

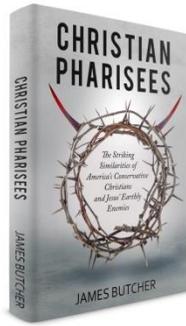
Christian Pharisees'
**Small Group
Bible Study**

by James Butcher

This Bible study is intended for
use in small groups within
churches or other Christian fellowships.
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use in those small groups
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***Christian Pharisees'* Small Group Bible Study**
Chapter One: "Why Does Your Teacher Eat With Sinners?"

1. Begin the session with a discussion of the central passage for this chapter. Read Matthew 9:9-13 together aloud. Ask the group:

- a. What jumps out to you from verses 9-10?
- b. What jumps out to you from verse 11?
- c. What jumps out to you from verses 12-13?

Discuss the following questions:

- a. Are conservative Christians known more for being judgmental or compassionate?
- b. Concerning those away from God, are conservative Christians generally quicker to judge or love?

2. Have someone read the below passage from *Christian Pharisees* aloud. Discuss the following questions: Is the author right that evangelicals practice holiness by separation? Do you agree that compassion should be at the heart of Christians' interactions with non-Christians? If not, what should be? How good a job do conservative Christians usually do at showing compassion in these situations? What are some practical examples of what it would look like to live out in your life the compassion mentioned in the second paragraph?

"The problem with the *holiness by separation* idea is not that holiness or separation are irrelevant ideas. There is a place within spiritual lives for holiness – God does want His people to be less sinful and to be more like Him. There is a place within spiritual lives for separation – there may be times a believer has to remove himself from a situation for one reason or another. The problem was that the Pharisees had put *holiness by separation* at the center of their faith in how they dealt with the people around them. When they encountered those who seemed to be distant from God, the center of their response was *holiness by separation*.

"Here Jesus tells us what He wants at the center of His followers' faith when it comes to those who are distant from God: *compassion*. That is the guiding principle. When you see the woman mired in sexual sin, Jesus wants your first response to be compassion. When you encounter the

homeless man who is clearly half-wasted, Jesus wants your first response to be compassion. When you talk to that co-worker who loves to spout atheist rhetoric half because he believes it and half to get a rise out of you, Jesus wants your first response to be compassion. When you see on the news the woman walking out of the abortion clinic, Jesus wants your first response to be compassion.”

3. Have someone read the below passage from *Christian Pharisees* aloud. Discuss the following questions: Do you agree with the statements the author makes about conservative Christians in the first two sentences of this passage? Do you agree that conservative Christians do not have the same compassion toward “sinners” that Jesus had? If so, what are the specific reasons for the difference? Do you know of a Christian who is good at showing this type of compassion? If so, share a few details about what their life looks like.

“Christians are more known by who and what they are against than whom and what they support. Christians lead with judgment and presume that mercy and grace must follow much later. Christians consistently fail to have the right thing at the center in their dealings with sinners. Remember the Philip Yancey story with which I began the book? ‘I was already feeling terrible about myself. They’d just make me feel worse.’ This is the reputation of followers of Jesus?”

“Why did the tax collectors and sinners *want* to eat with Jesus? It is really not that complicated. It was *the compassion that Jesus had for them*. He genuinely loved them. He delighted in sharing mercy. He was quick with a word of grace. He did not look at them as people who could be loved by God if they made major life changes; He saw them as people who were already desperately loved by God. *Of course they wanted to eat with Him!* Who wouldn’t? Under such conditions, who among us would not delight in every moment with Him?”

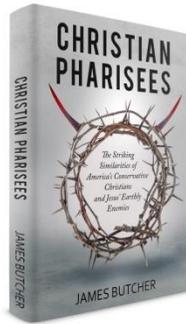
4. Have someone read the below passage from *Christian Pharisees* aloud. Discuss the following questions: How has conservative Christians’ pursuit of the culture war hurt their ability to show compassion? What do you think would be the outcome of actually living out this “thought experiment”? How challenging would it be for you personally to live like this? Do you think pursuing that would be a good idea or would lead to negative consequences?

“A small thought experiment: what if Christians forgot all their larger culture war concerns, all their passion for ‘winning America back,’ all their good reasons for condemning ‘those people’ and for the next decade made compassion their central thought toward those who are away from God? What if they did not obsessively debate whether doing so might be perceived as accommodating sin or might not be sufficiently conservative? What if they just led with compassion in every encounter with people who are away from God?”

5. Have someone read the below passage from *Christian Pharisees* aloud. Discuss the following questions: Do you think that evangelism is too often shared as a canned presentation? Do you think there is often a lack of compassion in conservative Christians’ evangelism? Do you agree with the author that more compassion would increase the harvest? Can you give some practical examples of what pursuing this might look like?

“[Matthew 9:35-38] is certainly an evangelism passage, but what is rarely noted is the larger context. It is the concluding statement in a passage on *compassion*. It began with the ‘I desire compassion’

story, had two clarifications about the nature of this compassion, emphasized by back-to-back-to-back compassion examples, and then concluded with the statement of Jesus' heart for the people: 'compassion . . . because they were . . . like sheep without a shepherd.' That initial 'I desire compassion' story saw those who were away from God longing to be near Jesus, enjoying His company at a dinner at Matthew's house. Could it be that the missing piece in Christians' poor showing in evangelism is their lack of compassion? Could it be that they have turned evangelism into a canned presentation to be given like a sales pitch with little thought for the need to actually love the person to whom they are speaking? Could it be that even today the harvest is plentiful with many hearts that would respond to an outpouring of compassion, but such a flood is nowhere to be seen in conservative Christian churches? Could it be that what the lost are looking for is a taste of compassion when what Christians have been offering is a straight diet of truth? Could it be that even in Jesus' day the number of people willing to be 'workers' following that approach were 'few' and two millennia have not expanded the percentage who are open to following Jesus' compassionate lead, even if that is the key to evangelistic impact?"



***Christian Pharisees'* Small Group Bible Study** **Chapter Two: "Whoever Exalts Himself Shall Be Humbled"**

1. In *Christian Pharisees*, the author explains the spiritual principle behind "Whoever exalt himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted." Read aloud the below passage from the book about that principle. Discuss the following questions: Does the spiritual principle of God working through the humble person make sense? How often do most Christians look for God to work through them and how often do they just handle things themselves? Can you think of a person you know who is humble and God is using in a profound way? Do you think the conservative Christian church in America is known more for its humility or its arrogance?

"On the other hand, when a Christian humbles herself, it sets her on a completely different path. It could be a willingness to take the least-wanted task at a church event. It could be doing acts of love within her neighborhood that no one knows about because they are behind the scenes and she does not write about it on Facebook. It could be the way she treats the janitors and service people at her workplace, even jumping in to help them when the opportunity presents itself. It could be the extra cup of coffee she buys for the homeless person she saw on her drive to McDonald's. Whatever the specifics of the situation, she is willing to be humble.

"As she does this she lives her life in the same spirit Jesus did. Because she is willing to act this way, she begins to grow in spiritual maturity. She becomes more like Jesus. As that happens, she becomes someone through whom God can do greater things. The key for God being able to work through someone is her closeness to Christ – her spiritual maturity.

"Now Jesus' positive promise comes to fulfillment: 'whoever humbles himself shall be exalted.' This does not mean that God necessarily gives her a lofty title and position, though that does sometimes happen. What it means is that she has become a person *through whom God can do great things*. She becomes 'exalted' in spiritual power as she finds her life having a disproportionate impact on those around her. She finds that she often 'just happens' to be in the right place at the right moment. She discovers that her words turn out to be exactly what that person needed to hear. She finds that the ministries in which she serves begin to see an outsized impact. She prays and sees her answers come more quickly and dramatically. Why is all this happening? Because God is working *through her*."

