

BEWARE OF THE LEAVEN

Jesus uses the word “beware” eleven times in the gospels to introduce a warning to his followers. This means they were to take special heed to these warnings. There are three different words translated “beware” in the New Testament. The definition given in Vine’s *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* of these three words is: “Warning to take heed against something; to turn one’s mind and attention to something by being on guard against it; and to keep yourself from something.”

Only once does Jesus mention the “leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of the Sadducees” together (Matt. 16:6). Perhaps the creed of the Sadducees was less popular than that of the Pharisees, and is mentioned less in the Scriptures. He once mentions the leaven of the Pharisees with the leaven of Herod (Mark 8:15). Matthew indicates the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees to be their teaching, and Luke adds hypocrisy (Luke 12:1). Of course their teachings were not only false, but hypocritical. Jesus did not use the term “leaven” to warn the apostles against the love of money, covetousness or worldly pleasures, all of which were perils to which the apostles were exposed. He identifies the leaven as false doctrine. Besides his beware statements against false teachers, his warnings are to beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, the leaven of Sadducees and the leaven of Herod. The Apostle Paul uses leaven as an image of malice and wickedness (I Cor. 5:7, 8) and describes legalism in these same terms (Gal 5:7-9).

However, “leaven” does not always stand for evil and wickedness. For example, Jesus taught that the Kingdom is like leaven which a woman took, and hid in three pecks of meal until it was all leavened” (Matt. 13:33). Luke introduces this parable with the words “To what shall I compare the kingdom of God...” (Luke 13:20). This is a very short parable, in the context of other parables about growth. In the majority of these parables, the kingdom is pictured as starting small, but growing. Alongside of these is pictured an anti-kingdom that also grows. This parable is about the kingdom starting small, but growing just as a small amount of leaven explodes in three measures of flour, and “the whole” was entirely leavened. In the Old Testament the peace offering consisted of both leavened and unleavened bread (Lev.7:12, 13). The law also required that leavened bread be presented at the festival of Pentecost: “You shall bring in from your dwelling places two loaves of bread...baked with leaven as first fruits to the Lord” (Lev. 23:17).

Leaven is used to describe ethical behavior which gives shape to our lives, just as leaven aerates a loaf and gives it shape. The religious leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees gave the wrong shape to one’s life and so does the political leaven of Herod. The Apostle Paul exhorts the Corinthian Christians to “Clean out the old leaven of malice and wickedness and celebrate the feast (life) with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth” (I Cor. 5:6, 8). “Malice” and “wickedness” would certainly describe the leaven

of the Pharisees, Sadducees and Herod, which in all three is excluded both sincerity and truth. To make this applicable to today, the leaven of the Pharisees would describe externalism in religion, the leaven of the Sadducees would describe the skepticism in religion and the leaven of Herod would refer to politics and worldliness in religion.

The leaven of the Pharisees can be summed up in two words: they were self-righteous tradition worshippers. Concerning these elite Jewish teachers Jesus said: “rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, ‘this people honors me with their lips about their heart is far from me. But in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.’ Neglecting the commands of God you hold to the traditions of men...you nicely set aside the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition” (Mark 7:6-8). Notice Jesus says “you hold the tradition of men.” All tradition is not bad. The Greek word for tradition means “a handing down.” The word is used to refer to apostolic teaching: I Corinthians 11:2: “hold firmly to the traditions, just as I delivered them to you.” In II Thessalonians 2:15 the Apostle tells them to “hold to the traditions which you were taught” and chapter 3:6 he speaks of “the traditions which you received of men.” It is the “traditions of men” that Jesus warns against. Paul shows how deadly these traditions can be when he warned the Colossians to “see that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ (Col. 2:8). Modern man no longer is ready to listen to the voice of the one living and eternal God, but prefers the changing sands of human opinion, modernity and the traditions of men for the foundation upon which to build his Christian life. The tragedy the church is facing today is modern Phariseeism that is seldom seen or recognized, is that in hundreds of our pulpits there is a determined avoidance of the truths of Scripture. On Sunday after Sunday there are preachers that stand up before eternal beings, without a shred of divine truth, nothing relating to the Divine revelation in Scripture and nothing concerning the great transforming truth revealed in the Word of God. The leaven of the Pharisees is still with us.

In Matthew 23 Jesus, in a scathing denunciation of the Pharisees, gives us a vivid picture of what the leaven of the Pharisees is. The renowned English scholar the late R.C. Ryle in his book *Warnings to the Churches* summarizes this chapter in these words: “They valued themselves upon excessive strictness in their attention to all the ceremonial requirements of the Mosaic law. They attached great value to washings and ceremonial purifying of the body, and believed that the very touching of the dead body would defile them. They made a great ado about the outward parts of religion, they made broad their phylacteries, and enlarged the fringes of their garments. They were very zealous to make proselytes. They prided themselves on paying great honor to dead saints, garnishing the sepulchers of the righteous, thought much of having power, rank, and preeminence, and of being called by men, ‘Rabbi, Rabbi.’ These things, and many

such like things the Pharisees did. Jesus ended by calling them 'serpents and a brood of vipers.' The Pharisees produced a dead religion although they were in search of a means to reach a level of acceptance with God. Christ refused to be intimidated by the super-holy Pharisees and drew a conclusion to summarize what they were doing lest they miss the point. You have let go the commandments of God and are holding on to the traditions of men." Man-made rules masquerading as God's truth are extremely dangerous, and yet they have always been with us. The leaven of the Pharisees today virtually puts Scripture aside, and buries it under the tradition.

