

Who Are the Pharisees?

The **Pharisees** were the pious Jews who rigorously followed the law of Moses and opposed Greek and Roman influence. Josephus claims they numbered about six thousand in Jesus' day. While the **Sadducees** were mostly upper-class aristocrats and priests, the Pharisees appear to have been primarily middle-class laypeople, perhaps craftsmen and merchants. The Sadducees had greater political power, but the Pharisees had broader support among the people. The most distinctive characteristic of the Pharisees was their strict adherence to the law of Moses, the Torah. They carefully obeyed not only the written law but also the oral law, a body of extrabiblical traditions that expanded and elaborated on the Old Testament law (e.g., "the tradition of the elders" in Mark 7: 3).

The Pharisees' goals were to apply the Torah's mandates to everyday life, and to "build a fence" around the Torah to guard against any possible violation. Hands and utensils had to be properly washed. Food had to be properly grown, tithed, and prepared. Since ritual purity was so important, the Pharisees refused to share table fellowship with those who ignored these matters. The common "people of the land" were often shunned, and the Gentiles even more so!

In contrast to the Sadducees, the Pharisees believed in the resurrection of the dead (Acts 23: 8), and they steered a middle road between the Sadducees' belief in free will and the determinism of the Essenes. They hoped for the coming of the Messiah, the Son of David, who would deliver them from foreign oppression. This made them anti-Roman but with less inclination to active resistance than the Zealots and other revolutionaries. Jesus condemned the Pharisees for raising their traditions to the level of Scripture and for focusing on the outward requirements of the law while ignoring matters of the heart. For their part, the Pharisees denounced Jesus' association with tax collectors and sinners, and they deplored the way He placed Himself above Sabbath regulations.

Tax Collectors

Tax collectors were notorious in that day and were hated by the Jewish people as traitors and abusers of their own people. They were a mafia-like organization in the first century. They served Rome, the Gentile occupying power of Israel. They were like dishonest IRS agents who overcharged the people for their own profit. The Jewish writings known as the Mishnah and Talmud set them beside thieves and murderers. They were expelled and banned from the synagogue. The touch of a tax collector rendered a house unclean. Jews could lie to a tax collector with impunity. With money as his god, Levi was a social pariah who was spiritually bankrupt, having sold his soul to sin and self.