

# A Few Good Pharisees

Jonathan Banning

While growing up in Orlando, I loved to spend Sunday afternoons with my friend Gregory. When I was 10, an afternoon with the Klines was the perfect way to bridge the gap between morning and evening services. So, whenever morning services concluded, my mission began to convince my parents that I should spend an afternoon with the Klines. My methods were not always pure. Often, I would petition my father with Gregory standing by, both of us eagerly looking for the green light from Mr. Banning. A total guilt trip. Other times, I would ask my dad while he was talking to some member of the church, making sure that if he told me, “no,” he would have to say it in front of somebody else. My father called this tactic “putting [him] on the spot.” Social psychologists have coined a technical phrase for it, “the power of the situation.”

The power of the situation speaks to the amount of social pressure you feel. Asking about going to Gregory’s in the back hallway with no one around eliminates social pressure, but asking in front of Gregory or Miss Nancy Lawson adds power to the situation. It creates an environment where my dad feels compelled to say, “yes.”

This terminology is new, but social pressure is not. We read about men and women in our Bibles who found themselves stuck in extraordinarily powerful situations. Couldn’t we look to ancient Babylon and find perfect examples? Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-Nego found themselves in a powerful situation. The city bowed to Nebuchadnezzar’s idol when the music played, save the three Jewish captives. The pressure increased as the king gave them a second chance. Nebuchadnezzar watched and the furnace roared anxiously awaiting the boys response the next time the music began (Daniel 3). How about Daniel when Darius put a law in place that decreed no one could pray to anyone but him. Daniel prayed to Jehovah three times a day, but now came a crushing social pressure to break the habit (Daniel 6).

We find powerful situations in the Gospels as well. Consider the position of a Pharisee during the ministry of Jesus. To a religious leader, Jesus was the enemy. His teaching endangered their place and preeminence. The resurrection of Lazarus causes them to worry all the more (John 11:48-53). Imagine if you were one of them, put yourself in their sandals for a second. Jesus quickly becomes more respected than me (Matthew 4). Jesus often speaks ill of me and my colleagues (Matthew 23). The most respected Pharisee, Caiaphas, adamantly believes He is worthy of death. A Pharisee in the first century would find himself in an immensely powerful situation. He would feel compelled to hate Jesus and do everything they could to discredit the Son of God. The social pressure must have been enormous.

Despite the power of the situation, we find in our Bibles a few good Pharisees. Do you remember Nicodemus in John 3? He was a rabbi and a ruler of the Jews, but He knew that Jesus was special. He knew that Jesus came from God and for that reason he came to Jesus and sought His teaching (John 3:1-3). Do you remember Gamaliel in Acts 5? He may have saved the lives of all of the apostles by nothing but his words. Gamaliel desired to look for the will of God, and was willing to wait and see if the apostles truly did the work of God (Acts 5:34-40). Or how about our favorite Pharisee, Saul of Tarsus? He cast his vote against all things Christian until he took a road trip to Damascus and met Jesus on the road. From that point forward, he repudiated the Pharisees and began his walk toward Christ (Acts 9:1-18).

We cannot ignore the powerful situation in which a first century Pharisee would find himself. Despite the enormous pressure; in Daniel 3 we find a few good Jews, in Daniel 6 we find one good Jew and in the first century we find a few good Pharisees. In all of these stories, men shook off the pressure of culture for the sake of doing what God demanded, proving an important point. Man is never a slave to his circumstance. Never does the walk become too difficult. Never does the path become too narrow. Never does the road of righteousness become too difficult to traverse. Man is never a slave to his circumstance, no matter how powerful the situation. Doesn't God promise us as much through the Scriptures (I Corinthians 10:13)?

Today, Christians face tremendous social pressure to act a certain way and believe certain things. The circumstance is difficult, but we are not its slave. The situation is powerful, but not overpowering. Do not succumb. Be like those few good pharisees who knew that man is never a slave to his circumstance.