

# Opinion

— EDITORIAL —

## Pharisees and fake lives

It struck me a long time ago that there's a huge difference between being a Bible-thumper and a Christian. The former triggers an instinct in me that pushes me away from church. The latter draws me closer. What the difference between the two was exactly, I couldn't quite put my finger on. What I knew for certain was that when a Christian (or a member of any other religion for that matter) is loudly, socially focused on how devoted they are to that religion, how dedicated to the laws of it they are—that loudness rings false inside me much of the time. Where I have always found the most authenticity has been in folks who are simply living their lives the best they can without hitting you over the head with their beliefs. But when you stop to really talk with them, what you find inside is sometimes powerful stuff. Transforming, even.

I've heard it said that when a theme keeps popping out at you again and again, there's a lesson trying to be learned. Let me tell you, this year has been a doozy for seeking answers, and it wasn't until last weekend when it finally dawned on me how a pastor of a church, or simply those belonging to that church, could keep repeating a line of scripture—scripture that was technically right—and yet it should still feel so wrong somehow. Talk about confusing!

In this past year, I have seen two separate pastors in two separate churches declare someone precious to me unsaved, unchristian, “crushed by the hand of God,” and other lovelies, simply because he had gone to them while struggling—and revealed that his life, which had been presented to the outside world as flawless for decades—was indeed very far from perfect. Maintaining that façade was keeping him in a joyless, unhealthy life he could no longer maintain, and, being flawed as we all are, he had started on a path out of that life in a way far less than ideal.

Yes, he had sinned, which all of us do pretty much every hour of every day to one degree or another, and because he hadn't followed the “law” perfectly was made to feel like the lowest of the low. One of these church leaders took it upon himself to not even declare this pastoral judgment to the man's face, but spread it like gossip to a member of his family instead. Conform to the law at any cost, or be condemned, was the over-arching message. “Conform to my interpretations, or you are not Christian enough,” was the subtext...

With that came a feeling of superiority and arrogance, and it crossed my mind that those descriptions probably went hand-in-hand with evil infiltrating any church. Heck—didn't they go hand-in-hand with Satan's fall?

And then, probably not by chance, I stumbled across someone's random blog—and I got it. I had been running headfirst into spiritual leaders and congregations rife with Pharisaical spirit. This spirit, I think, is why so many non-Christians view churches as unyielding, hypocritical and out-of-touch. So I started breaking down what that spirit looks like—what it *really* looks like up close and in person.

First, there is a focus on appearance. Jesus likened it to a nice shiny white tomb, looking perfect on the outside,

but filled with death and decay on the inside. How does a man's life in any way honor God if this comparison describes it?

There is also such a standard of incredibly high expectations through actions that adhere to scripture that comes with the Pharisaical spirit, that no man could possibly live up to it—and sometimes the men who truly desire to be “good” destroy themselves trying. Others throw their hands up and walk away from the church as a result. Jesus could live up to the high standard of God. But if we ourselves could, Jesus wouldn't have been necessary in the first place.

One Midwest pastor named Frank Powell said, “Modern-day Pharisees believe in their works. That's why they love James 2:14-26. But they skirt around passages about grace. Oh, yeah. They believe Jesus died on the cross for their sins. But they turn around and mock the cross by trying to earn their salvation.”

We try our best. We do the best we can with what we know at the time.

But Pharisees don't work on the heart. They don't consider motives. They don't look at the voice of God whispering inside a believer in the form of instincts or gut-reactions. Instead, they equate that whisper with fleeting emotions or whims, and as in the case I mentioned above, actually advise Christians to ignore it and simply conform to the law as they see it. If an issue is kept very black-and-white scripturally, then there are no personal, in-between areas to complicate matters. Isn't a relationship with Jesus supposed to be individual and personal?

Jesus was a rebel. He questioned the existing religious system of the day—even breaking Sabbath in order to heal a man in the temple. He preached compassion above legalism. That healing in the temple makes me look at individual situations and use common sense in them. Wasn't Jesus saying that more evil in that specific circumstance was being perpetuated by allowing a man to suffer than by breaking a religious law?

He also tells us to “beware of the leaven of the Pharisees.” I don't know, but maybe that's similar to being told we'll know the kind of tree by its fruit. Is the spiritual advice you're receiving creating fear and doubt and confusion and sickness? Does it focus on condemnation instead of compassion? Does it allow for grace and clean slates?

Powell also says, “Pharisees are exclusive. They pick and choose who enters the group. But Jesus never valued exclusivity. Just look at his chosen 12. A tax collector (Matthew). A doctor (Luke). Fishermen (Peter and Andrew). A Zealot (Simon). That's a conglomerate of guys from many different backgrounds. So, look around at your group? Is it essentially a collection of men and women cut from the same mold?”

