

# Foes and Conflicts

by Harris Franklin Rall

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*Harris Franklin Rall's sermon explores the conflicts Jesus faced, highlighting the tension between his message of mercy and the rigid legalism of the Pharisees.*

**Scripture:** Matthew 10:34, Matthew 12:22, Mark 2:23, Mark 3:31, Mark 7:8, Luke 4:16

**Topics:** "Jesus Teachings", "Spiritual Conflict"

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## Description

Harris Franklin Rall delves into the paradoxes in Jesus' life, where despite his message of love and goodwill, he faced conflicts that deepened until his death. These conflicts stemmed from his different approach to religion, focusing on inner spirit and service rather than outward forms and rules. Jesus' teachings clashed with the Pharisees' legalism and hypocrisy, leading to misunderstandings, opposition, and ultimately his crucifixion. His call for supreme allegiance and willingness to break earthly ties for the sake of the kingdom of God is highlighted in his interactions with family and friends.

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## Transcript

One of the paradoxes in Jesus' life is seen in the fact that, despite his spirit of love, and his message of good will, his own life was one of conflict, a conflict that deepened and grew more bitter till it brought about the end. This conflict appears in different forms and degrees: there is the misunderstanding of his family and friends; there is the attitude of the Galilæan populace, changing from early enthusiasm to later disappointment and indifference; and there is the early and growing enmity of the scribes and Pharisees. These conflicts bring the element of change and movement into Jesus' life, and at last hurry him on to his death.

The first opposition that appeared was that of the Pharisaic party. Mark shows this at the very beginning, when Jesus healed a man upon the Sabbath. The conflict about the Sabbath was the most frequent cause of their attack. Usually it was because Jesus followed the higher law of mercy and healed upon the Sabbath (Mark 2:23-28; 3:1-6; Luke 14:1-6; 13:10-17). They criticized him equally, however, for failing to keep other laws. He and his disciples kept none of the regular fasts, nor did they follow the innumerable rules about ceremonial washings (Mark 2:18-22; 7:1-5).

The study of Jesus' teaching and practice shows the real ground for these differences. It was not simply personal hostility. It was a wholly different conception of religion and righteousness. For Jesus' opponents religion was a sum of laws that God had given, and of rules or traditions handed down by the fathers, which made clear the application of the laws, and which were almost more sacred than the laws

themselves. A religion of life and the spirit faced here a religion of law and tradition. The great teachings of the prophets about love and mercy and justice had not been forgotten by the Jews; but the formal and ceremonial stood side by side with the ethical and spiritual, and in actual practice the latter were lost in the routine performance of the former.

Jesus did not begin an attack upon legalism and formalism, but he left them at one side. He did not fast or observe the rules of washing, nor do we hear that he ever offered sacrifice. He paid no regard to ceremonial purity. He sat at table with sinners and publicans (Mark 2:15); he touched the leper (Mark 1:41); he did not mind that the woman with the issue of blood touched him (Mark 5:27, 34). His principles were clear. Religion for him was (1) not outward forms but an inner spirit; (2) not rules performed for God but service wrought for men; and (3) the oneness with the Father of his children, who show to God reverence and trust and to men his own spirit of mercy and good will. Such fundamental difference had to bring conflict. With it went another fact: Jesus was conscious of bringing in a new age. He came with a message of joy, a ministry of deliverance and gracious service (Luke 4:18-21). The bridegroom was here; why should the sons of the bride chamber fast? The new life was here; why try to press it into the old forms (Mark 2:18-22)? To the Pharisees he was the revolutionist, overturning the old that was sacred. In his own heart he knew himself as the bringer of a new life and a new day.

