

# GoDeeper



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Paul | Part One | Pastor Steve Wells | 04.11.2021  
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## Pharisees

The Pharisees were an ancient Jewish group who laid the foundation for what would become rabbinic Judaism. The name, “Pharisee,” likely comes from the Hebrew word *prushim*, meaning “separated ones,” but it’s unclear what exactly this label signified.

Some of the Pharisees’ biggest contributions to Judaism were:

- Emphasizing the “oral tradition” (which they argued was equal to the written tradition of the Torah.)
- Preserving the Jewish laws associated with Temple worship and purification.
- Creating 613 New Commandments governing Jewish life outside of the Temple.

By preserving and advocating for the importance of oral tradition, which was believed to have been handed from God to Moses *along with* the Torah, the Pharisees played an integral role in giving us both the Talmud (the written record of the oral tradition) and the Masoretic Text (the original Hebrew Bible, which relied on oral tradition to correctly identify and pronounce ambiguous words). So at least in part, Christians can thank the Pharisees for ensuring the Old Testament was so carefully preserved.

While the Pharisees affected Judaism in many positive ways, in the New Testament, their adherence to oral tradition is often portrayed as overly legalistic, and in some cases a means of circumventing the Law (Mark 7:10-12).

The New Testament presents the Pharisees as the sort of “gatekeepers” of Judaism. They constantly test Jesus and try to trap him in a blasphemous statement or something that could be interpreted as a threat against Rome. As Jesus accumulates followers, and those followers begin embracing his interpretations of the Law, he presents a greater and greater threat to “true Judaism” and the political power they needed to normalize it.

*“The Pharisees were the defenders of a certain kind of community and Jesus challenged the Pharisees’ vision of community by attacking their purity regulations concerning washing and food, as well as Sabbath practice. The effect of Jesus’ teaching was to widen the community boundaries and loosen the norms for membership in this community. **Jesus thus created a new community outside the Pharisees’ control and quite naturally provoked their protest and hostility.**”*

—Professor Anthony J. Saldarini, *Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*

The Pharisees were certainly responsible for the efforts and schemes to kill Jesus, but it’s important to remember that these people weren’t the power-hungry villains church tradition has often made them out to be. In their minds, *they were the protagonists*, defending Judaism against heretical beliefs and false doctrine. If you’re familiar with the New Testament epistles, you know that the early Christian church was similarly vigilant. But unlike the early Christian church, they had a formally defined canon of Scripture—and centuries of tradition to interpret it—reinforcing what they believed. So perhaps it’s better to think of the Pharisees, Sadducees, scribes, and experts of the Law this way: when Jesus came onto the scene, Israel needed a heart transplant, and these groups were like an overactive immune system, rejecting the very thing they needed to survive.

The Pharisees definitely aren’t “the good guys” in the New Testament, but their emphasis on oral tradition and practicing Judaism outside the temple allowed Judaism to evolve into what it is today. And Christians have them to thank for preserving the Oral Torah, which was used to create the Masoretic Text—one of the documents that our Old Testament is based on.

Next time you read about the Pharisees in your Bible, just keep in mind: this isn’t the whole picture, and for all their faults, the Pharisees were relentlessly *trying* to point the nation of Israel back to God. Perhaps now you can begin to see why Saul of Tarsus was relentless in his persecution of this “new way” that Jesus’ disciples were promoting.

# Who Were the Pharisees?

There are several main ways scholars describe the Pharisees. No label fully covers who they were or what they did, but taken together, they give us a clearer picture.



## A religious sect

The Pharisees had specific beliefs—particularly surrounding the importance of oral tradition and role of the temple—which separated them from other Jewish sects, such as the Sadducees and Essenes.



## A political group

In the New Testament, the Pharisees attempt to influence government leaders and stir up the people to carry out their political agenda—which was directly tied to their desire to preserve Judaism and the identity of God's people.



## A social movement

The Pharisees sought to change the way Jews lived. They included all classes of people, and their practices, theology, and teachings had ramifications for everyday, ordinary Jewish life.



## A school of thought

In *The Jewish War*, Josephus refers to the Pharisees as one of three "philosophical sects" or schools of thought. They were a broad group that acted on their shared beliefs.