

Series: Born Among Us

Lesson 3: The Battle of Right (The Pharisees)

Lesson Objectives:

As a result of this lesson, students will be able to...

- Define hypocrisy
- Identify who the Pharisees were
- Identify what the Pharisees' encounter with Jesus says about Jesus' identity
- Look for instances of hypocrisy in their own lives
- Continue to build a biblical image of Jesus

Materials Needed:

- ☐ Scrap paper
- ☐ Pens
- ☐ Stuffed animals, action figures, and/or other toys (optional)
- ☐ Bibles
- ☐ Board and markers
- ☐ Jesus image from last week
- ☐ Slips of paper

Lead In:

Give this basic definition of hypocrisy: a hypocrite is someone who pretends to have higher standards than they really do. Now ask students to use the pen and scrap paper to invent examples of hypocrisy. They should not refer to real people or recognizable events, rather they should use general examples. They should write only one example of hypocrisy on each piece of scrap paper. When they are done, they should place the papers face down in the middle of the area/table. Decide how many each student must write, depending on the size of your group; aim for a minimum of ten examples all together. Do an example together, such as “A teacher tells her students not to swear in class but then swears at the students” or “A man says that he only eats gourmet food and then has KD for dinner.”

When they are done, have them turn over all of the examples that were generated and decide whether they are indeed examples of hypocrisy. If they are not, change the wording so that they are good examples. Guide the conversation but let the students do the work. A key thing to watch out for is this: hypocrisy involves pretence. Failure is not hypocrisy. For example, if I say I am trying to be a good golfer when in fact I am not a good golfer, that doesn't make me a hypocrite. It makes me a learner. Similarly, if I say I try to avoid buying products that are environmentally harmful but I did buy some unrecycled toilet paper, that is not hypocrisy. And if I say I go to church and try to follow God, but in fact am still a rotten sinner, that is not hypocrisy. Hypocrisy is about pretending to be better than you are; it is not about success and failure.

Task One:

Ask the students if they know who in the Bible is synonymous with being a hypocrite. The answer is the Pharisees.

Ask if anyone knows who the Pharisees were. Solicit some answers and clarify and correct according to these basic points or your own knowledge of the Pharisees:

- The Pharisees were one group of Jewish people with a particular set of interpretations or beliefs, much like a denomination today.
- They had significant numbers and profile in Jesus' day.
- They believed in following God's laws in a very strict way.
- They worked hard to have political influence so that they could promote their views.
- They were conservative.
- They wanted all Jews to follow their interpretation of the law.
- They modelled right living and hoped others would imitate them.

Transition by saying something like, *Good job. Now that we know who the Pharisees were, we are going to find out what happened to them in the Bible. But first I want to find something out about you and the people that you look up to.*

Task Two:

Ask each student to think of a Christian person that they know who they consider to be very devout and/or that they look up to. Give each student a piece of paper on which to write the name and/or quickly draw a picture of that person. Alternatively, if you have little kids at home or a nursery at church with toys, bring in a variety of stuffed animals and/or action figures to represent the people. Ask the students to select one to represent the person that they selected. Have each student say who they chose and why that person is admirable. Have the listening students check to see if that person really is admirable and have them comment as if they were Jesus. For example, Kellie chooses an older lady called Gloria from the congregation who takes care of the youth and prays for them. The other students agree that Gloria is very admirable and they pretend to be Jesus by saying something like, "Gloria, you are a very faithful servant and I love you."

Wrap up this task by saying something like, *The people you have identified are indeed good examples of pious people who love God and do good things. Of course you find them admirable! They are admirable! In Jesus' day, those people were the Pharisees. The Pharisees were admirable because they did the right thing and worked very hard on following God. Let's find out how Jesus really did respond to them.*

Task Three:

Ask for a volunteer who will look up and read Mark 2:23-3:6. Ask the other students to choose one word to describe Jesus' reaction in the passage that they are about to hear.

When the reader has finished, solicit some answers. Angry, amazed, loving, bold are all possibilities. Now doubt your students will think of more.

Continue to ask these questions about the text, repeating the reading if necessary. The possible answers are next to the questions.

