

BEWARE OF THE LEAVEN...

When Jesus tells His followers to “beware” of something, I believe that He is very serious and that His disciples were to take heed to that warning. As for our discussion, Jesus told His disciples to beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, the leaven of the Sadducees and the leaven of Herod.

The scripture passages I am referring to are as follows:

- Luke 12:1 (KJV) – *“In the mean time, when there were gathered together an innumerable multitude of people, insomuch that they trode one upon another, he began to say unto his disciples first of all, **Beware ye of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy.**”*
- Matthew 16:5, 12 (KJV) - *And when his disciples were come to the other side, they had forgotten to take bread. Then Jesus said unto them, Take heed and **beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees.** ... Then understood they how that he bade them not **beware** of the leaven of bread, but **of the doctrine of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees.**”*
- Mark 8:14-21 (KJV) – *“Now the disciples had forgotten to take bread, neither had they in the ship with them more than one loaf. And he charged them, saying, Take heed, **beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, and of the leaven of Herod.**”*

Unfortunately, as we today read of these warnings, we tend to think of them as being for that period of time and as being somewhat irrelevant for us today. After all, where are the Pharisees? Where are the Sadducees? And especially, Herod; we have not heard anyone called Herod these days and in the historical records the family of Herod ended in the late first century. So, I guess these are three “beware” that we no longer need to worry about. Well.... Not so fast.

These “three beware” all have one thing in common that Jesus mentions concerning them. He refers to all of them as “leaven.” Leaven (yeast) is symbolic of all things concerning sin. In other words it is symbolic of all things that is contrary to and opposite of God's identity, His character and His personality. Leaven/Yeast has a decaying affect on life. Therefore the Bible uses it as a metaphor for sin. Yeast, along with other micro-organisms are involved in the decaying process of life.

It actually eats away at its host's sugar (sweetness) and then excretes carbon dioxide and alcohol. In baking it creates air pockets and causes the bread to be “puffed up” and filled with little empty spaces of “nothing but air.” That may be good for bread but if you get what it is saying to us as far as being “puffed up” and prideful in our sin, you understand that this is opposite of God's character and we must cleanse ourselves from it and we are not to “travel” with it nor hold on to its ways.

Leaven, also helps to create alcohol. As we know alcohol is an agent of addiction. It causes the user to want more and more of it. However, the more the individual uses alcohol, the more he or she loses control of their lives as well as reality. They begin to live in “a drunken stupor.” It is the same with sin.

Matthew 16:12 tells us, *“Then understood they how that he bade them not beware of the leaven of bread, but of the **doctrine** of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees.”* In this scripture, Matthew reveals exactly what Jesus was speaking about when He says to “*beware of the leaven...*” He is referring to the “doctrines” of the Pharisees, the Sadducees and of Herod. He was referring to their teachings and what they stood for.

Therefore, Jesus’ use of the term “leaven” is not just referring to sin but it is also referring to the affects of that sin. He is referring to the negative affect that the doctrines of the Pharisees, Sadducees and Herod were having on the people. It was a warning to His disciples to be on alert, be attentive to and stay away from the false doctrines these “leaders” were disseminating to their followers. He was telling them that these “doctrines” were deceptive and contrary to the actual Word of God, His precepts and His ways.

In Matthew's account, we see Matthew making it very clear that Jesus' usage of the term "leaven" was a metaphor referring to the "doctrine" of the Pharisees and Sadducees. Therefore, we can also say that when Jesus tells his disciples to beware of the "leaven of Herod," that He is also referring to some kind of "doctrine" concerning Herod. We will be discussing these three "doctrines" in our discussion.

- Let's first take a look at the "doctrine of the Pharisees."

The Pharisees, along with the Sadducees and Essenes were the three main sects of Judaism who emerged during the time of the Hasmonean (Jewish) rule in Israel which was about 300BC. The term "Pharisee" comes from the Hebrew word, "*pharisaioi*" which means "separate." They wanted to return to a pure form of Judaism with a high regard for outward forms of what would be considered "holy and pious." The Pharisees are still considered to be the "fathers of modern Judaism" by most Orthodox Jewish people.