We are not cookie-cutter people. When we're told if we seek, we shall find, I assume that seeking means looking at things from different points of view and asking a ton of questions. It means messing up and getting back on track, sometimes in ways that don't “look” perfect from the outside.

Blessedly, the grace of God allows people to stumble; it allows trips into darkness and struggles back out of it. I think that's all part of spiritual development. The Pharisaical church leader, however, will harp on how bad the darkness is instead of lighting a candle and loving the Christian who is finding a new path on the way out of it.

—Kerry McQuisten, Editor

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— SPECIAL COLUMN —

*So I was thinking ...*

## Holiday madness

By Jimmy Ingram  
Special to The Baker County Press

The holidays are here again. Family, friends, snow (hopefully), decorative lights, Santa Claus, holiday cheer. It really is the most wonderful time of the year. It's also a time of the year when we see a few things that leave us speechless.

Black Friday: I'm old enough to remember when Black Friday wasn't really a thing. Sure, shopping the day after Thanksgiving has been around a while, but there was a time when it wasn't yet considered a contact sport. Somewhere along the line retailers and shoppers decided that shopping at midnight while still in a turkey-induced catatonic state seemed like a great idea. By the thousands, people stampede relentlessly to save big money shopping for gifts their loved ones already have. Consumer civility appears optional as credit cards and patience are worn thin. Advertising phrases like “doorbusters” create a sense of urgency, sounding less like the spirit of holiday giving and more like a physical challenge. The irony of Black Friday is that it has managed to transform the kind act of giving to others into a form of consumer gluttony. So let's recap: Giving to others: Good. Running over people at 1 a.m. in a Wal-Mart with the intensity of an NFL linebacker to save \$50 on a TV: Bad.

TV Ads: You've all seen them—the ads suggesting gifts so expensive it's almost comedic.

*(Wife exits house to find her gift: a brand new Mercedes, complete with a decorative holiday ribbon. She's overjoyed, hugging her oh-so-thoughtful husband.)*

Now I'm sure in more affluent neighborhoods this may actually happen but I like to imagine the scenario where the average man/woman decides an \$80,000 car is a great gift idea. I'm guessing the exchange would go like this:

Man: “Honey, your present is outside.”

Woman: “Really?”

Man: “Surprise!”

Woman: “Umm, wow. How much did that cost?”

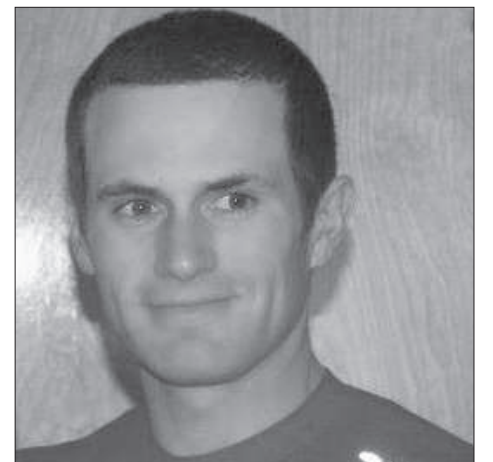
Man: “Don't worry about it.”

Woman: “Did we win the lottery?”

Man: “Uhhh ... no.”

Woman: “You realize that car represents two years of college for our kids, right?”

Man: “Don't like the color?”



Submitted Photo

Jimmy Ingram is a local farmer and father of two who enjoys people watching within our wonderful community and beyond.

Woman: “You're missing the point, honey.”

Man: “Okay, okay. But what are we going to do with that giant bow? You have no idea how long it took me to find that.”

So please, Mercedes, quit making several million people look at their spouse and say, “Who does that?” every time one of your holiday commercials comes on. You've set the bar way too high.

Holiday weight gain: Turkey, ham, stuffing, cookies, pie. Any person who can make it through the holidays without being forced to discover new territory at the end of their belt should get a round of applause. In fact, if it were socially acceptable I'm sure most people would gladly wear nothing but pants with an elastic waist from Thanksgiving day until New Years. It's sobering to realize the good intentions of your frigid four-mile late December walk burned just enough calories to cover roughly 10% of the of the meal you plan on eating. I know, I know, try not to think about it, right? Until you step on the scales five times in thirty seconds, insisting to yourself that number can't be real.

January: Most of us have nothing personal against the month of January. But let's face it, it can be a challenging month. The pressure of New Years resolutions, credit card bills from Christmas, cold days, and the realization that spring is still months away can be tough. Here's an analogy: Consider the month of December as a great night out: Friends, lots of wine, laughter. Now imagine the month of January as the unpleasant hangover the next morning. Of course the good news is that January is a new beginning. A good time to reflect on new ways to improve your life in the coming year. That is, once you figure out how you managed to gain ten pounds and max out your credit card during the month of December.

All sarcasm and kidding aside, I would like to wish everyone a very joyous holiday season. I hope each and every one of you is surrounded by the ones you love, and remember fondly those who aren't there with you.

Happy holidays.

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