2. *Christian Pharisees* examines three passages where "Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted" appears in the gospels. The first is Matthew 23:1-12. Read that passage aloud and answer the following questions:

a. What jumps out to you about verses 5-12?

b. Verses 5-7 point out how much the Pharisees liked the public expressions of their faith. Read aloud the following passage from *Christian Pharisees* and discuss whether you think it is an accurate description of conservative Christians:

“[H]ow much is left of most Christians’ faith when all that is visible is gone? Take away church on Sunday morning, where he might be going to be seen rather than because he truly wants to worship God. Take away that big leather-bound Bible that is laid out on her lap as the pastor preaches. Take away the Instagram pics and Facebook posts. What is left? How much actual time does he spend every day in private prayer with God? How often does she read that thick Bible when no one else is around? How many people does he financially help with no one knowing? What ways does she serve where no one can see? A strong argument can be put forth that Christians have made the things that define a ‘faithful Christian’ things you can see, like showing up three times a week for church. Try to find someone within the Christian world who will argue that Christians as a group are doing well at the ‘hidden things,’ like personal Bible study, private prayer, and secret acts of compassion. By their pastors’ own constant admonition, Christians have a ‘faith’ that is defined by outward appearance, not inward maturity.”

3. The second “exalted/humbled” passage is Luke 14:7-11. Read the passage aloud and answer the following questions:

a. What jumps out to you in verses 7-11?

b. Verses 7-11 point out how much the Pharisees were engaged in social competition. Read aloud the following passage from *Christian Pharisees* and discuss whether you think it is an accurate description of conservative Christians:

“Do Christians show any difference from the culture at large on the issue of *social competition*? None that is visible. They are every bit the strivers that the rest of society is. There is little reputation of Christians befriending the lowly and eschewing the powerful. Even among Christian pastors, how is it that they claim to be following the leading of the Spirit, yet that inevitably points them toward ever-larger congregations? The Spirit never wants pastors moving to smaller, less socially prestigious churches? Further, why is the American church so rigidly subdivided by class and race? Almost all congregations are homogeneous, with Christians ‘being led’ to join churches that are uniformly people of their own race and their own socioeconomic class. Apparently the Spirit does not want them worshipping with anyone who is lower on the *social competition* ladder?”

c. Read Luke 14:12-14. Do you know of any Christians who are regularly doing this? If not, what does it say about us that we are blatantly ignoring a command of Jesus?

4. The third “exalted/humbled” passage is Luke 18:9-14. Read the passage aloud and answer the following questions:

a. What jumps out to you in verses 9-14?

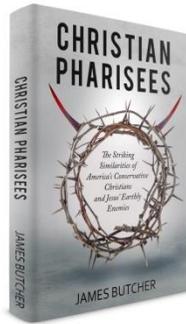
b. Verses 9-14 point out that the Pharisees were confidently comparing themselves with those around them. Read aloud the following passage from *Christian Pharisees* and discuss whether you think it is an accurate description of conservative Christians:

“Christians have a problem with spiritual pride. They see themselves as the godly remnant within the United States. They are well known for their abrasiveness in their moral judgments, but not for their humility. They are renowned for being confident in the truth of their opinions, but not for their compassion. It is stunning how often their spiritual pride blinds them to the corrosiveness of their actions.

“There are many contributing factors to Christians’ pride: their love of increasingly fine dividing points in theology; their joyful arrogance in being right; their burden to stand for God against the ‘bad people’ in society; the insufficient holiness (in their judgment) of those who disagree; the public’s ignorance of the Bible leaving few with the knowledge to question Christians’ viewpoints with Scriptural rebuttals.”

5. Read the following passage aloud. Discuss the following questions: Is the powerlessness of the conservative church proof of its spiritual pride? If so, what’s the next step for conservative Christians?

“Instead of being exalted and empowered through God’s movement, churches find themselves casting about to manufacture some evidence of progress. If the church were actually humble, it would find itself being exalted by God – used in powerful ways to make an obvious difference in the world. Its powerlessness is ample evidence of its pride problem.”



***Christian Pharisees'* Small Group Bible Study**
Chapter Three: “[They] Will Take Away Both Our Place And Our Nation”

1. In *Christian Pharisees*, the author argues that American conservative Christians have pursued political power. Read aloud the below passage from the book. Discuss the following questions: Do you agree that American conservative Christians have been focused on regaining political power? Do you think that has happened because American conservative Christians feel they have lost power in society?

“Do American Christians share the Pharisees’ obsession with power? Without question. A majority of Christians’ public persona over the last forty years has been centered in their pursuit of political power in an effort to ‘take our country back.’ As that phrase suggests, there is a palpable sense among Christians that power they once held has been wrested from them, to the ill of country as well as Christians themselves. They desire to restore their power, with the fervent belief that their renewed power will mean a renewed America.”

2. In *Christian Pharisees*, the author argues that America is not a Christian nation. Read aloud the below passage from the book. Discuss the following questions: Do you agree with the author that Israel and the church are the two “nations” referred to in the Bible? Do you agree with the author that America is not a Christian nation? Have conservative Christians wrongly assigned the blame on “them” (abortionists, homosexuals, liberals, feminists, Democrats, secular humanists, evolutionists, the mainstream media, etc.)?

“The perennial drumbeat of conservative Christians fighting the culture war centers on the fact that the problem is ‘them’ and America has to be won back. They endlessly quote the Old Testament passage 2 Chronicles 7:14: ‘If [My] people, which are called by [My] name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek [My] face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land.’ This is God’s promise, the evangelical argument goes, and it applies to America. The problem is ‘them’ and their unwillingness to humble themselves, pray, and turn from their wicked ways. What is wrong with this country is ‘them.’

“The problem with that argument (and it is a massive problem) is that this promise is from the Old Testament. A solid argument could be made that it does not have a direct application today – that it was specific for Israel in that day and time or perhaps Israel throughout her ancient history. But if it does have direct application today, it would only be to *the nation of God*. That is not America, but the church. So if there is an application for today, it is not that *America* needs to repent in order

to see God's forgiveness and healing, but that the *church* needs to repent to see God's forgiveness and healing.

"This, of course, completely changes the dynamic of where blame is assigned. The problem is no longer 'them;' for Christians, the problem is 'us.'"

3. In *Christian Pharisees*, the author argues that God wants passionate followers of Christ, not believers in a vague civil religion. Read aloud the below passage from the book. Discuss the following questions: What are the dangers of pushing a shallow, generic religion instead of pointing people toward following the actual teaching of Jesus? Is there value in having people claiming to be religious if they are not followers of Jesus? Are conservative Christians right to desire to return to the 1950s?

"The massive push in the 1950s to incorporate God into public life bore results in seeing more people in church. This effort, with the help of Billy Graham and Dwight Eisenhower, pushed America toward that previously mentioned high-water mark of 69 percent of Americans claiming church membership. That is less impressive, though, when one considers that during that time 47 percent of Americans 'could not name even a single author of the gospels.' As Kevin Kruse writes in his excellent history of the era, 'The American people, like Eisenhower, had become very fervent believers in a very vague religion.' I am reminded of the quote from an Anglican pastor who was asked about the size of his parish. He replied, 'A mile wide and an inch deep.'

"Is this something to which it would be worth returning? Is getting as many people as possible into the pews a worthy goal if their faith is a bland cultural Christianity that bears little resemblance to the Bible's description of what it means to be a follower of Christ? Would Jesus be more pleased with a relative few passionate followers or with a massive majority of unchanged church members?"

