

Jeff Foxworthy has made a career of telling "redneck" jokes. For instance, "You might be a redneck if someone asks you for some identification and you show them your belt buckle." Now to be fair the South doesn't have a lock on rednecks. The North has them also. For instance, "You might be a northern redneck if you've ever burned a tire on the hood of your car in winter to help get it started." Redneck jokes are funny because they often painfully close to being true. So today I have something new for you - the Pharisee joke! For instance, you might be a Pharisee if you often find it odd that a sermon applies to everyone in church but you.

You might be a Pharisee:

- if you think the only music God listens to is at least 100 years old
- if you're sure nobody has ever had to forgive you
- if you think the world would be a better place if everyone were just like you
- if you go to church to prove you're good!

Were the Pharisees bad people? Not really, but they were seriously confused about what was important. A young man once came to a great rabbi and asked him to make the younger man a rabbi. It was wintertime then. The rabbi stood at the window looking out upon the yard, while the rabbinical candidate was droning into his ears a glowing account of his piety and learning.

The young man said, "You see, Rabbi, I always go dressed in spotless white like the sages of old. I never drink any alcoholic beverages; only water ever passes my lips. Also, I live a plain and simple life. I have sharp-edged nails inside my shoes to mortify me.

Even in the coldest weather, I lie naked in the snow to torment my flesh. Also daily, I lash my bare back to complete my perpetual penance."

As the young man spoke, a white horse was led into the yard and to the water trough. It drank, and then it rolled in the snow, as horses sometimes do.

"Just look!" cried the rabbi. "That animal, too, is dressed in white. It also drinks nothing but water, has nails in its shoes and rolls naked in the snow. Also, rest assured, it gets its daily ration lashes on the rump from its master. Now, I ask you, is it a saint, or is it a horse?!?!"

Which is more important – what goes into us or what comes out of us? Which defines us more – our outside behavior or our inside motivation?

We probably know the answer to that intellectually but it doesn't always soak through to how we live. A priest was called out for an emergency in the early morning hours. On his return, he was accosted by a mugger, "*Your money or your life!*" Then, when the thief saw the priest's Roman collar, he told him to put his wallet away. The relieved priest lit a cigarette and offered his would-be mugger one. The latter proudly said, "*No thanks, Father. I've given up cigarettes for Lent.*" Like the thief, many Catholics lose sight of the forest because of the trees. We give attention to minutiae and turn our backs on the essentials. There is a danger of thinking God takes our sins lightly because we take them lightly – or that God values what we find worth our time.

I can't tell you how many times over the years I have heard a confession that goes something like:

"I am a drunkard, a wife beater, unfaithful, a liar, and a thief. But I am a practicing Catholic."

Really? What I want to say is that **you need a lot more practice** but honestly the few minutes we have in the confessional isn't enough time to change a heart. By "practicing Catholic" most people mean they do Catholic stuff but it's almost always stuff that Jesus never asked us to do. It doesn't mean that stuff is wrong or harmful but it certainly isn't essential.

Regulations for having Sunday mass require that I wear an alb and stole and a chasuble, that we have candles and fine chalices and altar linens. But I also know that when in Iraq or Korea I celebrated mass in chem gear on a card table using an ugly little folding cup that I could carry in my pocket and Christ was present there no less than he is in St Peter's Basilica in Rome.

You are encouraged to bless yourself with holy water as you enter the church but if you think that little bit of water somehow makes you ready to join the celebration you are so wrong. If it reminds you that it was your baptism that freed you from sin and made a part of the people of God, made you one with all those who will dip their hands into the water, **then** it has been worthwhile.

Traditions and personal practices are valuable because they can remind of what's important and help us define ourselves. But Pharisees – ancient ones and modern one – can get so wrapped up in little details that they forget the values that formed the tradition.

I'm not sure how they conducted the study but the American Society of Microbiologists reports that only 2/3 of the people who use airport restrooms wash their hands;

the other one-third is contributing to the spread of everything from SARS to the common cold. Hand washing is a great idea and it was on the minds of the Pharisees we meet in today's Gospel lesson. But their concern was not the hygiene of the disciples. People in those days didn't know about germs and the spread of disease. No, their concern was that the disciples were not following "the tradition of the elders" and were now **unclean**.

What does "unclean" mean? It has nothing to do with dirty hands, the practice of washing was done for religious purity. It was thought that the normal activities and circumstances of everyday living made a Jew **unclean before God**. Pouring water over the hands temporarily washed away this defilement. So did God mistakenly make a world that was unclean? In the Pharisee's mind, God wasn't part of this unclean world but distant and only reachable by the special ones like themselves.

In his response to the Pharisees, Jesus makes it clear that Clean Hearts are more important than Clean Hands. God's world is not unclean and God is not absent from it and he does care about the things that might not be seen but really make us who we are.

A young student being interviewed about her religious beliefs said, "*Oh yes, I believe in God, but I'm not nuts about Him.*" According to a Gallup Poll that is a good description of how most Americans feel about God. Ninety-four percent of us believe in God. When it comes to translating that belief into action, however, most of us are clearly not nuts about Him.

Or as Jesus said it "*These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.*"

So how do we distinguish the Law of God from mere human practices? How do we know when we are being good Christians or not? It really is not that difficult. We only have to look into our hearts. Am I putting God first? Am I serving Him in others? Am I reverencing Him in every aspect of my life? That's what really matters. From this all the rest flows. Jesus does not condemn rituals and devotions but what he does fault any religious observance that is limited to the external aspects and does not include that for which the rituals exist, namely, conversion of one's heart from pride and self-centeredness to loving concern and compassion for others.

What all this comes down to is cultivating a series of attitudes, internal motivations which are in harmony with with the Christian life. It is by developing these that we will be sure that we are living a life worthy of the Gospels and whatever practices can remind of that are then a blessing rather than a substitute for true conversion.

On your way home you might want to amuse yourself by thinking of some lines to follow up on:

You might be a Christian if.....