They held to a high regard for what they called the Oral Law which they believed God gave to Moses at Sinai along with the Torah (the Written Law). There is no evidence or archeological proof of this "Oral Law." It was supposedly passed down through the Levites (the priests) from generation to generation. It was only formally written down in what is called the "Talmud" somewhere between the 300 -400 A.D. Jesus would refer to this "Oral Law" that the Pharisees and Scribes ascribed to as "the traditions of men."

The Pharisees and Scribes (who were members of this "Pharisee sect") were extreme legalists when it came to the keeping of the Law and its application as found, they believed, in the Oral Law. This is where Jesus became a stumbling block for them. They were interpreting the Law and God's Word with their own finite minds (the tradition of men) while the One who was the Law and who was the Living Word and the one and only expert of the Word of God, was right there in front of them in the form of Jesus. It is interesting to note that when this sect began, they held a high belief that Messiah was to soon come and they were looking forward to His coming. Yet they missed Him when He was standing right there in front of them.

They did believe in and held in high regard the Torah (the first five Books of the Bible) the Prophets and the Writings that comprise what is now called the Jewish Bible. However, they also held to the belief that the Oral Law superseded the written Word of God. They also believed in the resurrection of the dead and the existence of both good and evil angels. At the time of Jesus, because of their wealth and seemingly outward piety, they held a lot of influence over the Jewish people although the people did not actually like them very much because of their elitist attitudes, behavior and lifestyles, as most of all their hypocrisy.

In Luke 12:1, we see that the writer states that Jesus said outwardly and upfront that the "doctrine of the Pharisees" was hypocrisy. Many times Jesus called the Pharisees and scribes hypocrites and white washed sepulchers. The terms hypocrite and hypocrisy literally mean "to be an actor; a stage player; to pretend; to be an impersonator." I believe the most telling part of the above definition is the aspect of being an "impersonator." These Pharisees and Scribes began to think of themselves as God's selected ones and to be His spokesmen. Therefore, knowing or unknowingly, they began playing the part of God. Their interpretations (the Oral Law) of God's written Word became greater than God's own written Word given to Moses written by God for all generations. As Jesus stated many times, they made their interpretations of "God's intent," these "traditions of men," greater than the Word of God.

They came to think of themselves as God's personal interpreters of what God "really" meant which if followed to its conclusion made them even greater than God. After all, God needed them (the Pharisees and Scribes) to interpret what He "really" meant because He was incapable of doing this Himself. This therefore, as we know led to them actually **adding** to God's Word. They added their commentary and interpretations of God's written Word because the written Word was not "clear" or good enough. Hmmm...

Therefore, when Jesus warned His disciples to “beware of the doctrine of the Pharisees” He was actually saying to beware of their impersonating God and adding to God’s written Word. They did this by adding onto the written Word their “traditions of men,” their “commentaries,” that led to “legalism” and outward works of piety, etc. Unfortunately, they misunderstood and therefore, neglected the main reason and purpose for God’s written Word which was to bring His people to a place of “circumcising” the inner heart and turning from their wicked ways and turn towards God and His ways (repentance) that would lead to blessings. Jesus came to straighten them out and to correct their “hypocrisy.”

- Now let’s take a look at the “doctrine of the Sadducees”

As mentioned previously, the Sadducees, along with the Pharisees and Essenes had their beginning at the same time during the Hasmonean period of Jewish history (circa 300BC). The Sadducees were prominent upper class elitists who wanted to maintain the priestly duties in the Temple. However, they were very liberal concerning their lifestyles and therefore had no problems and actually encouraged incorporating Hellenism (Greek and Roman culture and values) into their lives which the Pharisees vehemently opposed.

The Sadducees rejected the idea of the Oral Law and insisted on a literal interpretation of the Written Law as found only in the Torah, the first five books of the Bible (the Pentateuch). They did not accept or believe in the validity of the books of any of the Prophets nor any of the Writings (Psalms, Job, etc). Consequently, they did not believe in an afterlife or resurrection, nor did they think much of the coming of the Messiah (Son of David) since it is not mentioned, as they saw it, in the Torah.