The Leaven of the Sadducees can also be summed up in a few words: materialism, ritual, free-thinking, rationalism and skepticism. They did not believe in the resurrection, spirits or angels (Acts 23:8; Matt. 22:23). When they brought to Jesus the case of a woman, whom they said, had seven husbands and propounded the question to him: "in the resurrection, whose wife shall she be of the seven?" He charged them with two faults, faults which today's religious world is also guilty of: they did not know the Scriptures nor did they know the power of God (Matt. 22:23-33). The Sadducees in Jesus' day were more political than religious. On the subject of the Sadducees, quoting again J.C Ryle *Warning to the Churches* he states: "We may not say that the Sadducees were downright infidels; this they were not. We may not say they denied revelation altogether; this they did not. They observed the Law of Moses. Many of them were found among the priests in the times described in the Acts of the Apostles. Caiaphas who condemned our Lord was a Sadducee. But the practical effect of their teaching was to shake men's faith in any revelation and to throw a cloud of doubt over men's minds, which was only one degree better than infidelity. And of all such kind of doctrine, our Lord says, 'Take heed and beware.'" That the Sadducees were chiefly made up of the priests is seen in Acts 5:17: "But the high priest rose up, along with all his associates, that is the sect of the Sadducees, and were filled with jealousy." Although the Pharisees were the chief opponents of Christ during his ministry it was actually the priest (made up chiefly of the Sadducees) who had him crucified. It was in the court of the high priest that counsel was taken against him, he is betrayed into the hands of the chief priests. They send the multitude to seize him. He is conducted to the palace of the high priest, where he is tried and declared guilty of blasphemy (Matt. 26: 3, 4, 14, 47, 57, 65). The chief priest bind him, deliver him up to Pilate, accuse him, and demand his death (Matt. 27: 1, 2, 11-14). All this shows that the highest ranking religious people are not above the most awful sins imaginable. Beware of the leaven of the Sadducees.

The leaven of Herod can be described in two words: "political power." The leaven of Herod is mentioned only one time recorded by Mark when Jesus warns: "Take heed, beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod" (8:15). Earlier Mark had revealed that the Pharisees plotted with the Herodians to kill Jesus (3:6), and Luke reveals that Herod wanted to kill Jesus (Luke 13:34). The collaboration of the Pharisees with the Herodians is an example of the merging of religion with politics. Although the leaven of Herod is mentioned only once, it can be more dangerous than the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees. When the modern church has the distorted vision of trusting in Herod's gimmickry rather than the power of the gospel, the warning of Jesus is particularly applicable today. The leaven of the Pharisees, Sadducees and Herod, which in all three is

Herod exalts civil law above God's moral law, stresses success rather than faithfulness and puts its trust in secular ingenuity rather than the word of God. Too often the modern church has crawled under the sheets of the political arena. This is the leaven of Herod. The church is not to take over the power centers of the government in their effort to establish the kingdom of God

David wells in his book *God In The Wasteland* when showing how the modern church has embraced the world, pretty well sums up what the leaven of Herod is. He states: "Today evangelicalism reverberates with worldliness. In the first impressions, this worldliness does not appear ugly at all. Quite the opposite. It maintains a warm and friendly countenance, parading itself as successful entrepreneurship, organizational wizardry, and a package of slick public relations, insights that are essential to the facilitation of evangelical business. Neither is anything wrong with entrepreneurship or organizational wizardry or public relations or television images and glossy magazines per se. The problem lies in the current evangelical inability to see how these things carry within them values that are hostile to the Christian faith." The leaven of Herod is worldliness in any form.

Jesus said "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's; and to God the things that are God's" (Matt: 22:21). Anything more than this is the leaven of Herod, of which we are to beware. As Leroy Garrett wrote in his essay *Soldier On!* "This was leaven that Jesus warned against that was more insidious than the false teaching and hypocrisy--more dangerous than the treachery of the Pharisees or Sadducees."

The following article is by Kyle R. Simplot, a retired minister living in Onalaska, Wi.

IT'S ALL ABOUT MONEY

The rise of computer technology and of the internet has made this octogenarian aware that life is more and more about money. Fully 95% of my daily incoming mail asks for money. It comes in many disguises. Sometimes the gimmick plays on your sympathies for hungry children—always accompanied by photos of ragged, hungry little boys and girls. Sometimes the sponsor claims to be a non-prophet religious organization—with the photo of a grandfatherly white-haired pastor.

Sometimes a few coins are attached to the cover letter playing on your sense of honor to return their value plus much more in a donation check. Then too, a pad of personalized address labels may be included in the hope that you will show appreciation for something useful. There was a time, years ago when towns were smaller, and life was simpler, then I would take all that altruism at face value. Since internet commerce has made it possible for money-grubbing entrepreneurs to engage in virtual pick-pocketing without leaving the comfort of their urban apartments. I confess that with me the milk of human kindness has curdled.

With election campaigns heating up. 99% of my incoming e-mail asks me sign a petition for a multitude of worthy progressive causes—followed up with the requests for contributions, to which I immediately respond with the delete button—especially if they originate in Nigeria! Unfortunately, all this has caused a loss of innocence to otherwise generous people like myself. To let others take advantage of me would encourage bad people of evil intent. I now donate to causes only when I initiate the gift, and never when solicited. Unfortunately we no longer live in Mayberry.