

Deadly Influences

Mark 8:14-21

In his sermon, the preacher was blasting television for the bad influence it had on Christians. He challenged everyone to do what he had done in his own home, and that was to put their TV in the closet and leave it there. After the sermon, a nice older lady asked the preacher's little girl what she thought of that. "Oh I just hate it," she answered, "It gets awfully crowded in there!"

Jesus was warning against bad influences when He said to His disciples, "Watch out for the yeast of the Pharisees and that of Herod" (Mark 8:15). Yeast, or leaven, occupied a dual role in the lives of first-century Jews. For religious ceremonies, leaven was a symbol of evil, but in everyday life, it was a very practical ingredient for anyone who ever baked bread, or for that matter, ate it. Leaven made bread rise and gave it a lightness and "tastiness" that could not be duplicated by bread cooked without leaven. Leavened bread was just better than unleavened bread and, apart from certain rituals, there was no negative or sinful stigma attached to its use.

Why was something ordinarily benign like leaven used to describe that which was sinister? Leaven was a piece of dough from a previous baking that had fermented. It had gone bad, so to speak. This fermenting was viewed as putrefaction or corruption. Scientifically, leaven inserted into a batch of fresh dough did its thing by corrupting the rest of the dough. Leaven was rigorously excluded from most of the offerings in the Old Testament, but not from all of them. Fellowship offerings called for yeast. This may have been a reminder to the worshipper that his fellowship with God was not perfect due to the corruption that exists within a man.

A small amount of leaven can work in a whole batch of dough. Leaven permeates whatever is around it. When Jesus warned His disciples of the "yeast of the Pharisees and that of Herod," He was referring to things the Pharisees taught that mislead people about the nature of being right with God. He was speaking of the corrupting influence upon the nation by the Herodian line of puppet kings and the Herodian party that supported them. One day, these disciples would be left in the world to establish the church as a new Israel, a holy nation that would truly honor God. To that end, they must give no quarter to these corrupting influences.

A tiny speck of what the disciples might learn from the Pharisees and Herodians would prove destructive to their work. Church history is filled with stories of corruption, division and oppression because worldly influences have not always been carefully purged. Do not treat this warning as something meaningful only to twelve ancient Apostles. Destructive spirits die hard.

I. The Occasion on which the Warning Was Given (14, 15)

A. Jesus Had Just Encountered the Pharisees

Mark 8 begins with the miraculous feeding of the 4000. This was the second multitude Jesus fed, but in spite of those two miracles, certain Pharisees came to Him, demanding a sign from heaven that would prove that He was from God. It is hard to imagine how Jesus' miracles to date failed to put their skepticism to rest, but remember, they had previously attributed Jesus' works to Satan. Now they demanded something big that bore what they judged to be the mark of God.

Of course, the Pharisee's idea of what God was all about was skewed. They may have wanted Jesus to part the waters of the Jordan for no other reason than to prove that He could. Perhaps, by a word of command He might pull down some Roman building or, better yet, strike some oppressive Roman official dead. Jesus refused to play by their rules. He flatly refused their wishes. Their demand was not a reflection of their loyalty to God but of their blindness to Him.

No miracle could have awakened faith in these men because Jesus was simply not interested in establishing the kind of kingdom they demanded, an earthly kingdom marked by the restoration of Israel to worldly dominion. Jesus wanted to get away from these guys, so He and the disciples jumped in a boat to get to the other side of the lake. That brings us to our text. Jesus and His disciples were in the boat, trying to distance themselves from these sign-demanding Pharisees.

¹⁴The disciples had forgotten to bring bread, except for one loaf they had with them in the boat.
¹⁵"Be careful," Jesus warned them. "Watch out for the yeast of the Pharisees and that of Herod."

The trip across the lake would take about six hours. Somewhere along the way, they found that they had only one loaf of bread among them. Perhaps, they were contemplating going back whence they had just come to get provisions. This would have been an opportune time for Jesus to warn them, "Watch out for the yeast of the Pharisees and that of Herod."

