

PITFALLS FOR THE SPIRITUAL

Galatians 5:26

Until we enter the gates of heaven, we will not be out of danger. The path to heaven is through enemy territory so he places traps all along the way. Even those who sincerely seek to walk in the ways of the Lord, to walk in the Spirit, must beware of the pitfalls. It is an awareness of this that prompts this admonition from the Apostle. He speaks these three brief words of warning in the midst of his discussion of the spiritual life. These are pitfalls the spiritual are in danger of falling into.

The character of these admonitions remind us that the spiritual people rarely ever fall into the pits of sensuality and open carnality. These are the pitfalls of those who have been less than complete in their commitments to the Lord. The pitfalls for the spiritual involve the sins of the spirit. While they may not be considered as scandalous by the world, they are just as damaging to the work of the Lord. These three mentioned by Paul are of this nature. They are sins of the spirit that are a constant danger to those who seek to walk in the Spirit. Since there are many of you who are sincerely seeking to walk in the Spirit, to be a spiritual person, let us consider these pitfalls.

I. VAIN-GLORY IS A PITFALL TO THE SPIRITUAL.

"Let us not be desirous of vain glory". A more literal rendering would be, "let us not become vainglorious". The danger is that this will become a pattern of life for those who have been seeking to walk in the Spirit. The word "vain glory" involves the combining of two words to make a word. One of the words means empty or vain, while the other means glory. So it means to be conceited, boastful. There is a place for glory to be on the lips of men, but there is a glory that can be on their lips that is empty or vain.

The glory of man is empty when he is glorying about the wrong things. The spiritual are often tempted to glory in the wrong things. Sometimes they are tempted to glory in their sacrifices and commitments, Such people who have fallen into this pitfall are easy to spot. They will be overheard often telling others about how much they have given up or how much they have suffered for the cause of Christ. They will be boasting of how much they are seeking to do even now for the Lord. All such glorying is empty, meaningless glory. Regardless of how much we might have given up for the cause of Christ, it is no more than we should have done.

"The spiritual are often tempted to glory in their work for the Lord, and in their achievements for that work. With a repulsive conceit they will brag to you about how much they do, and what the results have been. In their recounting their

achievements they have often been known to exaggerate just a bit. The numbers and the deeds grow in size as they continue to retell the story. This is vain gloried. The spiritual are sometimes tempted to glory in their experiences. They will recount their experiences in such a way that it seems that they are totally responsible for their spiritual experiences. They may have seen a vision, experienced healing, or some other gracious work of God. Such people will usually talk more of their experience than they do the Lord. Paul's experience at this point might be helpful. Evidently Paul was tempted to flaunt some of his experiences over the head of other believers in order to bolster his position among them. He had been the participant in some experiences that would surely lend themselves unto such boasting. He reminds the Corinthians that in one experience he was actually lifted right up into the third heavens. He saw things unspeakable! Yet God put a restraint upon him, and would not allow him to share it with others lest he be lifted up in conceit.

In the scriptures there are only two things suggested that a Christian can legitimately glory in. One of them is found right in this Galatian letter, "But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the World." Christians can glory in the work of Jesus Christ on our behalf on the Cross. Such will not be empty glory for it gives all of the honor unto the One to whom it belongs. The other reference is in the passage I have already alluded to in the Corinthian letter. Paul writes, "Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong." (II Cor. 12:9,10) The Christian can justly glory in the things that make him weak, the things that make him lean upon the Lord more fully. Any other glory will be vain glory.

A church that is seeking to be spiritual can fall into the same pitfall. We must beware lest we go out bragging about the wrong things., We can brag about being the biggest and the best in such a way that we take glory away from the God who made us what we are. God will not permit any flesh to glory before Him. He is jealous for His glory. Yet the very nature of the spiritual life in which a lot of good things are happening create a temptation in itself. But it is a temptation to be vain glorious.

II. THE IRRITATION OF OTHERS IS A PITFALL TO THE SPIRITUAL.

Many students of this letter see this as being the outcome of the conceit and pride we have just considered. It is surely true that these three pitfalls are very closely related. Any one who falls into one of them will probably find himself in all three. This one says simply, "Provoking one another." "Provoking" means to call against, to challenge, to irritate. Now there is a kind of provoking that is legitimate and right for the Christian. Indeed, we are urged to provoke one

another unto good works. But there is a dangerous way of provoking one another. It will not be hard to notice when you encounter it. Yet it is such a hidden pitfall that you may almost slip into it before you know it.