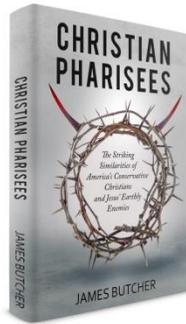
4. In *Christian Pharisees*, the author argues that the culture war represents a loss of vision by conservative Christians of what God desires. Read aloud the below passage from the book and discuss the following questions: What is the mission of the church? What place does changing society have in that mission? Is the accumulation of political power part of that mission? Do you agree with the author that conservative Christians have been power hungry?

"The focus of the church was not intended to be the accumulation of earthly power or the taking over of a secular nation. The mission given by Christ concerns the redemption of souls and instruction in the way of Christ that leads to abundant living. Certainly there are substantial ways that such an endeavor, properly pursued by the church and fully empowered by Christ, will impact the larger society. To the extent that improves culture and society, it is a welcome side effect. But it is exactly that: a side effect.

"Christians' pursuit of a culture war represents a loss of vision of the mission that Christ gave the church. Christians' pursuit of a culture war has served to alienate the very people whom they were supposed to be winning.

"The base fear that motivates this pursuit is the loss of power. The base passion that spurs this pursuit is the regaining of power. This, of course, is made more palatable by the refrain that Christians are winning America back *for God*. It is just a happy coincidence that getting America back for God also represents an increase in power, authority, and influence for Christians themselves.

“The Pharisees of Jesus’ day fretted that they would lose ‘both our place and our nation.’ Christians, in a manner so public as to be undeniable, have fought for the last few decades to regain their place and their nation.”



***Christian Pharisees'* Small Group Bible Study** **Chapter Four: "A People Who Will Produce Its Fruit"**

1. In *Christian Pharisees*, the author cites statistics about public perception of Christians. Read aloud the below passage and discuss the following questions: Do you agree with the perceptions of these "young outsiders"? If so, how big of a problem do you think this is in sharing the gospel? If not, why do you think they hold this erroneous view?

"... the perceptions of those outside the church give some indication whether Christians are living fruitful lives. The news is, unsurprisingly, not good. One study asked opinions of young people who do not go to church. 'Nearly nine out of ten young outsiders (87 percent) said that the term *judgmental* accurately describes present-day Christianity. This was one of the big three – the three most widely held negative perceptions of Christians (along with being antihomosexual and hypocritical).' Equally sad, only 15 percent of those young non-Christians 'thought the lifestyles of those Christ followers were significantly different than the norm.' Of course, public perception is not necessarily the same as reality, but here the numbers are significant because they point in the same direction as the other three points I am sharing."

2. In *Christian Pharisees*, the author argues that Christians have emptied "belief" of its full meaning. Read aloud the below passage and discuss the following questions: Do you think that many people understand "belief" in this dumbed-down way? Where do you think this understanding comes from? How can Christians do better at helping people understand the full definition?

"The second approach to fruitfulness among Christians focuses on one item rather than a whole list. The focus is on saying that you 'believe in Jesus.' Christians have dumbed down 'believe in Jesus' to where it only means 'mentally agree with the idea that Jesus existed.' That means when you ask someone if they 'believe in Jesus,' their affirmative answer means 'Yes, I believe that Jesus lived 2,000 years ago, died on a cross, and was resurrected from the dead.' They believe that *as a fact*. When the Bible speaks of 'believing in Jesus,' it has in mind the idea of someone believing that Jesus lived, died, and was resurrected, but also that He was who He claimed to be and that we are to be followers of His teaching. We are to believe *as an act of obedience*."

"There is an old story of a tightrope walker preparing to go across Niagara Falls. He brought a wheelbarrow out before the crowd and asked, 'Who thinks I can push this wheelbarrow across the tightrope?' The crowd roared its confidence. 'Who thinks I can push this wheelbarrow across the tightrope with a person in it?' The crowd roared its confidence. Then he said, 'Great! Now, who will

get in the wheelbarrow?’ And the crowd was silent. Belief is not saying you think Jesus can do it; belief is getting in the wheelbarrow. Belief is not saying you think Jesus is great; belief is actually obeying the teaching of Jesus.”

3. In *Christian Pharisees*, the author argues that fruitfulness is a necessary part of the Christian life and not a nice bonus. Read aloud the below passage and discuss the following questions: How important is it that not producing the desired fruit was the reason that Jesus said He was taking the Kingdom away from the Pharisees? Do you agree that fruitfulness is necessary to the Christian life? What’s the difference between a saved person producing fruit and a person being saved by works?

“This was the point Jesus drew out of the story: ‘Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will *produce its fruit*.’ The point is not lost on its intended audience. A couple verses later the Bible says: ‘When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard His parables, they understood that He was speaking about them.’

“The passage makes it abundantly clear that Jesus was dissatisfied with the Pharisees because they were not producing the fruit that should come with being God’s people. Jesus gave His kingdom to a new group of people who would produce the fruit of the kingdom in their lives. This is not a side issue, but is the stated reason for the transfer. It shows that fruitfulness is a major expected result for the new system, not a nice extra.”

4. In *Christian Pharisees*, the author argues that fruitfulness should be obvious and not hidden. Read aloud the below passage and discuss the following questions: Should salvation result in obvious proof or is that presuming too much? What do you think should be the impact of the “most powerful Being in the universe” taking up “residence within us”?

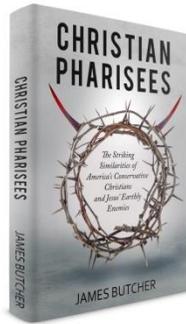
“In spite of Christians regularly saying things like ‘There is no way to know whether you are having an impact or not’ or ‘We will not know until we reach eternity if we have done any good,’ this passage points in the opposite direction. It states that fruitfulness is clear and obvious. Certainly there are some situations where a person will not know in this life whether they had an impact, but that does not change the overall truth here. A good tree produces good fruit.

“Why do Christians not preach this? Because they have dumbed down ‘belief’ to merely mean verbal assent to a list of doctrines. There is no expectation in most Christian circles that *the normal Christian life* will bear obvious fruit. There may be a hope that it will happen for the particularly good Christians, but it is seldom stated that fruitfulness is *normative for the Christian life*. While Christians rightly claim the Biblical truth that salvation comes by grace through faith, they also need to proclaim the Biblical truth that such a powerful salvation produces a clear change in a person’s life. We are not saved by works, but when we are truly saved there will be evidence in our lives that the most powerful Being in the universe has taken up residence within us.”

5. In *Christian Pharisees*, the author argues that fruitfulness should be substantial. Read aloud the below passage and discuss the following questions: Is this degree of fruitfulness impossible? What does it say about the Christian church in America that it seems so out of reach? Do you think this is possible for your life?

“Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop – a hundred, sixty, or thirty times what was sown.’ This is a picture of a life that does not merely produce a ‘Charlie Brown tree’ harvest – this is a picture of an *abundant* harvest. This is an echo of the idea Jesus taught in John 15 when He said that His normal follower would ‘bear *much* fruit.’ In this four soils parable is again the idea that a Christian is someone who does more than just feign empty ‘belief’: ‘these are the ones who have heard the word in an honest and good heart, and hold it fast, and bear fruit with perseverance.’

“Now, just how impressive is a harvest that is a hundred, sixty, or thirty times what was sown? One leading evangelical notes the average ‘planted seed to harvest seed’ ratio in Palestine in that era was eight times what was sown. Jesus promised thirty times, sixty times, even a hundred times. That means that Jesus spoke about fruitfulness that ranged from impressive to overwhelming.”



