

THE PHARISAIC TITHING VOW

Many Protestant churches and the Roman Catholic Church have induced their members to believe that they are required to pay tithes to their church by obligation. The truth is that Gentiles (non-Jews) were not obligated by any vow to pay a tithe, in contrast to the sons of Jacob (ie. Jews). The descendants of Jacob were bound to pay a tenth of all their increase to the Levite priesthood for its sustenance. The vow was made by Jacob, the father of Israel, at Bethel: ***“And Jacob vowed a vow, saying, If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat, and raiment to put on, so that I come again to my father's house in peace; then shall the LORD be my God: And this stone, which I have set for a pillar, shall be God's house: and of all that thou shalt give me I will surely give the tenth unto thee.”*** Genesis 28:20 to 22. This vow was made in response to a dream that Jacob had wherein God renewed His original promise to Abraham and Isaac with Jacob: ***“And he dreamed, and behold a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven: and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it. And, behold, the LORD stood above it, and said, I am the LORD God of Abraham thy father, and the God of Isaac: the land whereon thou liest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed...”*** Genesis 28:12, 13. Today's Christian churches have used these or similar verses from the Old Testament to guilt their members into tithing, which, for the poor, could be the imposition of a hardship.

The following verse from the book of Matthew is another one that has been used by church clergy to make its members feel compelled to pay an obligatory tithe to their church. From Matthew 23:23: ***“Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone.”*** This preceding verse is often used to suggest that the Saviour was directing us to fulfill our supposed dutiful obligation to pay tithes. Note that Jesus speaks directly to the Pharisees in these verses, as he refers to them by name. Who were the Pharisees? They were a Jewish religious sect, who strictly observed the laws of Moses, and believed in the exact observances of those ancestral laws, and the separation of themselves from the common people. They adhered to the traditional ordinances of the Mosaic laws in a manner unequalled by others.

From the Pharisee sect arose great doctors and masters of the Mosaic Law, usually referred to as scribes. To the Pharisees were entrusted the most important offices of state by the later Jewish rulers. They were the popular party, and were the party of progress, and were very influential among what we would call the middle class of the common people at the time of our Saviour, Jesus the Christ. The Pharisees were also the national party in religion and politics during that period. The Sadducees (another Jewish sect) were their major opponents.

Originating from the Chasidim, they became distinguished in the second century B.C., for the inspiration they gave the Maccabees (ie. a group of Jewish rebels who fought against Antiochus IV) during the Syrian conflicts. A certain group of these Chasidims became very enthusiastic in their support of a complete religious restoration of the Mosaic Law, both canonical and traditional. Thus, they aligned themselves to the tribe of Levi, the priesthood being the centre of the Jewish national life. During the time of John Hyrcanus, there sprang into existence a difference of opinions concerning the law, and with their separate ideas being clearly delineated, they became known as the Pharisees. Their name came from the Hebrew word, "PERUSHIM" ('separatist', or 'separated').

The name 'Pharisee' or 'Perushim' probably came upon them by the ridiculing by the Sadducees (Zadokites). It has been estimated that even at the height of their prosperity, the Pharisees never exceeded 6,000 to 7,000 in number. The Pharisees, by their rules and ideas of sacredness, which covered the smallest details of daily life, made themselves a sacred social class. Before admittance to the sect, each potential candidate was required to make a pledge that he would strictly observe the laws, avoid ceremonial pollution, not to be a guest nor to receive as a guest any non-Pharisee, nor to have dealings with the Gentiles (ie. non-Jews). The person would also have to promise to adhere to the ordinances and laws of Moses, and that he would set apart tithes on all the produce of his land, and that he would not eat anything that had not been duly tithed. From the foregoing, we should have a little better knowledge and understanding of the characteristics of this religious group that Jesus was speaking to in Matthew 23:23. Each new member of the Pharisee sect had to take the pledge personally. Therefore, when any man was a member of the Pharisee sect, it was a known fact that he would have taken the pledge and was personally bound by that vow of tithes and purity.

As previously mentioned, Jesus is speaking to this particular group of people and not to all Jews, nor all mankind. We know this by the Son of man's distinct manner of addressing them: ***"Woe unto you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites."*** Now with respect to their paying of tithes, would Jesus, the Son of God, preach to these people and suggest they not keep their vows, causing them to default in their pledge? We know as Christians that Jesus would not encourage someone to break their vows. We just learned that the Pharisees were bound by their vows to the traditions and ordinances of those laws of Moses and of men (ie. additional doctrines added by the sect's teachers or scribes) for as long as they belonged to the sect. Jesus would not teach men to neglect their obligation to their sworn vows.