B. What Was the Meaning of Jesus' Warning?

How could the influence of the Pharisees be detrimental to the disciples and to the church they would lead? For starters, the Pharisees claimed to have a high view of the Law of Moses, but they had so ritualized the practice of the Law that they missed its truths. They tacked on many of their own traditions and rules to the point that an ordinary working slob could never keep up with everything that the Pharisees insisted was essential for righteous living. They professed to have a high view of the Scriptures, but they had an uncanny knack for interpreting it in ways that would accommodate their own sinful practices while condemning minor indiscretions in others.

Pharisaism in our own vernacular has become synonymous with hypocritical self-righteousness. The spirit of the Pharisee is legalistic, oppressive and not at all real. It is no wonder that Jesus wanted the leaven of the Pharisees nowhere near His church, but it is also quite evident that in the history of the church, we haven't always been vigilant in guarding against the pharisaic spirit.

The influence of Herod and the Herodians was as great a danger to the church, but of a different kind. The spirit of the Herodians was the spirit of compromise with the secular world. The Herods were puppet kings who ruled only at the pleasure of the Roman emperor. The Herodians were a political party of Jews, probably founded by Herod the Great. They saw value in paying homage to a ruler that knew how to "get along" with the Romans that occupied their land.

The spirit of the Herodians remains alive and well in the church among those who sense a need to get along with the world. This is the spirit of theological liberalism that cannot withstand the ridicule of science, so they strip the Word of God of its teeth. Miracles aren't really miracles. One liberal explanation for the feeding of the multitudes is that Jesus stood in front of the small opening to a cave and distributed food as His disciples handed it out to Him. This same spirit of liberalism is also reluctant to condemn any sin that this current culture of relativism tolerates.

Ordinarily, Pharisees and Herodians had nothing to do with each other. One was a group of right-wing radicals and the other, left-wing extremists, but neither cared for Jesus. In its own way, each camp was self-sufficient and unwilling to trust Jesus. In fact, these polar opposites occasionally joined forces against Jesus, their common foe. Once, the Pharisees and Herodians came in unison to Jesus, asking if it was proper for a Jew to pay taxes to Rome. If Jesus said, "Yes", the Pharisees would smear Him in the eyes of the populace that resented the Roman presence. If He said, "No," the Herodians would certainly report Him to the Roman authorities.

Religious liberalism and religious legalism – each in its own way has plagued the church throughout history and even to the present day. We must remain watchful against them.

II. The Substantiation that the Warning Was Needed (16-21)

A. The Disciples Utterly Missed the Impact of Jesus' Words verses 16-18

¹⁶They discussed this with one another and said, "It is because we have no bread."

¹⁷Aware of their discussion, Jesus asked them: "Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not see or understand? Are your hearts hardened? ¹⁸Do you have eyes but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear? And don't you remember?"

Jesus' warning sailed right over the heads of His disciples. He wanted to review the group's recent encounter with the Pharisees, perhaps, because He alone grasped the severity of it. The disciples wanted to ride their bikes. But they did hear Him say something about yeast and that triggered their salivary glands. Jesus wanted to teach a crucial lesson for their futures as Apostles. They began to "discuss" the bread situation. The verb implies a bit more than friendly discussion. As the discussion heated up, we can be sure it approached argumentation and blame-naming. "I thought you had the bread!" "No, I have the money bag, he's in charge of the bread." "What you talking about? I have my own loaf of bread. What do I look like - your mother?"

Aware of their "discussion", Jesus finally had enough: "Get off this bread thing already and pay attention!" Then He began to speak to them in a tone He typically reserved for the Pharisees. "Do you still not see or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear? And don't you remember?" Their hearts were dull. Their minds were dull. They had seen mighty miracles and learned nothing from them. For all intents and purposes, they could just as easily have been a boatload of Pharisees as a boatload of saints.

B. They Missed the Significance of Earlier Experiences with Jesus verses 19-21

... ¹⁹When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many basketfuls of pieces did you pick up?"

"Twelve," they replied.

²⁰"And when I broke the seven loaves for the four thousand, how many basketfuls of pieces did you pick up?"

They answered, "Seven."

²¹He said to them, "Do you still not understand?"

When Jesus asked His men about the two times that He had fed multitudes, they remembered details, but they had missed the divine truth behind the miracles. The words for “basketfuls” in verses 19 & 20 are not the same. When Jesus fed the 5000, the leftovers were divided and placed in twelve small, personal baskets, the likes of which were carried by most Jews whenever they traveled far enough to need to pack a lunch. When Jesus fed the 4000, the leftovers were gathered into seven large hamper-like baskets such as was used during the stealth escape of Paul by night from Damascus when he was lowered in a basket from an opening in the city wall.