Being that they were so acceptant of Greek and Roman ways, along with their prominence and wealth, they were able to “buy and purchase” their way into becoming the High Priests of their day. The Romans allowed the High Priesthood to go to the highest bidder no matter what line they were from. Contrary to what many think, the High Priests of Jesus’ day were not from the line of Aaron. At Jesus’ trial we see Annas (the High Priest) and Caiaphas (Annas’ son-in-Law who worked alongside Annas as High Priest). Annas and Caiaphas were both Sadducees who bought their way into the High Priesthood and therefore as leader of the Sanhedrin (the Jewish Council).

So, what was Jesus telling His disciples when he said to beware of the “leaven (doctrine) of the Sadducees?” Well, based on what we just discussed, the Sadducees were very liberal in their acceptance of the sinful Greco-Roman lifestyle and culture. They looked the other way, which implied acceptance, when it came to adultery, fornication and homosexuality. They compromised to great extents for the “keeping of the peace” with the Romans. This allowed them to keep the status quo concerning their somewhat cozy relationship with the Romans so that they could keep their status and power over the Jewish people. Let’s just say the Sadducees and Romans made “strange bedfellows.” Jesus was telling His disciples to beware of the Sadducees’ compromising ways and their acceptance of the pagan culture they were in and allowing and actually promoting that pagan culture to enter into the lifestyles of God’s people.

However, I believe the biggest thing that Jesus was telling His disciples concerning the “leaven of the Sadducees” had to do with the Sadducees acceptance of only the Torah and the rejecting of the Prophets and Writings. In essence, the Sadducees were **taking away** from the full Word of God. Jesus was warning His disciples to beware of those who detract from God’s Word and take just what they want and use it for their own purposes, thereby, rejecting the full wisdom and counsel of God and His Word to its fullest.

The Pharisees and Scribes were adding to God’s Word while the Sadducees were taking away from God’s Word. Both are dangerous. Jesus calls these ways “leaven” because both ways, these “doctrines,” are deceptive in their portrayal of God’s identity, His character and His personality. Both “doctrines” misrepresent God to the people that were entrusted to them. I believe the Body of Christ today needs to heed this warning of Jesus. This warning is just as relevant today as it was at the time He gave it.

There are many leaders, preachers and teachers who are adding to God's Word through their own interpretations and commentary thereby trying to explain God's "intent" with man's own finite understanding of an infinite God. There are those who speak "prophecies" under the guise of, "Thus saith the Lord," and mislead many in the Body of Christ. I am not saying that we cannot learn from each other, however, we must be careful that we do not "*go beyond what is written.*" (1Corinthians 4:6)

There are also many so called leaders, preachers and teachers that are taking away from God's Word. They do this by stating very brashly that the Old Testament and the teachings of Jesus before His resurrection are irrelevant for us today. I have heard it say that the Old Testament is a compilation of myths and legends not to be taken literally. I have heard people say that Revelation needs to be removed from the Bible because it already has taken place (Preterists). There are those that want to have 1, 2 and 3 John removed from the Bible because they talk too much about sin. And the list goes on. All I can say is to repeat what Jesus warns His disciples – "beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees." Hmmm...

- Lastly, let us take a look at the "doctrine of Herod."

We must realize that when the Bible mentions the name "Herod," we must be aware of what time period the text is referring to. As we are all well aware of, Jesus was born sometime between 6-3BC. Therefore, I believe that "Herod the Great" was the "Herod" we read of in the account of Jesus' birth. He was appointed "king over the Jewish people" by the Roman Emperor, Augustus Ceasar in the year 37 BC. and "ruled" as a vassal king over Israel until his very painful death (severe gangrene) in 4 BC. That would make him the king who ordered the slaughter of all infant males 2 years and younger as described in the Gospel accounts.

Herod the Great was not actually Jewish. He was Idumean (a descendant of Esau) which brought much resentment and displeasure to the Jewish people and leadership. His mother was Arab. According to Jewish tradition a person was a Jew only if their mother was a Jew. Herod, therefore, was not really a Jew. That is why Augustus made him king over the Jews – to "stick it to them." Herod the Great was very much a supporter of Roman and Greek culture. He was very much politically aligned with Rome and truly was a master at gaining favor with whoever came to power in Rome. Again, the Jewish people were very upset over this because they saw this as a major stumbling block to not just their freedom but also their religious freedom of worshipping Yahweh. To try to appease the Jewish people, Herod accomplished many building projects including a major renovation of the Temple at the time of Jesus.