***Christian Pharisees'* Small Group Bible Study**
Chapter Five: "He Who Is Forgiven Little, Loves Little"

1. In *Christian Pharisees*, chapter five revolves around the story of Simon the Pharisee and the "sinful woman" that is found in Luke 7. Read aloud Luke 7:36-50 and discuss the following questions: What in Simon the Pharisee's religion led him to having the reaction he did in verse 39? What is the point of the parable that Jesus tells in verses 41-42? What do the different behaviors described in verses 44-46 tell us about how each of the two people thought of Jesus? Is there anything else that jumped out to you as you read the passage?

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In *Christian Pharisees*, the author shares a chart that distinguishes between "Plan A" and "Plan B." The chart is shared below. "Plan A" is the Pharisees' approach; "Plan B" is Jesus' approach. The next four questions in this small group Bible study deal with the chart.

	Plan A	Plan B
What does God want most from us?	Be good	Love
Who is at an advantage?	Best of rule-keepers	Worst of sinners
Why are they at an advantage?	Not like those flagrant sinners	More forgiveness = more love
How should I respond?	Sin management	Confess who you really are

2. The author writes that Question #1 is "What does God wants most from us?" Read aloud the below passage and discuss the following questions: Do you agree that what God most wants from us is love? Do you think that most churches focus more on appearing to "be good" than on loving God? Do most American conservative Christian church members look more like Simon the Pharisee or the "sinful woman"?

"Question #1 is 'What does God want most from us?' Plan B says that the answer is 'love.' When Jesus was asked what the greatest commandment was, He pointed people to two commandments both of which were focused on love (love God, love others). In fact, He went so far as to say that the whole Law hung on those two things.

“It is an astounding thought to consider: God wants *our* love. In the Luke 7 story, compare the woman’s outward, shameless expression of unembarrassed love for Jesus to Simon’s cool, intellectual, doctrinaire, prideful receiving of Christ. When you consider how many churches are filled with ‘respectable people,’ that is probably not a good sign. Why do churches so plainly and consistently fail to attract the brokenhearted and downtrodden? It points to Christians being Plan A people, like the Pharisees.

“An honest analysis of the vast majority of churches would conclude that love is not the main defining characteristic of those congregations or the Christians who populate them.”

3. The author writes that Question #2 is “Who is at an advantage?” Read aloud the below passage and discuss the following questions: How does grace change who is the most likely to come to God? Does this seem backward to you or does it make sense? Do you agree with the author that most people in church do not truly understand how radical the idea of grace is?

“Question #2 asks ‘Who is at an advantage?’ Here the Plan B answer shocks: ‘the worst of sinners.’ What? How can this be? This is where we need to understand the radical nature of *grace and forgiveness*. The Pharisees’ (and most Christians’) approach pursues trying to be good by following the rules. The idea of grace posits the unavoidable failure of that approach.

“Grace argues that our human attempts at obeying the rules to please God will fail because we cannot perfectly keep them. This will inevitably leave us short of God’s standard. Grace puts forward that a person cannot earn her way to God. She must be saved *by grace*. That is, it must come as a free gift from God. Christians believe this happens through Christ’s death and resurrection. When a person becomes a Christian, she receives it *by grace through faith*. That is, her *faith* in Christ allows God to save her *by grace*. It is a gift. A person simply needs to recognize her spiritual need, humble herself before God, and ask for God’s help. Obviously, this stands in stark contrast to attempts to get to God by being ‘the best of rule-keepers,’ trying to earn her way there.

“Who is most likely to embrace this grace? It is those who are ‘the worst of sinners.’ It is those who understand how badly they have messed up and have no illusions of being ‘better than those people.’ Those in such a situation hear of the possibility of grace and leap at it. They know what an incredible offer is being made – and unlike those who are ‘the best of rule-keepers,’ their obvious sin (remember that they are not good at sin management) forces them to acknowledge they cannot earn their way to God. Remember that the question we are answering is not ‘Who needs grace?’ – the obvious answer there is *everyone*. The question is ‘Who is at an advantage?’ and the nature of grace makes those who have great sin more likely to pursue it.”

4. The author writes that Question #3 is “Why are they at an advantage?” Read aloud the below passage and discuss the following questions: Do you agree that there is a close relationship between love and forgiveness? Do you think that many conservative Christians coming from respectable backgrounds believe that they have little to be forgiven of? Do most Christians not understand “how big a game changer grace is”? How does grace mean that the “worst of sinners” are more likely to come to God?

“Question #3 then follows: ‘Why are they at an advantage?’ The answer is that ‘more forgiveness = more love.’ It is a principle explicitly stated at the end of our Luke 7 story: ‘For this reason I say to you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven, for she loved much; but he who

is forgiven little, loves little.’ There is a symbiotic relationship between forgiveness and love. The more forgiveness you receive, the more love you are going to show. Simon did not even share the basic courtesies with Jesus when He came to the house; the massively forgiven woman outdid him in acts of extraordinary welcome and affection. Compare that to Christians who invite Jesus into their hearts, but then do little to make Him feel welcome. They call themselves Christians, yet are barely cordial to Christ in the claims He makes on their lives.

“Another way to put it is this: there is a predictor of how much we will love God. Certainly other factors are in play, but the biggest factor is how much we have been forgiven. The woman *loved Jesus* more than Simon did. Period. And *love* is what God desires.

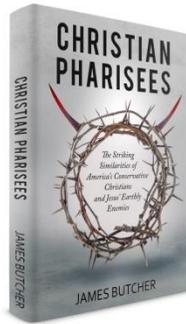
“I do not think that most Christians appreciate just how big a game changer grace is – how much it alters everything, how much it turns religion on its head, how much it rearranges the natural order of things. Christians seem to mention grace only as the means by which someone is saved. It is more, though, than simply the name of the mechanism by which salvation happens. The very fact that it is the means by which someone is saved has an enormous influence on who gets saved, on who is most likely to be saved, and on who is at the front of the line. Grace is not earning salvation via good works or a good reputation, but is the acknowledgement that you can never in your own power be good enough. This means that those who were the least likely to be able to ‘earn their salvation’ will be the most likely to jump at this new system.”

5. The author writes that Question #4 is “How should I respond?” Read aloud the below passage and discuss the following questions: Why do respectable people find it harder to “confess who you really are”? Is the culture in most churches one that encourages confession or pretending? Do most respectable people believe they have massive sin that they need to be forgiven of or do they concentrate on how much better they are than “those people”?

“Question #4 continues by asking ‘How should I respond?’ The Plan B answer is ‘confess who you really are.’ Attempts at ‘sin management’ – looking good in public while hiding your worst sins – will not fool God. It can lead to lots of nice things being said at your funeral, but it will not help you at the Final Judgment.

“In the Luke 7 parable, both of the debtors owed massive amounts of money. Sure, the second guy can take some solace that he does not owe as much as the first guy, but that does not put him one nickel closer to being able to actually pay his heaping debt. The quickness to look to the ‘not-as-bad-as’ defense has long been a human tendency. ‘I am not perfect, but I am not as bad as him.’ From a Biblical perspective, though, a more analogous defense would be ‘Sure, I have killed someone, but at least I am not a serial killer like him.’ How well would that defense work before a jury? Not too well. You are guilty and deserving of death. . . .

“When it comes to ‘sin management,’ it is not that we do not have sin, because we do. It is that we as a culture have come to minimize it or deny it altogether. The tragic irony is that we think by denying and minimizing our sinfulness, we will get closer to God. In fact, it is by admitting our horrid sinfulness that we actually have greater opportunity to love God.”



