

# Pharisees

## Who Were the Pharisees in the Bible?

Updated January 16, 2019

The Pharisees in the Bible were members of a religious group or party who frequently clashed with [Jesus Christ](#) over his interpretation of the [Law](#).

The name "Pharisee" means "separated one." They separated themselves from society to study and teach the law, but they also separated themselves from the common people because they considered them religiously unclean. The Pharisees probably got their start under the [Maccabees](#), about 160 B.C. The historian [Flavius Josephus](#) numbered them at about 6,000 in Israel at their peak.

Middle class business men and trades workers, the Pharisees started and controlled the synagogues, those Jewish meeting places that served for both local worship and education. They also put great importance on oral tradition, making it equal with the laws written in the Old Testament.

## What Did the Pharisees Believe and Teach?

Among the Pharisees' beliefs were [life after death](#), [resurrection of the body](#), importance of keeping rituals, and the need to convert Gentiles.

Because they taught that the way to God was by obeying the law, the Pharisees gradually changed Judaism from a religion of [sacrifice](#) to one of keeping the commandments (legalism). Animal sacrifices still continued in the Jerusalem [temple](#) until it was destroyed by the Romans in 70 A.D., but Pharisees promoted [works](#) over sacrifice.

The [Gospels](#) often portray Pharisees as arrogant, but they were generally respected by the masses because of their piety. However, Jesus saw through them. He scolded them for the unreasonable burden they placed on the peasants.

In a scathing rebuke of the Pharisees found in [Matthew](#) 23 and [Luke](#) 11, Jesus called them [hypocrites](#) and exposed their [sins](#). He compared the Pharisees to whitewashed tombs, which are beautiful on the outside but on the inside are filled with dead men's bones and uncleanness.

"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the kingdom of heaven in men's faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to.

"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness." (Matthew 23:13, 27-28, Most of

the time the Pharisees were at odds with the [Sadducees](#), another Jewish sect, but the two parties joined forces to [conspire against Jesus](#). They voted together in the [Sanhedrin](#) to demand his death, then saw that the [Romans](#) carried it out. Neither group could believe in a Messiah who would [sacrifice himself for the sins of the world](#).

## **Famous Pharisees in the Bible:**

Three famous Pharisees mentioned by name in the New Testament were the Sanhedrin member [Nicodemus](#), the [rabbi Gamaliel](#), and the [apostle Paul](#).

## **Bible References to Pharisees:**

Pharisees are referred to in the four Gospels as well as the [book of Acts](#).

## **Example:**

The Pharisees in the Bible felt threatened by Jesus.

(Sources: *The New Compact Bible Dictionary*, T. Alton Bryant, editor; *The Bible Almanac*, J.I. Packer, Merrill C. Tenney, William White Jr., editors; *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, Trent C. Butler, general editor; [gotquestions.org](#))

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