1. **Do you think that the Pharisees were right? Do you think that they knew the rules?** Yes. The Pharisees knew the rules, at least their strict interpretation of them. The Pharisees enforced Sabbath observance (not working one day of the week). They had really figured out all kinds of rules about this general rule. For example, they had figured out that if a wall fell on someone, the rescuers were only allowed to remove enough stones from that person to determine if the person was dead or alive. If alive, they could help the person out. If dead, the body had to stay there until after the Sabbath. They had figured out all kinds of details like that about the Sabbath and other laws.
2. **How did the Pharisees feel in this encounter with Jesus?** Perhaps they were confused, outraged, shocked, offended, worried that Jesus would corrupt people.

3. **Why did Jesus get the man to stand up in front of everyone? If he had already been chastised for working on the Sabbath, why not just heal him at the back of the room, or quietly in secret?** It seems Jesus was trying to make a point, trying to teach something.
4. **And most importantly, what do you think motivated Jesus to break the Sabbath laws?** Primarily, Jesus prioritized love and compassion for human beings over observance of the law and wanted to teach this to others.

Task Four:

Tell the students that you are going to continue looking for some of the things that Jesus said to the Pharisees. Have a volunteer find and read Matthew 23:1-27, the famous woes. Before he or she reads, explain that this is a passage where Jesus addresses the Pharisees, the good people of religion. Tell the students to imagine that Jesus is saying this to them and their heroes, the toys if they are still around. Have the volunteer read in an animated voice, putting feeling and emotion into it.

When the reader is finished, ask the students how they felt hearing those words of Jesus.

Also, ask the students to identify why Jesus was so harsh with the Pharisees. There are really two possible angles from which to answer this question. First of all, as above, Jesus prioritized love and compassion for human beings above the observance of religious rules and he wanted to teach this lesson to his followers and to the religious people. Second, he also hated hypocrisy. He thought the Pharisees were hypocrites. Remember the definition? Pretending to have higher standards than you really have? The pretended to be very faithful when in fact they were not faithful to the highest law, to love God and love other people. Guide some discussion around this.

Wrap this part up by saying something like, *I bet we can all understand why the Pharisees were so angry with Jesus! They thought they were doing great by God's standards but Jesus challenged everything they did. He called them every name under the sun! In public! Imagine how that would feel. Imagine if Jesus came up to you and instead of saying "Good job that you came to church this week," or "I'm glad to see the way you are trying to stay true to your faith," he said, "Forget you! You say you're a good person but you're full of it!" or "You come to church, but it's all for show!" That's what he said to the good religious people of the day, only worse! The interesting thing is that Jesus didn't take issue with what the Pharisees taught; he took issue with how they lived (Matthew 23:3). They neglected the things that matter to God, justice, mercy, and faithfulness, and this is what Jesus could not stand for.*

Now I just want to say one final thing here. We're not saying that the people you look up to are hypocrites or that they don't live what they believe. We were just trying to show that it would have been shocking for Jesus to be so hard on the people that everyone thought were so religious and good. Not all good people are hypocrites, so don't run home to pastor so-and-so and read him or her the woes!

Task Five:

Tell the students that their last job as students of the Pharisees is to turn the tables on themselves. What might hypocrisy look like in their lives? On the board, write the beginning of a sentence: "Woe to you..." Have the students suggest ways to complete the sentence that apply to their own teenaged lives. For example, "Woe to you if you don't drink at the party but you spend all night making fun of other people" or "Woe to you if you argue with your friends that Jesus is real but you don't live as though that were true." Encourage them to get creative and to think of things that apply to their own lives. Aim for six statements (or another number appropriate for your group size).

Task Six:

Finally, revisit the image of Jesus that you started two weeks ago. Ask the students what new things they want to add or change about Jesus as a result of this lesson. Have them summarize some of the key things that they have discovered about Jesus so far. Again, guide the students to articulate deeper and newer insights about Jesus and to record these on the image using more slips of paper and the markers. At the heart of this encounter with Jesus is the message that Jesus cares more about justice, mercy and faithfulness than he does about empty religious observance.

Closing:

Close in prayer, thanking Jesus for who he is and asking God to reveal to each of the students a fresh understanding of his character.