

FRIDAY, MARCH 23

MATTHEW 23:23-28

If you were to walk the streets of first-century Jerusalem and ask passers-by who the holiest people in town were, the responses would have been nearly unanimous: “The Pharisees and teachers of the law, of course!”

The Pharisees were a sect of devout Jews who were incredibly conscientious about upholding the Law of Moses. In order to facilitate their law-keeping and to ensure they didn't accidentally break a commandment, they developed a series of strict traditions and rules to guide every aspect of their lives, all the way down to the way they washed their hands before a meal. Ritual holiness was their game, and they were professionals.

But something was missing. You see, according to Jesus, they were all show and no substance. They went through all of the right religious motions, but their hearts were in the wrong place. In their quest to be outwardly “holy,” they had missed that God's original heart and intention had always been to change them from the inside out.

One of the most fascinating, and perhaps even troubling, aspects of the gospels is the fact that, by and large, the Pharisees are portrayed as the “bad guys.” Those who thought they were the closest to God were actually those who opposed his purpose the most fiercely.

This passage should serve as a stark reminder that genuine, Christlike holiness is always an inside-out reality; it begins with a changed heart first. Genuine Christian holiness is far less about outward manifestations of piety and far more about an inward transformation. True holiness will work its way out, not only into our actions, but also into our attitudes, as well.