Christian Pharisees' Small Group Bible Study

Chapter Six: “You Are Israel’s Teacher and Do You Not Understand These Things?”

1. This chapter begins with a look at John 3:1-15. Read aloud those verses and discuss the following questions: What does Jesus think of Nicodemus’ theological insight? How is it possible that Nicodemus was a “religious expert” and yet was immediately lost in what Jesus said? Do you agree with *Christian Pharisees* that what Jesus told Nicodemus was “Spirituality 101”? Do you agree with *Christian Pharisees* that the Pharisees were “experts in religion but beginners in spirituality”?

2. In *Christian Pharisees*, the author argues that the basic outline of Paul’s theological masterpiece (Romans 1-8) can be summarized in four points. Read aloud the below passage that summarizes those four points and answer the following question: Do you agree with author James Butcher that this is the correct summary of the gospel as presented in Romans 1-8? If not, how would you summarize the gospel?

“To summarize Paul in Romans 1-8:

1. Repent of your sins.
2. Believe in Jesus’ death and resurrection.
3. You are made a new creation in Christ.
4. You walk forward in the power of the Holy Spirit.”

3. In *Christian Pharisees*, the author argues that most conservative Christian gospel presentations focus almost completely on point #2 of the four points shared above. Read aloud the below passage that summarizes the Roman Road and answer the following questions: Do you agree with the author that the Roman Road concentrates almost entirely on point #2? Do you agree with his argument that conservative Christians are not preaching a false gospel but are preaching a woefully incomplete gospel?

“... the ‘Roman Road’ that is a standard salvation presentation among Christians. In fact, it is probably not pressing the issue to call it *the* standard salvation presentation among Christians. What is the Roman Road?

1. Romans 3:23.

All have sinned.

2. Romans 6:23.

Everyone deserves spiritual death for their sins.

3. Romans 5:8.

Jesus died for humanity.

4. Romans 10:9.

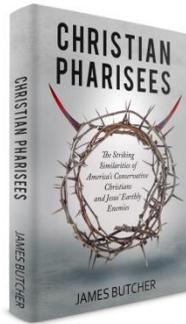
Believe in Jesus and you will be saved.”

4. In *Christian Pharisees*, the author argues that conservative Christians preaching an incomplete gospel has had substantial negative consequences. Read aloud the below passage and answer the following questions: Do you agree that preaching an incomplete gospel has directly led to many people “who say they are Christians, but who bear no fruit and have no life change.” Do you agree that the present definition of “believe in Jesus” is inadequate? Why or why not? Do you agree that conservative Christian leaders are directly responsible for this situation? Do you agree that it is more difficult for people who believe this incomplete gospel to become truly saved for the reason the author shares?

“Second, for those who contend that what was shared in the Cru, Billy Graham, and Roman Road gospel presentations are sufficient, I have a question: what would be the outcome if you just told people that they need to ‘believe in Jesus’ without sharing the reality of new creation or the necessity of following Christ? You would get a bunch of people who say they are Christians, but who bear no fruit and have no life change. That is *exactly what we have now in America*: many, many people who claim to be Christians but who bear no signs of spiritual fruitfulness in their lives whatsoever.

“Christians’ failure to preach the whole gospel has *directly led* to this situation. If fruitfulness is a sign of true salvation, then church leaders, by espousing incomplete doctrine, have led those people to a false assurance of salvation.

“It is worth pausing to emphasize what a great and grave sin this discussion is laying at Christians’ door: millions of people who honestly believe that they are spiritually right with God despite a complete lack of godly fruitfulness. They have this assurance simply because they said at some point in their life that they ‘believe in Jesus’ and a pastor or church leader assured them that completed the spiritual process. They have that misplaced confidence because pastors and church leaders gave them that confidence by not sharing the whole gospel with them. This false confidence actually makes it much harder for them to genuinely become a follower of Christ because they are convinced that they are already right spiritually. This is spiritual blood on the hands of conservative Christian pastors and leaders.”



***Christian Pharisees'* Small Group Bible Study Chapter Seven: "You Do Not Know the Scriptures"**

1. In chapter seven of *Christian Pharisees*, the author focuses on four stories shared in Matthew 22 concerning Bible knowledge. The first is the "give to Caesar" story (Matthew 22:15-22). Read aloud the below passage and answer the following questions: Do you agree that the "give to Caesar" story shows the Pharisees using their Bible knowledge as a weapon in an attempt to prove someone wrong? Do you think that conservative Christians like to argue about the Bible? If so, what do you see as some of the negative results of such arguing?

"[The Pharisees] were using their Bible knowledge with the sole intent of trapping Jesus in His answer toward discrediting and destroying Him. They were not interested in learning; they were interested in winning. *The Pharisees used their Bible knowledge as a weapon in an attempt to prove someone wrong. . . .*

"There is a caricature of Christians literally beating someone upside the head with a thick, leather-bound Bible. The caricature, like many, is not a whole cloth invention, but merely an exaggeration of a real, prominent trait. Winning a theological argument is a Christian joy. Putting people in their place with the Bible is just doing God's will and protecting the faith. Bible knowledge is about proving that my school of thought and I are right. It is about using my knowledge to win the argument. It is about catching that person in their wrongness. The Bible does refer to itself as the 'sword of the Lord,' but in most cases the way Christians use it results in blunt force trauma."

2. The second story concerns marriage at the resurrection (Matthew 22:23-33). Read aloud the below passage and answer the following questions: Do you agree that conservative Christians are confident in their Bible knowledge? Judging from the story, what do you think Jesus would say is the correct way to view your Bible knowledge? Is there a difference between being confident in the Bible and being confident in your Bible knowledge?

"This [passage] delivers a related point: *your confidence in your Bible knowledge is unfounded.* The heart of this story is Jesus' response to the Sadducees' airtight theological argument: 'You are in error.' The Sadducees gave their best theological argument to prove their point and Jesus straight up told them 'you are wrong.'

"This 'seven brothers' story was not one they had created for this situation. It was undoubtedly a well-worn Bible proof that had long impressed the Sadducee faithful with its power

and wisdom. It gave them confidence in their Biblical understanding, yet Jesus casually swatted it away. Their confidence in their Bible knowledge was unfounded.

“Do conservative Christians have great confidence in their Bible knowledge? Without question – none are more confident in their Bible knowledge. No one loves to argue the Bible more than conservative Christians. They have numerous airtight theological arguments. They have many wonderfully constructed proofs. They have countless undeniable explanations. They have a boxful of knots no one can untie.

“Jesus hammers the Sadducees: *your confidence in your Bible knowledge is unfounded*. Is it possible He thinks the same of conservative Christians: *your confidence in your Bible knowledge is unfounded?*”

3. The fourth Matthew 22 story is the son of David puzzle (verses 41-46). (We will come back to the third in a moment.) Read aloud the below passage and answer the following questions: Do conservative Christians tend to focus on the passages that fit their theology and avoid the others? Do you think it’s possible in your life that a single question from Jesus could reduce you to embarrassed silence? Why do most Christians focus far more on what they know about the Bible than what they do not yet understand?

“The key phrase in this story is in the last verse: ‘No one was able to answer Him a word.’ Here is a core idea of the Old Testament and central tenet of the hope that the Pharisees held: the coming of the Christ, the arrival of the Messiah. Yet on this matter they have no answer to Jesus’ question.

“The central truth this story shares is this: *they were silent in the face of their real Bible knowledge*.

