

Peer Pressure from the Pharisees

Matthew 5:13-20 | 2/5/2017

When it comes to righteousness, the Pharisees are tough to beat. Jesus knows that these Jewish leaders are passionate about the law of God. Supportive of synagogues and schools. Attentive to purity rules and regulations. Focused on the resurrection, with a powerful hunger for heavenly rewards.

The Pharisees are the spiritual superstars of their day, exerting an enormous amount of peer pressure on the people around them. "I tell you," says Jesus, "unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (v. 20). How are we supposed to respond to this?

Peer pressure is a powerful force in our lives, and it can both help us and hurt us. Todd Rogers is a professor of public policy at the Harvard Kennedy School. He has studied the peer pressure that comes from people who are a little better than us, as well as the pressure that comes from people who are *waybetter* than us. In other words, the Pharisees.

Says Rogers, "When you are compared to people who are doing a little better than you, it can be really motivating." Someone who is conserving energy might inspire you to use less energy, and someone who is voting might motivate you to vote. But peer pressure turns negative when you are compared to people who are *unattainably* better than you. If you decide to train for a 5K race with an Olympic distance runner, for example, you are not going to be inspired. You are going to be really intimidated and probably drop out. This is exactly the effect of the Pharisees on the people around them.

Remember what the apostle Paul said about his own accomplishments as a Pharisee? "If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more," he wrote to the Philippians. "Circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee" (Philippians 3:4-5). Paul was a top-performing Pharisee, unattainably better than many of the people around him. You can understand why his peers would feel inferior and want to quit.

But Jesus is not interested in making people give up when he says, "unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (v. 20). The Pharisees might be better than anyone else in terms of following religious rules and regulations, but Jesus has a new approach to righteousness that is not based on rigorous law-keeping. Instead, he wants his followers to be salt of the earth and light of the world, fulfilling the law in new ways -- as he does.

As Christians, we don't have to feel peer pressure from the Pharisees. Our righteousness comes about in a whole new way, one that avoids faulty assumptions about who are the top performers. Even the apostle Paul, the spiritual superstar who had tremendous confidence in himself, came to see that his achievements as a Pharisee were really losses "because of Christ" (Philippians 3:7).

So what do righteous people look like? *They look like salt.* Jesus says that they are "the salt of the earth" (v. 13). In the ancient world, salt was a valuable commodity used for sacrifice, purification, seasoning and preservation. Christians are to play all of these roles in the world, and are to remain salty by staying true to their mission and avoiding contamination. "If salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored?" asks Jesus. It cannot, of course. Contaminated salt "is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot" (v. 13).

Note that Jesus doesn't say, "Try to be the salt of the earth." He doesn't say, "It might be good for you to catch some classes at Salt and Light University to learn how to be salt." He doesn't say, "Go to the rabbi and elders and have them lay hands on you to beseech God to grant you saltiness." He doesn't say, "Take 30 minutes every morning to meditate and try to reach, and to be in touch with, your inner saltiness."

His comment is quite straightforward. "You are the salt of the earth. This is what and who you are. Don't forget it." His statement is not a command but a description. Whatever Jesus actually had in mind when he said, "You are the salt of the earth," we know that salt as an element has no value to itself. It's not about making salt better salt. Salt is salt. The value of salt is in its application to other things. No wonder Jesus calls us "salt." We exist for others.

What do righteous people look like? *They look like light* -- lighthouses, spotlights, flashlights, lamps, candles in the darkness. Jesus says, "You are the light of the world" (v. 14). Once again, being light does not involve sitting through a college class, reading literature on the subject or meditating about it. Jesus' statement is a description, not a command.

And, like salt, light does not exist for its own benefit, but for the benefit of everything it illuminates. Light provides warmth and energy to the world around it, and encourages life and growth. We do the very same thing when we act as the light of the world, and when we reflect the light of Christ to others.

"No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket," says Jesus, "but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house" (v. 15). Our righteousness as Christians depends on doing whatever we can to be lights to each other and to the world around us. We are --

- + to be open and honest instead of hiding in the dark,
- + to offer other people warmth and encouragement instead of being cold and discouraging,
- + to be an energy source for others, so that together we can advance the mission of Christ in the world.

"Let your light shine before others," says Jesus, "so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven" (v. 16). Our challenge is to shine as a Christian community so that others will see what a life of love and faithfulness looks like. In a world of self-righteousness, we can be an example of Christ-righteousness -- right relationship, that is, with God and neighbor.

The Pharisees may have been the spiritual superstars of their day, but their righteousness was rooted in rules and regulations. They cannot be our role models for righteousness, because they neglected the justice, mercy and faith that are part of a right relationship with God and neighbor. Nor can the 21st-century Pharisees who are alive and well in the church today, people who make other Christians feel unworthy through an excessive focus on religious rules and regulations.

We have only one role model for righteousness: Jesus Christ, the one who invites us to be salt and light. He offers us the very best peer pressure, that which inspires us to rise to the challenge of advancing his mission in the world. As salt, we can talk with openness and honesty about who we are as Christians. As light, we can bring warmth and energy to the world around us.

You might say, "Well, if the Pharisees were the superstars of peer pressure, and that's a bad thing, what about Jesus? He was *without sin*, and yet you say that he is our 'role model for righteousness'."

Yes. The difference between the Pharisees' righteousness and the righteousness of Jesus is that one must work for the former, while the righteousness of the latter is a free gift. Paul makes this clear. The apostle wants to be "found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith" (Philippians 3:9).

No peer pressure. We need never worry about whether we're righteous enough. Worrying is what the Pharisees did. We're righteous enough and then some. Our righteousness is the righteousness of Jesus.

That's a righteousness that even a Pharisee would envy.

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