After the death of Herod the Great in 4 BCE, the kingdom was divided among his sons. Herod Antipas was to rule Galilee and the east bank of the Jordan as a tetrarch; Philip was to be tetrarch of the Golan Heights (Decapolis and Perea) in the north-east; and Archelaus became the tetrarch of Samaria and Judaea. Pontius Pilate came from Rome to oversee everything and be the "tetrarch" of Jerusalem although He was truly the ruler over all the land and was the overseer over all Herod's sons. The "Herod" we read of during Jesus' life and ministry and the one whom Pilate sent Jesus to at the time of His trial and crucifixion was Herod Antipas because he was the tetrarch of Galilee and because Jesus was a Galilean from Nazareth.

So what does all this have to do with Jesus' warning to "beware of the leaven of Herod?"

The "leaven" is twofold. First, Herod and those who followed after him (Herodians) represented a group of politically minded secular Jews who were aligned with Rome. Rome represented the carnal governing ways of the world. They were not a religious sect, but rather a Jewish political party stemming from a misguided devotion towards the Roman emperor and Herod, his appointed "king" over Judea and its surrounding regions.

Herod and the Herodians were very much involved with "Roman politics." They were consumed with greed and political power. Their ultimate goal was to restore a Herod (Herod Antipas) to the throne in Judea originally ruled by Herod the Great. This meant getting rid of the other tetrarchs – Antipas' brothers and

Pilate. They had no plan or desire for the restoration of the throne of David, thereby rejecting anyone coming as “the Son of David.” Anyone saying they were the “Son of David” would be considered a threat and needed to be removed. That is why Jesus referred to Herod Antipas as, “that old fox.” (Luke 13:31, 32)

The second aspect of the “leaven of Herod” and the Herodians was concerning their cultural views. The Herodians thought of themselves as being “enlightened” Jews (Hellenistic) who claimed they had faith in Yahweh, yet they worked hard at gaining political and social favor by not imposing their Jewish beliefs on others, namely the Romans, in the hopes of not offending them. The Herodians, under Herod Antipas, actually desired Israel to embrace the Roman/Greco system of philosophies and values and to incorporate them within Judaism. In doing this we could say that the Herodians became the ultimate example of the ultimate compromisers. Unfortunately, using many of today’s standards that we see in many churches we could say that the Herodians were the “inclusive church”, the “politically correct church”, and indeed the “enlightened church” of their day. They had an insatiable desire for their political party to be in control. Hmmm....

If we look closely we can see that the Herodians and Sadducees were not too far apart in their “doctrines.” They were both very liberal in their misuse and misunderstanding of God’s ways and His Word. The Pharisees, on the other hand, were ultra conservative – so much so that they believed they needed to interpret and add to God’s ways and Word. Jesus said to beware of all three!!!

Jesus warns His disciples, which include all of His disciples today, against joining any one of these “camps.” The more we add to Jesus’ Gospel message, the more we subtract from its original purpose. Jesus’ warning is clear. Beware of those who pervert God’s ways, precepts and commandments – His Word. Beware of those who add to His Word things that are not there. Beware of taking away from His Word and invoking us to not take it in its entirety. Beware of those that water down His Word and “enlightens” us with incorporating the ways of the world into the faith and to take over by political means for political purposes. Beware of the leaven (doctrines) of the Pharisees, the Sadducees and of Herod!!!

I leave you with Jude1:17-25 (KJV) – *“But, beloved, remember ye the words which were spoken before of the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ; How that they told you there should be mockers in the last time, who should walk after their own ungodly lusts. These be they who separate themselves, sensual, having not the Spirit. But ye, beloved, building up yourselves on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Ghost, Keep yourselves in the love of God, looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life. And of some have compassion, making a difference: And others save with fear, pulling them out of the fire; hating even the garment spotted by the flesh. Now unto him that is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy, To the only wise God our Savior, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever. Amen.*