“Christians, like most believers, focus their attention on the parts of the Bible they think they understand. They prefer to avoid the sections that push against the grain of their theology. They often maintain smugness about their Biblical understanding in part because they rarely leave the comfort of their favorite sections of Scripture. . . .

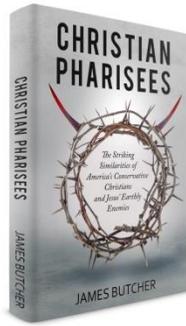
“Christians love to talk about the Bible and share their interpretations. Is it possible that in the face of a question or two from Jesus (even on basic, core Scriptural issues) they too would be left in awkward, embarrassed silence, unable to even hazard a guess?”

4. The third Matthew 22 story concerns the greatest commandments (verses 34-40). Read aloud the below passage and answer the following questions: How do these two commandments (verses 37, 39) encompass “all the Law and the Prophets”? Do conservative Christians put greater emphasis on Bible knowledge than depth of love as a sign of spiritual maturity? Why do you think that Bible knowledge is sometimes elevated above love as the focus?

“The final phrase is the key one: ‘All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.’ If a person passionately pursues these two commandments, it puts them on a track for knowing the heart of the revelation of God.

“How does this relate to the other three stories? This directs us toward a simple faith. It is one that is not focused on endless depths of obscure Bible trivia, but on becoming a person of deep love. It is one that does not look to the Bible for ammunition in an attempt to prove others wrong, but looks for insight to become increasingly loving. It is one that acknowledges that maturity is not about how much one knows, but how much one loves. It understands that loving God and loving others will not necessarily make a life easier, but it will make a life better and a heart fuller.

“The key point is this: *it is not about hyped-up Bible knowledge, but lived-out love.* And the Pharisees’ approach to the Bible did not lead to that type of love. Neither does Christians’. Allow me to repeat myself: despite their self-professed love for and expertise in the Bible, Christians’ approach to the Scripture has not yielded the results God desires.”



***Christian Pharisees'* Small Group Bible Study
Chapter Eight: "The Tradition of the Elders"**

1. The central idea for this chapter arises from Mark 7:1-13. Read that Bible passage aloud and answer the following questions: What jumps out to you from this passage? Does the idea of "setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions" make sense to you? If not, what is confusing?

There are ten traditions from conservative Christian churches discussed in the book. Below are discussion questions for five of the ten examples used in the chapter. Feel free to discuss the other examples if you find them of particular interest.

2. One of the examples in chapter eight concerns the idea of becoming a "member" of a church versus the Biblical use of that term. Read aloud the below passage and answer the following questions: Do you agree that the common use of the term "member" is significantly different than the Biblical usage? Do you agree that this helps create church "members" who feel no obligation to serve? Do you have thoughts on what a better, more Biblical system might look like within the average church?

"In church life, though, being a 'member of the church' means something different from the Biblical definition. It means that a person expressed his desire to join a congregation and his name was entered on the church roll as a 'member' of that congregation. No further activity required; no additional work necessary. In fact, most congregations have a 'membership' that is two or three times larger than the actual number of people attending on a typical Sunday.

"The practical problem with this is it diminishes expectations of what it means to be a part of the body of Christ. I can be a 'member' of the church and not even show up. This is a choice that Christians have made in defining membership."

3. Another of the examples in chapter eight is church growth. Read aloud the below passage and answer the following questions: Is Sunday morning attendance the main definition of "success" that is used in conservative Christian life? Do you agree that the number of disciples is a better measure of success than the number of people in the congregation? What are other worthwhile measures of church success? Do you have thoughts on how these more valid measures could be given more attention?

“If you ask a Christian which churches in his town are the most successful, those named will almost without fail have one thing in common: drawing a big crowd. When a church is searching for a new pastor, one of the desires that is almost always near the top of their ‘wish list’ is someone who can ‘grow the church.’ If a Christian publication is looking for someone to quote, they will inevitably seek out the pastor of a megachurch, because that is presumed to be someone who is a successful pastor.

“In one respect, a large church can obviously be a good thing if it is filled with genuinely saved and transformed believers. More often, though, large congregations can point in a different direction. Specifically, it can teach that drawing a crowd is the primary goal of the church.”

4. Author James Butcher also uses the example of Wednesday evening prayer meeting. Read aloud the below passage and answer the following questions: Do you agree that most prayer requests in Wednesday evening prayer meeting are for physical requests? Do you agree that it would be healthy if a higher percentage of requests were for spiritual issues? What do you think are the reasons that more physical requests are typically mentioned? What are some practical ways to improve this situation?

“The problem is that *physical* prayer requests are the overwhelming bulk of what is offered. Generally, the only time this varies is if the pastor makes it a point to specifically ask for unsaved people for whom to pray, at which time a few names will be offered.

“It must be remembered that people are learning about prayer in those meetings. Not just about how to pray, but also about what to pray. And what they are learning is that you should spend most of your prayer time on physical needs.

“It is notable that some of the greatest intercessory prayers in the New Testament have to do with *spiritual* issues.”

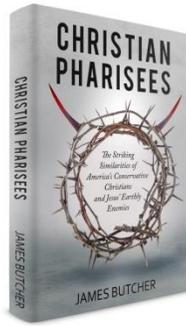
5. Resting on the Sabbath is an additional cited example. Read the below passage aloud and discuss the following questions: Do most conservative Christians rest on Sunday? Are excessive church activities part of the problem? What could be done to improve this situation?

“This makes it clear that there should be a weekly day of rest. There is much to be said about Christians not slowing down at all outside of church on Sundays – it is just another day of chores, errands, and busyness – but that is a subject outside of our immediate concern. That concern is that church leaders have pushed aside the idea of the Sabbath as a day of rest in favor of the Sabbath as a day of church activity. This is the ‘tradition of the elders’ that directly contradicts the Bible’s clear teaching, yet it is business as usual in almost every conservative Christian church.”

6. The final example shared in this chapter focuses on “having a personal relationship with God.” Read aloud the below passage and answer the following questions: If the phrase “personal relationship with God” appears nowhere in the Bible, why do you think conservative Christians have settled on it as their default expression for being a Christian? Do you agree with the author that the phrase is significantly different from “being a follower of Jesus”? If you think it is a problematic phrase, what changes could be made to avoid the issues surrounding it?

“The problem with the ‘tradition of the elders’ of describing salvation as ‘having a personal relationship with God’ is that it seriously obscures what that salvation is to be. The central problem is this: salvation is understood as something that merely requires an acquaintance with Jesus, not obedience to the teaching of Jesus. Someone might ask me if I have a personal relationship with Mike. Perhaps I have not seen Mike in five years, but we did know each other at one point, so my answer to the question is ‘yes.’ We see this repeatedly in spiritual lives with people who rarely give God the slightest thought and make no effort to follow the teaching of Christ nonetheless claiming to ‘have a personal relationship with Jesus’ because they were baptized as a teen or went forward at a revival years ago. Christians’ repeated use of this phrase to characterize salvation leads people to believe that they are in good standing with God because they ‘have a personal relationship with God.’

“In truth, one of the Biblical expectations for a Christian is obedience to the teachings of Christ.”



***Christian Pharisees'* Small Group Bible Study Chapter Nine: "Lovers of Money"**

1. Chapter nine begins by looking at Jesus' parable of the shrewd servant (Luke 16:1-9). Read aloud the below passage and answer the following questions: Does the author's explanation of the meaning of this difficult parable make sense to you? Do you agree that our main money goal should be seeing people come to know Christ? Do you think this is the goal of most conservative Christians today?

