repent will lead us to increased hostility toward the One calling us to change.

Seeing the escalation of hostility throughout the Savior's ministry, it is not a great surprise when we read that, after the reports of the raising of Lazarus had reached

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the Pharisees, “then gathered the chief priests and the Pharisees a council, and said, What do we? for this man doeth many miracles. If we let him thus alone, all men will believe on him: and the Romans shall come and take away both our place and nation” (John 11:47–48). The defensiveness and fear on the part of the leaders of the Jews is palpable in these statements. A pattern of resistance to the Savior’s call had eventually developed a sense of Jesus as a threat in the minds of many of the elite.

We can see that the feeling of being threatened became formulated in political terms by the last months of Jesus’s ministry. It is not clear from the historical evidence that the Romans did see Jesus as a threat, but it is important to understand the pressures that the elite of the Jews were under. They were an occupied people, ruled by the Romans in Judea and a Roman supported ruler in Galilee. Although each of the different Jewish groups had found varying strategies of negotiating the political and social pressures of Roman rule and hellenization, it was in nobody’s interest to lose what political and religious autonomy they had. This sense of shared threat can help explain why the chief priests and Pharisees were working together to solve what they saw as a shared problem. It may or may not have been an accurate fear, but it was understandable in light of the fragile political situation they faced.

The prophetic statement of the high priest Caiaphas, who unknowingly testified of the Atonement, was also a clear statement of their feeling of justification: “It is expedient for us, that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation perish not” (John 11:49–50). The subtle escalation of hostility from offense at being

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challenged and rebuked had grown to the point at which they associated not just their own well-being but also the survival of their nation on eliminating this threat. By the last months of Jesus's life, the defensiveness of the political and religious elite had led them to feel justified in working toward His demise: "Then from that day forth they took counsel together for to put him to death" (John 11:53).

While these leaders have sometimes been portrayed as evil incarnate, their feelings of defensiveness and resistance may be closer to home than we would like. Those who responded defensively sought to protect themselves from the Savior's critique and call to a higher level of holiness. Surely, they thought, we are right and He is wrong. We are living a holy life. We are keeping the commandments. In their hostility we see, as in a mirror, our own response to chastisement as pride rather than humility. Hostility becomes our defense when we resist the call to repentance.

NOTES

1. Many of the interactions between Jesus and the Pharisees took place in Galilee, and the Pharisees involved in working for His death were in Jerusalem. While it is not fully clear what relations existed between the different groups interacting with Christ at different times, I believe that the pattern of response we see with the texts we have can give us insights into a broader sense of how hostility developed in those who saw Jesus as their enemy.
2. Martin S. Jaffee, *Early Judaism* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1997), 79. Jaffee states, "But what does seem certain—because it is the only thing upon which

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our otherwise irreconcilable sources agree—is that the Pharisees placed a great premium on something called ‘ancestral tradition.’” All sources consistently assent to the Pharisees’ focus on “ancestral tradition” that the rabbis would later call the oral law.

3. See Jacob Neusner, *From Politics to Piety: The Emergence of Pharisaic Judaism* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1973), 83.
4. Neusner, *From Politics to Piety*, 83; emphasis in original.
5. Neusner, *From Politics to Piety*, 80.
6. “Pharisees furthermore ate only with other Pharisees, to be sure that the laws were appropriately observed” (Neusner, *From Politics to Piety*, 80).
7. Neusner, *From Politics to Piety*, 73.
8. An important examination of the role of defensiveness and resentment in hardening hearts can be found in Terry Warner, *Bonds That Make Us Free: Healing Our Relationships, Coming to Ourselves* (Salt Lake City: Shadow Mountain, 2001).
9. For background on the practice of corban, see Max Wilcox, “Corban,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1:1134; and “Corban” in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. Geoffrey Bromily (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979), 1:772.

