

Today, almost everyone learns to read and write through a school system that begins as a young child and goes up through the high school years and beyond. In ancient times, only a small minority of experts could read and write. Scribes often held great power as chief ministers, but their duties often included many civil functions related to the recording of taxes, the census, building projects and the promulgation of the decrees of the king. At the time of Jesus, scribes were experts in religious Law and many if not most were from the Pharisees. They instructed students of the Law. They were treated with respect and given the name rabbi. They also often lectured in the Temple (Hahn 819-820).ⁱ

The Pharisees were a religious sect of laymen within Judaism. Translated from Hebrew, Pharisees means “‘separated ones’ because they separated themselves from all forms of religious and ceremonial uncleanness.” They strictly observed the letter of Jewish law in matters of “ritual piety, purity, and tithing.” They were determined to prevent the Jewish faith from being poisoned or diluted by foreign religious practices. Closely aligned to the scribes, they were openly contemptuous of those with less education who were ignorant of the Law and failed to observe the Law as only a Pharisee could. They often treated sinners and tax collectors like lepers for their religious impurity (Hahn 703-704).

The scribes and Pharisees were often at odds with Jesus (Hahn 820, 704):

- Jesus preached forgiveness. They called him a blasphemer.
- Jesus expelled demons and brought relief to those who were possessed. They accused him of being possessed and driving out demons because he was a pawn of the devil.
- Jesus reached out to sinners and tax collectors. They condemned him for his religious impurity.
- Jesus taught the apostles. They fought the apostles.
- Jesus loved his enemies. They were openly hostile to him and to his mission.
- Jesus taught as one with authority. They were often hypocritical and did not practice what they preached.
- Jesus understood the spirit of the Sabbath and taught that the Sabbath was made for man to include healing the sick, feeding the hungry and other corporal works of mercy. They held the Law required strict observance and that each time Jesus helped someone on the Sabbath he was violating the Law.
- Jesus willingly sacrificed his life for our salvation. They collaborated to have him arrested, plotted his death, and stirred the crowds up to call for the crucifixion of Jesus.
- Jesus died for all. They sought to silence him and hold onto power.

Not all of the scribes and Pharisees were against Jesus and in fact many became Christians after his death and resurrection. The Apostle Paul is the most notable convert. However, in today’s Gospel, like yesterdays, Jesus criticizes the scribes and Pharisees:

- They are concerned with externals, but not with internals. They know the letter of the Law but not the spirit of the Law.
- In earlier generations, prophets were put to death. Jesus has no allusions about his own fate. Like their ancestors who murdered the prophets and the righteous, they will try to silence the voice of God by condemning Jesus to death.

“Woe to you scribes and Pharisees!” All told, the denunciation by Jesus of the scribes and the Pharisees takes the form of nine separate criticisms in the 23rd chapter of Matthew. Historically, we know there was deep opposition among the Pharisees to the mission, ministry and teaching of

Jesus. Furthermore, when Matthew wrote his Gospel there was a bitter conflict between Pharisaic Judaism and the church of Matthew's era.

As we read the Gospel 2,000 years later, we also must be aware that Jesus' critique applies to every era where leaders (religious or civil) fail to live up to the responsibility and trust placed in them. As we hear politicians make promises of all they can do for us and how inept the other side is, we should listen with a healthy dose of skepticism. We should also examine our own words and actions. Do we truly understand the spirit of the Law of Love that Jesus teaches us?

ⁱ Hahn, Scott. Catholic Bible Dictionary.