"That leads to Jesus' stated goal: 'so that when [the money] fails, [those friends] will receive you into the eternal dwellings.'

"I would paraphrase it something like this: if your passion and heart are to see people experience the love of God in their lives, when you come to the end of your life and all that money cannot be taken with you to the other side, those people who have died before you who were drawn closer to God through your love shown through your money will be there in eternity to welcome you and let you know with certainty that you invested your money well when you invested it in pointing people toward God's love. To return to my summary statement: use what you control to accomplish your goal. 'What you control' in this context is the financial resources that flow through your life; 'accomplish your goal' in this context for the follower of Jesus should be people drawn closer to God in salvation or maturity. The overall point Jesus was going for was that *He wanted His followers to focus their money ambitions on pointing people toward His Father.*"

2. Author James Butcher continues by looking at Luke 16:10-11 and arguing that money is a test of spiritual maturity. Read aloud the below passage and answer the following questions: Do you agree that Christians are accountable to God for the use of their money? Do you think that conservative Christians are just as passionate about living the American Dream as the rest of American society? Do you agree with the author that modern American conservative Christians are failing this "money test" in a way that is historically bad?

"Jesus was saying here that *money is a test*. It is not even an advanced test. The two verses taken together presume that being 'faithful in the use of unrighteous wealth' is the 'faithful in a very little thing' of the previous verse. The way that a Christian spends his money is a *test of his spiritual maturity*.

". . . if American Christians have bought into the American Dream, are passionately pursuing it with abandon and maxed-out credit cards, and are consequently giving minimally to the Kingdom of God, *they are miserably failing a basic spiritual test*. Failing so elementary a test is evidence, in itself, of

their spiritual immaturity. This is made worse because they are, when considering either the sweep of human history or even just worldwide incomes today, among the richest people who have ever lived. A solid American middle-class income does not put you in the fiftieth percentile. From either of those larger perspectives, it puts you above the ninety-fifth percentile. Given their current behavior, American Christians as a group face the future of standing before God in judgment as perhaps the group of Christians who collectively wasted the most money on non-Kingdom pursuits.”

3. Luke 16:10-12 points to the idea of stewardship. *Christian Pharisees* argues that our money does not ultimately belong to us, but God. Read aloud the below passage and discuss the following questions: Do you agree that Christians are to be stewards of their money rather than the outright owners of their money? What are some practical examples of how living with a stewardship mentality would lead to different spending patterns?

“The Biblical idea of stewardship places followers of Christ in a different place than the default position within capitalism. Stewardship, as evidenced in the three above passages, teaches that because a person belongs to Christ, the money that comes into her life is not her own. It ultimately belongs to Christ. Because of that, she is accountable to use it in ways that are pleasing to *Him*. Part of Final Judgment will include a person’s faithfulness and fruitfulness in her use of her money.

“Properly understood and incorporated into American Christians’ financial lives, Biblical stewardship would serve as a powerful antidote to the materialism and consumerism of American culture. It would help Christians to understand that perpetually raising their standard of living is not supposed to be their monetary goal. It would help Christians to focus their spending on ways that would, whenever possible, draw people to Christ. It would help Christians in their ongoing efforts to discern between wants and needs.

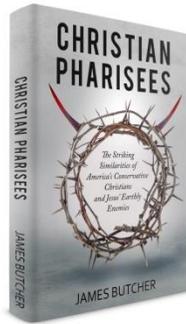
“Of course, as Christians presently live, this almost never happens.”

4. Jesus teaches that a person “cannot serve both God and money” (Luke 16:13). Read aloud the below passage and discuss the following questions: Do you believe that the god of America is money? Is the love of money America’s greatest sin? Why do you think there is not more discussion within the American church on the sins that money and greed can cause?

“The god of America is money. . . .

“While Americans heartily debate issues like abortion and homosexuality, there is surprisingly little discussion of monetary sins. That we should live as we do concerning our finances is simply a given in our society. The greatest sins in a society are rarely the ones that are actively debated; they are almost always the ones that are completely accepted as normal by the population at large. For America, that concerns money. Even within the church, aside from the occasional pastoral request for tithing, there is shamefully little sermon discussion of the intrinsic dangers of money. Given America’s materialistic obsessions and Jesus’ statement that a person cannot serve both God and money, one would presume that wealth and possessions would be a major and regular subject from the pulpit. It is not – and that is further proof that love of money is America’s greatest sin.”

5. James Butcher closes the chapter with an examination of Jesus' parable of the rich fool (Luke 12:13-21). Read that Bible passage and discuss the following questions: What jumps out to you in this passage? Is this parable a rebuke to lives spent pursuing the American Dream?



***Christian Pharisees'* Small Group Bible Study
Chapter Ten: "Woe to You, You Hypocrites"**

1. Jesus repeatedly uses the word "hypocrites" to describe the Pharisees in Matthew 23. The word perhaps most frequently used to describe modern American conservative Christians is hypocrites. Do you think that Christians deserve that label or is it unfair?

2. Concerning Matthew 23:13 on evangelism, author James Butcher writes that Christians often stand in the way of those interested in God. Read aloud the below passage and answer the following questions: Do you think that the reputation of modern Christians often stands in the way of someone believing in Jesus? If so, why do you think Christian hypocrisy is so repellant to potential believers? If not, what do you think holds potential believers back?

"... sometimes the reason that a person showing some interest in God did not walk through that door was the hypocrisy of the 'true believers.' In Jesus' day, the person perhaps had those heart longings, but then looked at the Pharisees and thought, 'If I have to be like that to get to God, no thanks.'

"Are Christians guilty of this? Without question. In more than twenty years as a pastor, I can tell you that the number of people who are unwilling to 'come to Christ' because of intellectual or theological concerns are pretty limited. The number of people is vast who are unwilling because of the hypocrisy they have seen in Christians."

3. Matthew 23:15 focuses on the evangelistic fervor of the Pharisees. Read aloud the below passage and answer the following questions: Are conservative Christians proud of their evangelistic emphasis? Does it surprise you that the Pharisees were evangelistic? How does evangelism become a negative thing when converts are not led to become like Christ?

"This fervor for souls is considered one of the most unassailable proofs that conservative Christians are God's people. How could they be so passionate for people to come to know God if they are not the true representatives of His name? The deeply troubling aspect of the Matthew 23 verse I just shared is that it points out that *the Pharisees were evangelistic*.

"The Matthew 23 verse tells us Pharisees made significant sacrifices ('travel over land and sea') even if it only resulted in one soul coming to God. Does this remind anyone else of the missionary focus that Christians have? They have sent missionaries around the globe in an effort to

‘win the world’ to Jesus. Again, this ‘heart for missions’ is seen as indisputable evidence of a true faith.

“To be clear, the problem is not the evangelistic fervor. The problem is the result: after going to all that trouble to win someone to Jesus, they then ‘disciple him’ so that he can become just like them. In fact, the new convert may be even more passionate about all this than his mentors, making him ‘twice as much a son of hell as you are.’”

4. For this small group study, we will examine one of the examples used in *Christian Pharisees* for the way the Pharisees were “focused on the wrong thing within a given issue” (Matthew 23:16-22). If you would rather discuss one of the other issues, simply refer to the original passage in the book. The example chosen for this Bible study concerns the “war on Christmas.” Read aloud the below passage and answer the following questions: Is the author’s description accurate that Christmas is usually a frenzy of buying? Do you agree with him that Christians have focused on the wrong aspect of this issue, ignoring the way they have participated in creating a materialistic emphasis to the holiday and emphasizing the “war on Christmas”? If so, how could Christians do better on this issue?

