

The Leaven Of The Pharisees

By David Phillips

In Luke 12:1 Jesus warns us to “*Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees.*” Though this *leaven* existed in the days of Christ, it has not gone from the world. In fact, it is just as prevalent today as it was in the first century. Therefore, Jesus’ warning is still needed today.

What Was Wrong With The Pharisees?

In an attempt to pin-point the leaven of the Pharisees today, many people have accused faithful Christians of being Pharisees for striving to do exactly what the Bible says. Some say that to take God at His word in the Bible is to be “legalistic” like the Pharisees. There are also some who slap the name “Pharisee” on all those who would try to disprove their personal doctrines by upholding the Bible as the only true standard. But, if we take a closer look at what Jesus says we will find that those who are quick to accuse others of being Pharisees are themselves exemplifying the very characteristics that Jesus was warning us against. In Luke 12:1-3 Jesus not only warned against the leaven of the Pharisees, He also defines that leaven as “*hypocrisy.*”

Jesus did not rebuke the Pharisees for requiring strict obedience to God’s law. They were not wrong for refusing to be “open-minded” to the philosophies of other men, nor were they wrong for condemning people in sin. On the contrary, Jesus commended those who strove to do the will of God (Matt. 7:21), commanded that we reject the philosophies and traditions of men (Matt. 15:3-9), and commands that we go to our neighbor in sin after we have considered ourselves (Matt. 7:5). The leaven that Jesus warned was not strict obedience, but rather the hypocrisy that filled the lives of many of the Pharisees, as well as their doctrines and practices. A brief reading of Matt. 15:3-9; 23:1-36 will reveal this:

- Matt. 15:3-9: Outwardly the Pharisees appeared to be devoted to God. But Jesus exposed their hypocrisy by showing that they were merely using their outward devotion to God as a means to avoid keeping the true command of God to “honor your father and your mother.”
- Matt. 23:2: Jesus did not say that the teachings of the Pharisees were bad in and of themselves, nor were they hypocrites for commanding obedience to the law. Rather, they were condemned because they were not doing the things that they commanded.
- Matt. 23:5-12: Jesus did not condemn them for being teachers of the law, but for using their position as teachers of the law as a means to exalt themselves instead of God.
- Matt. 23:14: Jesus did not condemn the Pharisees for their devotion, but for using their prayers both to be seen by men to cover up the fact that they were taking widow’s homes away from them. They used righteous acts to conceal their wicked deeds.

Making The Application

As stated before, there are some today who accuse others of being Pharisees. But who are the real Pharisees today? They are people who value their traditions over the commands of God (i.e. this is what we have always believed and practiced). The Pharisees are those who claim to be righteous but live in sin when others are not watching. They are greedy for money, full of anger, jealousies and covetousness and try to hide their evil hearts by doing righteous acts. The Pharisees are those who scoff at the people who strive to keep the whole law of God. They are the ones who ridicule God’s pattern for the church and complain when they are rebuked for not holding to that pattern. The Pharisees of today are those who,

when they hear the plain and simple truth of the gospel, dismiss it as being invalid because of their stubbornness and unwillingness to change. They are those who deny the existence of hell and reject the idea of an eternal judgment. The Pharisees today are those who claim to be righteous while ignoring the righteousness of God. *“For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God”* (Rom. 10:3).

A Change of Heart

How can we avoid such blatant hypocrisy? By making our hearts right with God! As Jesus said, *“Blind Pharisee, first cleanse the inside of the cup and dish, that the outside of them may be clean also”* (Matt 23:26). *“Blessed are those who mourn”* because when we mourn over our sins with godly sorrow then we prove to God that we earnestly desire to be holy as He is holy. For godly sorrow leads to repentance which in turn leads to salvation (2 Cor. 7:10). We can avoid being like the Pharisees by practicing what Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount. Let us take note of a few of His points:

Do not hate your brother (Matt. 5:21-22). Do not lust (Matt. 5:27, 28). Do your charitable deeds in secret that they might be seen by God and not by men (Matt. 6:1-4). Pray giving glory and honor to God and striving to forgive others as God is willing to forgive us (Matt. 6:9-14). Do not worry (Matt. 6:25-34). Do the will of the Father (Matt. 7:21).

How will this help us to avoid being like the Pharisees? The Pharisees allowed sinful things to remain in their hearts while doing their righteous deed. Therefore, we must find those things in our own hearts, remove them and replace them with that which is good and right and which leads to godliness. *“Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy -- meditate on these things”* (Phil. 5:8). We must humble ourselves and submit to our brethren in humility and sincere love. The Pharisees sought to exalt themselves in the eyes of men and were therefore humbled by God. But we must humble ourselves in the sight of men, give others the preference, praise others and not ourselves, honor others before ourselves, make ourselves weak that others may be made strong. Then we will be exalted by God. *“And whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted”* (Matt 23:12).

In terms of faith, we must set aside the traditions of our fathers, forget cultural standards, and disregard our own personal opinions, for these are the things which hindered the Pharisees. In stead, we must search God's word and seek to learn only that which He has revealed. The Pharisees were also condemned for their failure to believe the truth even when it was right in front of them (John 5:44-47; 8:44-47). *“But because I tell the truth, you do not believe Me.”* If we want to avoid the condemnation of the Pharisees, then we must change if we find ourselves in conflict with God's word.

Conclusion

Jesus taught men how to be saved, but many went away sad or angry because they could not bear the truth (Mark 10:22). Will we pretend to be righteous like the Pharisees, or will we turn our hearts to God?

April 2007