When a person makes a vow to God, or anyone else, he must stand accountable for the fulfillment and observance of his pledge. He is obligated by a moral standard to that which was vowed. Read Ecclesiastes 5:45: ***"When thou vowest a vow unto God, defer not to pay it; for he hath no pleasure in fools: pay that which thou hast vowed. Better is it that thou shouldest not vow, than that thou shouldest vow and not pay."*** Some may suggest that there seems to be a contradiction in our argument by our quoting the previous verse. The verse just quoted may appear to curate the impression that it refers to the paying of tithes by the use of the word "PAY", although this is not what it is saying. The verse in Ecclesiastes 5 refers simply to the obligation of fulfilling a vow, whether it be the vow of marriage, of tithing or a vow of service. Whatever the pledge is, the person who made it should not default in fulfilling it. Thus, "pay" in this verse refers to its broader meaning of "fulfill" your oath, not just in the monetary sense. Most of Christendom, we hope, believes that one who pledges a vow is obligated to pay his dues, whether in the monetary sense or otherwise. The Pharisees had made solemn vows before God, therefore they were indebted to carry out their promise to their particular sect. Jesus would certainly not say anything in disapproval of men who were bound in their dutiful act of fulfilling their vows.

On the other hand, Jesus does condemn the Pharisees' boisterous behavior that was often exhibited in the fulfilling of their vows. The Pharisees often exhibited vanity while at the same time trying to display a decent, pious exterior and performed the outward duties of their sect for all to see, but gave no attention to their inner, spiritual state. So, when Jesus was talking to the Pharisees in Matthew 23, he was not telling them to not tithe anymore but that they should not neglect to fulfill their other moral obligations ("not to leave the other undone"). What were those other moral obligations? The weightier and more important matters which come from the inner spirit of a righteous man, such as mercy,

faith and judgment. Read Matthew 23:25, 26: ***“Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for you make clean the outside of the cup and of the platter, but within they are full of extortion and excess. Thou blind Pharisee, cleanse first that which is within the cup and platter, that the outside of them may be clean also.”*** In other words, these Pharisees appeared righteous to their fellow men by their dedication in the performances of their traditional and religious vows, but while they were careful to maintain a decent outward appearance, they had allowed their hearts to become filthy and polluted with wickedness, such as being a respecter of persons. Now proceed by reading Luke 11:39 to 42: ***“And the Lord said unto him, Now do ye Pharisees make clean the outside of the cup and the platter, but your inward part is full of ravening and wickedness. Ye fools, did not he that made that which is without make that which is within also? But rather give alms of such things as ye have; and, behold, all things are clean unto you. But woe unto you, Pharisees! for ye tithe mint and rue and all manner of herbs, and pass over judgment and the love of God: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone.”*** Here again we note that the Pharisees had only an outward appearance of cleanliness (ie. the outside of the cup) while the inside (ie. their mind or inner thoughts) was unclean. They cloaked themselves in the practices of ceremonial laws, but neglected the cleansing and purifying of their hearts. The love of God, charity to all, faith in the Father and unbiased judgment towards mankind, these are things that should not have been left undone, for these were meant to be the inner essence of man since creation. Unfortunately, the Pharisees were faithful firstly to the law and ordinances of Moses and secondarily, to those things pertaining to God and their fellow man.

We can summarize what we have learned concerning the verses of Matthew 23:23 and Luke 11:42, which is as follows:

1. There is no doubt that Jesus was speaking to a specific Jewish sect in these passages, and not to the Jewish people as a whole.
2. This specific sect, the Pharisees, had personally vowed before God to pay a tenth of all their increase, and by so doing, were bound to the tithing law. As Jesus said, they were so meticulous to be sure to pay their tithes, that even on the smallest items, such as paying tithes on cooking herbs, the law of tithing may not be broken in the smallest way.
3. Jesus pointed out that the more important matters of the law, that is, spiritual works such as love and alms giving, were neglected by this sect.

Now going back to the original purpose of this booklet: Does Jesus command or teach Christians that they are bound to the paying of tithes? No. The words he spoke concerning tithing were directed at the Pharisees. This is not to suggest that the Pharisees were the only Hebrew sect bound by the law of tithes. Under the Levitical priesthood, all Israelites were instructed to follow the system of tithing. It was not until the time when the true Passover Lamb (Jesus) offered up himself that the New Testament of Christ began, ending those laws of the Levitical priesthood written in the book of the law. Note that when the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed in 70 A.D., the priesthood came to an end, and there was no longer a priesthood to receive the tithe. The tithing laws, as it is said, were "nailed to the cross". The Saviour does not anywhere in either of the two passages discussed in this tract, give instruction or any indication as to the tithing system being binding upon Christians.

As a final comment and to be clear for the reader of this tract, the focus of our topic was on whether the obligatory, systematic tithing system still existed for Christians, which as we have shown, does not. However, as children of God, we are expected to support our

churches with freewill offerings but just not under a rigid system that compels and guilts its members to give. As Christians, we learn to give to others, including our churches, which requires support from its members in order to carry out its benevolent works. We are told that: *“He which soweth sparingly shall reap also sparingly; and he which soweth bountifully shall reap also bountifully. Every man according as he purposeth in his heart, so let him give, not grudgingly, or of necessity: for God loveth a cheerful giver.”* II Corinthians 9:6, 7.