“There may well be a substantive issue surrounding Christmas, but it is not the one about which Christians endlessly fuss. In America, the birth of Christ has been transformed into a consumeristic orgy. It is by far the biggest sales season of the year for retailers, who relentlessly push the need for people to buy, buy, buy. Recent years have seen the introduction of sales on Thanksgiving Day, which used to be off-limits. Apparently it is now too much to ask to have one day a year to not buy anything but just be thankful for the blessings we already have.

“The larger point regarding Christmas is this: is the problem that the greeter at Walmart or the local mall says ‘Happy Holidays’ instead of ‘Merry Christmas’ as I come to shop, or is the problem that I spend so much of my Christmas season pursuing materialistic acquisition in the first place?”

5. We will also examine one of the examples used in the book for Matthew 23:23-24 and the issue of “focusing on the wrong matters within faith life.” If you would rather discuss one of the other issues, simply refer to the original passage in the book. The example chosen for this Bible study concerns mercy and foster children. Read aloud the below passage and answer the following questions: How well to modern American conservative Christians do concerning mercy? Do you agree with the author that the prevalence of unclaimed foster children is proof of the American church’s failure on this front? Why do you think conservative Christians often don’t see this issue as a religious issue worthy of their attention? Do you agree with the author that a Christian emphasis on this issue would have a substantial impact on conservative Christians’ reputation in society?

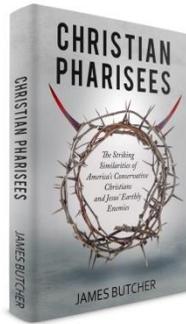
“The second ‘more important matter of the law’ that Jesus mentioned was mercy. . . .

“As an example, consider the issue of foster children. There are more than 400,000 children in the foster care system in the United States. In most of their situations, they are in need of a loving family to foster them through their biological family’s time of struggle. There are approximately 300,000 churches in America. The answer seems pretty obvious, does it not: if only one family in each church in America stepped up to show mercy to these kids in dire need, most of the need for foster families would be filled. Only it’s not. . . .

“One wonders why this is not a burden on more church leaders when you consider James 1:27: ‘Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to *look after orphans* and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.’ Foster kids are ‘temporary orphans,’ as they need someone to care for them in their time of crisis. . . .

“A thought experiment: what if Christians were as vocal and vehement about finding a home for every foster child in America as they are in denouncing homosexual marriage?”

6. Matthew 23 concludes with Jesus offering a lament for Jerusalem. Read Matthew 23:37-39 and discuss the following questions: What jumps out to you in this passage? Why do you think Jesus was still willing to receive them even after all of Matthew 23’s rebuke for their hypocrisy? Do you think these words apply to modern American conservative Christians? If so, do you think conservative Christians are willing to come back to Christ?



***Christian Pharisees'* Small Group Bible Study**
Epilogue: “[They] Rejected God’s Purpose for Themselves”

1. Author James Butcher opens the Epilogue with a look at how John the Baptist had skewed expectations of who Jesus was going to be (Luke 7:18-28). Read aloud the below passage and discuss the following questions: Are modern American conservative Christians “blind” to what God wants to do because they are focused on their own expectations? Do you agree with the author’s assessment of how far off track conservative Christians are or do you think he is too harsh? After all these weeks of study, do you agree with him that conservative Christians are “just like the Pharisees?” If so, what are the biggest reasons from these weeks of small group study? If not, what is your reason for discounting his arguments?

“This is a critical point: many times believers become so focused on their expectations of the way they think that God will move that they become blind to what God actually desires to do. It can happen when, like John, God is not bringing you the power and authority you were expecting. It can happen when the divine message does not fit with your comfortable, pre-existing theology. It can happen when the new message from God threatens your place in society. It can happen when you have been using the Bible to prove your point rather than to seek God’s heart. It can happen when your hypocrisy blinds you to deeper spiritual truths.

“This is, I believe, exactly where American Christians are now. They have become so focused on their expectations of the way that God will move that they are blind to what God actually desires to do. Christians are not merely one-off of having everything together spiritually – they are distant from God. Christians are not almost to their destination, but just running slightly behind – they are pointed in the wrong direction and have their pedal to the floor. The point of this book is not that Christians are close to having it right – it is that Christians are not even in the right ballpark. My goal for the reader of this book is not to believe that Christians need to make a few minor adjustments. My goal is that the reader believe that modern American conservative Christians are just like the Pharisees. Christians are just like the Pharisees.”

2. Luke 7 tells us that the Pharisees “rejected God’s purpose for themselves” (verse 30). Read aloud the below passage and answer the following questions: Why do you think the Pharisees rejected the call to repentance? Why do you think repentance is so difficult? Is repentance more difficult or less difficult for someone who has been a religious person for many years? Why do you think that’s true? Why exactly did the Pharisees’ refusal to repent constitute rejecting God’s purpose for their lives? Do you think that modern American conservative Christians would find it difficult to repent?

“Immediately after that statement, there are two crucial verses: ‘When all the people and the tax collectors heard this [about John], they acknowledged God’s justice, having been baptized by John. But *the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected God’s purpose for themselves*, not having been baptized by John.’ In John’s preaching and invitation to be baptized, God gave the Pharisees an open door to get a little closer to clearly seeing and living out God’s purposes for their lives, but they rejected that opportunity.

“What was it about John’s preaching to be baptized that they would not receive? John’s preaching was centered on *repentance . . .*”

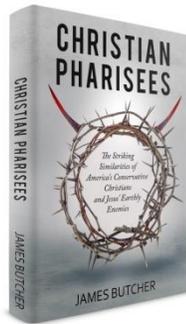
3. Author James Butcher argues that repentance is the next step for conservative Christians. Read aloud the below passage and answer the following questions: Do you think that conservative Christians are likely to repent in response to the message of this book? If so, what reasons do you see for that hope? If not, what do you think stands in the way? In your own life, has reading this book and participating in this small group Bible study led you do repent in your own life?

“Whether Christians will heed this painful message is an open question. It is a hopeful sign that there were some Pharisees who received Jesus’ rebuke and repented. Certainly not enough, but there were some. I pray that far more Christians will heed this word and turn back to God. While I hold to the hope that many humbly will, it must be conceded that it would be a severe departure from their present path. They have invested much in the false way they are traveling.”

4. In his concluding comments, the author states that he believes that an extended time of repentance is necessary. Read aloud the below passage and answer the following questions: Why does the author believe that an extended time of repentance is necessary? Do you agree with him or believe that is an overstatement? If you agree that it’s necessary, why do you think it would be difficult to have happen?

“If we are willing to repent, there will undoubtedly be the temptation to repent and then immediately jump back into action. That, in my opinion, would be a grave mistake. Repentant Christians need to wait on God. We need to dwell in our repentance for an extended period of time. This is a punishment, but it is also a spiritual necessity. We are so entrenched in our previous thinking and so distant from God’s plan the gulf cannot quickly be covered. We need to pray, confessing our sins and admitting our mistakes. We need to deeply read the Word, attempting to see it with God’s eyes instead of our standard theological interpretation. We need to quit believing that we have the right answers to all the questions and begin to see we not only are lacking the right answers, but also usually are not even asking the right questions. We need to lay aside our deeply held desire to be God’s spokespeople on all religious issues and instead submit to the Holy Spirit’s quiet guidance. There is still abundant reason to hope, but the path forward begins with contrition.

“How long will this take? Years? A generation? I do not know.”



If you have questions or comments
about *Christian Pharisees*
or this small group Bible study,
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via www.ChristianPharisees.com.