Let us see if we can uncover some of the ways this wrong irritation takes place. It takes place when the spiritual Christian seeks to challenge another person with an obvious air of superiority. I recall an incident that took place years ago in my early ministry. A dear man was really getting serious about seeking to be a spiritual man. He sincerely wanted to walk in the Spirit. In this pilgrimage he became convicted that he ought to give up smoking. After struggling with his conviction for awhile. He finally made the decision to abandon this habit that had controlled his life for a number of years. That was good. But what happened in the days ahead was not good. He assumed after that experience that if God wanted him to give up smoking, surely he must want everyone to give up smoking. So he opened a personal little crusade to get everyone to give up smoking. He would seek to do what only God can do --- cause people to have a conviction about this matter. But the end result was that all he did was irritate everyone. His spirituality became repulsive rather than attractive.

This is a pitfall of the Spiritual. As you walk with the Lord, the Lord will do many unusual things in your life. He will call on you for obedience in many different areas of your life. You will be tempted to impose your experience, or your God-given convictions on everyone. Can you imagine Jacob trying to impose his experience with God on everyone? He walked away after the night at Peniel with a very distinct limp. He had been touched in a crippling kind of way in the thigh. Can you imagine Jacob contending that if you had not been touched in the thigh, that you are not truly the man God wants you to be? The truth is that God relates Himself to us personally in such a way that he meets our needs. Just because He has done something in my life a certain way does not give me a commission to see that you conform in the same way in your life. This is a pitfall of the spiritual.

If your spirituality has become a barrier to good relations with others, you should check yourself. Have you fallen into this pitfall? Is not Jesus our model for the spiritual life? Yet there was that about Jesus which attracted men. He especially attracted those who had need of Him and his ministry. The only people offended by him were the super religious folk. Allowing your life to become a provocation, and irritation is bad.

This can be summed up I suppose by saying that the spiritual are tempted to become the conscience of everyone else. Everyone gets irritated with their conscience. We are not called on to be the conscience of others, but we are called on to help them. We will notice the alternative to being an irritating conscience next week. But there is one more pitfall that Paul lists.

III. JEALOUSY IS A PITFALL OF THE SPIRITUAL.

Spirituality usually gives birth to spiritual ambition. The spiritual become ambitious to do big things for the Lord. Envy is a danger to people who have such ambition. Obviously this can be closely related to vain glory.

The worldly-minded Christian may be envious of material things, and focus attention in these areas. But the spiritually minded are tempted to become envious of other matters. They may become envious of opportunities of Christian service. I am not inclined to be envious of some brother who has a new Cadillac, but I am tempted to be envious of some brother who has received a special opportunity to serve the Lord. My' envy may prevent me from really rejoicing in the privilege that has come to him. If I hear him preach in a certain conference I am prevented from receiving benefit because I am so concerned that i was not included on the conference program. Why do they never call on me to pray? Why do I never get to sing in church? Why do I never get to serve on a committee? Why do I never get to teach a class? Why do opportunities not come to me like they do to Brother Smith? Such envy of opportunities for service is a special problem to those who would be spiritual.

Will you let me touch on just one other? The spiritual are tempted at times to be envious of the recognition that comes to others. Why does no one notice my deeds like they do the deeds of Mrs. Jones? I envy her that kind of recognition.

The spiritual may also be tempted to be envious of the attention that another may get from some spiritual leader. Why does the pastor not spend time with me like he does with Mr. Purifoy? These are the kind of things the spiritual are tempted to envy. The reason they are tempted to envy them is because they are the kind of things prized among the spiritual. They are the things upon which the spiritual place value. You must beware of this pitfall too!

CONCLUSION:

About the most dangerous position a Christian can ever be in is to think that they have come to a plateau of Christian living on which there are no more pitfalls. Paul warned in another place, take heed when you think you stand lest you fall. No man is more vulnerable than the person who thinks that he has it made spiritually. It is for this reason that I warn you about the pitfalls of the spiritual. Since you are moving forward in your Christian life, since you have begun to grow, I do not want you to become the victim of a downfall. I do want you to come into one of these pitfalls. If it has sounded like I was familiar with them it is because I have been each of them on more than one occasion. It is not a good experience to fall into one of these traps that the enemy has set for you. So beware!