

## ***The Commands of Christ***

### **Sermon # 23**

#### ***“Beware of the Leaven”***

#### **Matthew 16:6**

The last command of Christ that we examined together was to *“Honor Your Parents”* found in Matthew 15:4. In that command we noted that in our youth we are called to honor our parents through obedience, as young adults we are called to honor our parents through recognizing their wisdom and in our parents elderly years we are called to honor them by helping with their support.

The next command is found in Matthew 16:6 where Jesus said, *“Take heed and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees.”* The command is found in the words translated *“take heed”* (*horate*) and *“beware”* (*prosechete*) which can both be understood to be imperatives.

This command is repeated in verse eleven where we read, *“How is it you do not understand that I did not speak to you concerning bread? —but to beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.”*

We want to consider this command by asking and answering a series of questions.

First, *“What is Leaven?”*

The Greek word translated *“leaven”* is (*zume*). Yeast, or leaven, is a powerful fungus that can cause a lump of dough to rise into bread, ferment liquids into alcohol, or cause painful infections. But principally leaven as referred to here, caused fermentation and made bread rise before baking and was used in much the same way that yeast is used today. Most of you ladies are familiar with the use of a *“starter”* for causing fermentation in sour-dough bread. This *“starter”* is used in the next for inducing fermentation into the next round of bread baking. For people living in the New Testament age the only method of reproducing yeast was to save a small piece of the unbaked dough, which would later be used to start fermentation in the next batch of bread.

Secondly, *“What Does the Bible Say About Leaven?”*

Because a small piece of leaven was able to cause a relatively large amount of dough to rise it, the term was often used figuratively to represent any kind of influence, although in scripture the word is used almost universally to represent evil.

In 1 Corinthians 5:7-8 the Apostle Paul says, *“Therefore purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, since you truly are unleavened. For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us. (8) Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.”*

Third, “What is the Leaven of the Pharisees?”

It is against the doctrine of the Pharisees and the Sadducees that Jesus warns his disciples. He calls their teaching “leaven” because it has the potential of affecting not only their own lives but everyone that they come in contact with.

The doctrine of the Pharisees and Sadducees contained a mixture of God’s truth and man’s traditions. The danger of the “leaven” of the Pharisees is that it spreads quickly effecting the thought process of an individual or a group to the extent that it corrupts their hearts and minds to the true meaning of God’s word and commandments.

I want to look briefly at a few crucial areas that the Lord deals with the Pharisees about.

· *They Made The Commandments Of God Of No Effect By Their Traditions. (Mt 15:3-6)*

“He answered and said to them, “Why do you also transgress the commandment of God because of your tradition? (4) “For God commanded, saying, ‘Honor your father and your mother’; and, ‘He who curses father or mother, let him be put to death.’ (5) “But you say, ‘Whoever says to his father or mother, “Whatever profit you might have received from me is a gift to God”

They majored on minor parts, while they violated major principles of the Law with their traditions. Jesus uses as a case in point, the way that they used dedication of one’s goods to God as an excuse to avoid having to take care of their elderly parents. By doing so they are making God’s command to “honor one’s parents” of no effect.

· *They Were Hypocrites, Teaching One Thing And Practicing Another (Matt 15:7-8)*

“Hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy about you, saying: (8) ‘These people draw near to Me with their mouth, And honor Me with their lips, But their heart is far from Me.’”

Jesus called the Pharisees “hypocrites.”

Hypocrite is a word which really means “an actor” one who wears a mask or one who pretends. The principle criticism of Jesus toward the Pharisees is that they taught one thing and did another. The hypocrite often deceives himself as well as others.

The author C.S. Lewis warns *“Anyone who has ever taught or attempted to lead others knows the tendency in all of us toward exaggerating our depth of character while treating*

*leniently our flaws. The Bible calls this tendency hypocrisy. We consciously or subconsciously put forward a better image of ourselves than really exists. The outward appearance of our character and the inner reality (that only God, we, and perhaps our family members know) do not match.”* [C. S. Lewis. *The Four Loves*. - [www.bible.org/illus/h/h-73.htm](http://www.bible.org/illus/h/h-73.htm)]

- *They Did Their Works To Be Seen And Appreciated By Men.* (Matt 23:3-7)

“Therefore whatever they tell you to observe, that observe and do, but do not do according to their works; for they say, and do not do. (4) "For they bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men’s shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers. (5) "But all their works they do to be seen by men. They make their phylacteries broad and enlarge the borders of their garments. (6) "They love the best places at feasts, the best seats in the synagogues, (7) "greetings in the marketplaces, and to be called by men, ‘Rabbi, Rabbi.’