Besides all this was the difference between his own spirit and that of the Jews. He calls the latter the leaven of the Pharisees (Luke 12:1). In the terrible indictment of Matt 23 he charges the Pharisees with being hypocrites, religious actors. Religion meant to him humble reverence for God and loving good will to men. He found in them the opposite. They were selfish at heart, desiring applause and preference. They did not care for men. They bound excessive burdens upon them. They put their formal rules before plain human obligations, and the very multitude of their rules, which made them so strict and pious, was actually a means to defeat the real spirit of the law (Mark 7:8-23). Finally he charged them with willful spiritual blindness (Matt 12:22-37). He had been casting out demons. They declared that he was in league with Satan, and that was the reason Satan's angels obeyed him. He saw in the charge simply their willful refusal to see the truth. He "charged them with the sin of sins, the sin against the Holy Spirit. It was not their rejection of him. It was the fact that they saw the light and called it darkness. They were sinning against the Spirit of God who was speaking to them. The man who thus willfully perverts his conscience shuts the only door by which God gets in. That was what he meant when he spoke of the evil eye and the darkened life (Matt 6:22, 23).

In the same chapter follows another charge which Jesus sets forth in the striking parable of the empty room (Matt 12:38-45). They had been asking for signs. He refused them. It was not light that they needed, but obedience. They were like the man who had been set free from an unclean spirit, who tried to keep his soul clean and fair and well ordered, but who would let nothing in. The last state of that man was a life of evil far worse than the first. These men were not guilty of the common vices. They prided themselves upon the order of their life; but their souls were empty, and when he came with the truth of God and the call to devote their lives, they shut the door. The fair outside did not deceive him. They were like the fresh whitewashed graves, seeming without, full of corruption within.

These were not the only conflicts in Jesus' life. He had to face as well the misunderstanding and opposition of his friends and neighbors, and even his own family. At one time his friends tried to carry him off, declaring that he was beside himself (Mark 3:20, 21). He had not begun his ministry at Nazareth, and when he went back at length the fame of his preaching and healing had preceded him. His fellow villagers listened to him with wonder, but he read their unexpressed thought: Show us some of these wonders that

we have heard of from Capernaum. Their proverb, "Physician, heal thyself," he answered with another, "No prophet is acceptable in his own country." "And they rose up and cast him forth out of the city" (Luke 4:16-30). Still harder was the break with his own family, which may have occurred before the Nazareth incident. It was reported to him while he was preaching that his mother and brothers were without the house and had sent for him. But there was a tie even deeper than that which bound him to mother and brothers. It was the tie of loyalty to the work for his brother men in the kingdom of God. In answer he looked around at the gathered company in the house and said, "Behold, my mother and my brethren! For whosoever shall do the will of God, the same is my brother, and sister, and mother" (Mark 3:31-35).

These experiences evidently lie back of the words of Jesus reported by Matthew as given in connection with the sending out of the twelve disciples on an independent missionary tour of their own (Matt 10). Matthew has probably brought together here, after his custom, sayings spoken on various occasions, but bearing upon one theme--the work of the Christian apostle. Such words may well have been used by the church in later years as an address of ordination or commission, when apostles or missionaries were sent forth, and they have probably undergone some changes in this usage. But the message itself seems to come from Jesus' own experience. His call was to a supreme allegiance: "He that doth not take his cross and follow after me is not worthy of me." Such loyalty might mean the breaking of all other ties. That had been his own lot: "I came not to send peace, but a sword." "I came to set a man at variance with his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law." They must not hesitate to share what he had borne: "A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his lord." But they were to share his faith and courage also: "Fear them not therefore. Be not afraid of them that kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul. The very hairs of your head are numbered." This chapter may be joined with the story of the temptation as a bit of the autobiography of Jesus: the wandering life, here received, there rejected, with no sure place for shelter; the bitter experience of malice and hatred from men and misunderstanding even from nearest kindred; the courage to speak every hidden word, and the assurance that his life was in his Father's hand who marked his every step.

#### Directions for Reading and Study

As to the attack upon Jesus, read Mark 2:23-28; 3:1-6; Luke 14:1-6; 13:10-17. State the charges against Jesus as you think the Pharisees might have framed them from their standpoint.

As to Jesus' criticism of the Pharisees, Mark 7:8-23; Matt. 12:22-45. Read Mark 3:20, 21, 31-35; Luke 4:16-30; Matt 10.

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