Jesus says, *“Do as they say do, but not as they themselves do!”* The problem is not with what they say they believe, but with their practice of their beliefs.

At the heart of their hypocrisy was their love of honor. The Pharisees were more interested in gaining the approval and honor of their fellow men than they were of God. Their religion had a motive, but it was not glorifying God, but a desire for position, prominence and recognition.

They also liked to be called “rabbi” which was a title of respect given to teachers. It corresponds to the honorary title of Doctor given to preachers and teachers today. I don’t have a problem calling someone “Doctor” but if you have to insist that everyone call you “Doctor” you have a ego problem.

- *They Loved The Spotlight And Special Treatment.* (Matt 23:13)

"But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut up the kingdom of heaven against men; for you neither go in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in."

The Pharisees and scribes would not associate themselves with Jesus and the truth he taught, and by that rejection they prevented others from coming to the truth because of their false teaching and their hypocritical lifestyles.

- *They Used Their Office To Make Themselves Rich.* (Matt 23:14)

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you devour widows’ houses, and for a pretense make long prayers. Therefore you will receive greater condemnation.

The Pharisee, just like some religious officials of our own day, used their position and their influence to enrich their own lives. Jesus did not like that then and I don't think He likes it any better now, do you?

Fourth, "What Are We To Do With This Leaven?"

The scientific definition of fermentation or yeast is "a substance in a state of putrefaction." The very use of the word putrefaction lets in on the little secret that this can never be good. Let's just examine it in two areas:

- A little unbelief in the lives of believers is a dangerous thing.

When Jesus spoke of leaven in His comments about the Pharisees His disciples were quite confused.

*"And they reasoned among themselves, saying, 'It is because we have taken no bread.' (8) But Jesus, being aware of it, said to them, 'O you of little faith, why do you reason among yourselves because you have brought no bread? (9) Do you not yet understand, or remember the five loaves of the five thousand and how many baskets you took up? (10) Nor the seven loaves of the four thousand and how many large baskets you took up? (11) How is it you do not understand that I did not speak to you concerning bread?--but to beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.'" (12) Then they understood that He did not tell them to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the doctrine of the Pharisees and Sadducees."*

What could He mean? They thought that His comments on "leaven" were some kind of veiled reference to the fact that they had forgotten to bring any bread (v. 7). But Jesus perceiving their thoughts reminded His followers of His miracles of feeding the five thousand and the four thousand. What was the response of the Pharisees?

No doubt he was thinking of how the Pharisee reacted to His miracles, they argued with Him and tried to test Him by appealing for a miracle. In short, they refused to believe—despite the miraculous provision of meals for more than nine thousand people!

Clearly, Jesus was warning His followers against the insidious infection of unbelief. Like yeast in dough, a lack of faith can permeate one's life until it breaks out in open rebellion against God. No wonder the Lord was so displeased with the disciples' lack of perception. Perhaps the yeast of unbelief was already at work among them. After all, they had apparently failed to understand the significance of a feeding miracle the first time around (6:52); now they were missing it a second time!

Jesus had grave concern about the condition of His followers' faith. He knew that there was danger ahead. He wanted to avoid exposing these men to the full force of His opponents before their faith was ready to handle such a trial.

None of us knows what dangers lie ahead for our faith. We may be headed for trials and challenges that we never imagined. Is our faith ready to meet whatever challenges come our way? Or have we let the yeast of unbelief gain a foothold, breaking down our trust in God and spreading resistance to Him throughout our life?

- A little sin in the life of a believer is a dangerous thing!

The only way to escape the leaven of sin is not to permit any compromise of sin to remain in our lives. The leaven of sin is much like the sowing of iniquity, we reap more than we sow.

#### Conclusion

The very nature of leaven requires that it be removed, because even a small portion of leaven will permeate an entire batch. This is the warning that God gives about leaven as a symbol of sin. Paul says in Galatians 5:9, *“A little leaven leavens the whole lump.”*