Could Jesus take care of the physical hunger of His disciples? That should have been a given, but if they couldn’t see that, how could they see the greater lessons of the miraculous feedings. The feeding of the 5000 was worked among the Jews. The twelve baskets corresponded to the twelve Apostles, which corresponded to the twelve tribes of Israel. Jesus, the Bread from Heaven, had come down to fulfill all of God’s promises to that nation. The feeding of the 4000 was done in a region that would have included a number of Gentiles. Seven abundantly filled hampers of food was a powerful symbol that this same Bread from Heaven was fulfilling God’s promise to Abraham that his seed would produce a blessing for the entire world.

The disciples could count, but they were a bit thickheaded when it came to grasping the spiritual realities that Jesus brought before their eyes. In this boat, thirteen men thought they had to figure out how to split one loaf of bread, but they missed the importance of the One Loaf Who was with them. After all this time, they still could not think in any terms beyond the temporary. This troubled Jesus. Must He still prove to them that there was no basis for concern about daily bread? His disciples were still steeped in their tendencies toward self-sufficiency. The leaven of the Pharisees and of Herod still infected them. Jesus asked them, “Do you still not understand?”

III. The Applications for which the Warning Remains Timely

A. Avoid Legalism

Pharisaism reduces godliness to a list of do’s and don’ts. That does keep matters simple. We always know where we stand. We don’t need wisdom. We don’t need discernment. Hard choices are eliminated. Kindness and grace are unnecessary for there is no need to empathize with the sinner. We just shove our list of rules at him, and he’ll either straighten up or he won’t. As a matter of fact, when we work off of a list of religious rules, we don’t even have to relate personally to God. We may not benefit from the warmth of His fellowship, but at least we won’t have to be troubled by where we fall short of His demands, because we’re keeping the rules. Yes, legalism is comfortable. The only problem is, keeping rules has never brought anyone to God.

B. Avoid Secular Compromise

Herodianism wants to get along with the world. I attended a conference last week because it touched on some important themes that don’t get much play or print in popular Christian media. I enjoyed it, but the sponsors were a bit on the egghead side and were awfully conservative in their approach to worship. So, I decided to balance that experience by attending a church at the other end of the spectrum, one known for its contemporary flavor. I was saddened to find that in that church’s quest to be cutting edge, the Gospel was no more recognizable than I would have expected to hear in a liberal, dead church that had simply stopped believing the Bible. No one could have exited that service with any sense that sin is the reason man is estranged from God. I know that debates about worship will probably remain with us for a long time, but that experience confirmed to me that there is such a thing as contemporary run amok.

Actress Sarah Michelle Gellar, *aka* “Buffy the Vampire Slayer” was quoted as saying, “I consider myself a spiritual person. I believe in an idea of God, although it’s my own personal ideal ... I’ve been to every kind of denomination: Catholic, Christian, Jewish, Buddhist. I’ve taken bits from everything and customized it.” That’s what we face today, folks. When the Gospel is preached, we need to at least be precise enough to confront that kind of thinking.

C. Avoid Spiritual Sensationalism

Why do we worship? We worship because we understand that God is great, that He is the Creator of everything and that in Jesus, our salvation has been won. If we don’t start there, it is highly doubtful that we will ever really worship. According to George Barna, 71% of adults say they have never experienced God’s presence at a church service as though that is an important statistic. If worship is about me feeling God’s presence, getting myself refueled so to speak, then what in the world have I been doing with myself all week? Worship is my gift to God for all that it means to me to be His child. God meets our needs every day we eat and breathe. He meet our needs in more ways than we even try to articulate. In part, worship is our saying, “Thank You,” “You are holy” and “I love You.” We might receive in worship, but that is not **WHY** we worship.

If I shared with you that for our anniversary, I bought Linda a new chainsaw, you might be less than impressed with my sense of romance. But, every time I hear someone measure worship in terms of the buzz they feel, I am left a bit underwhelmed myself. Worship is **OUR** gift **TO** God. There may be a beautiful moment if the gift is thoughtfully made to Him, but its still all about Him.

D. Cling to the Word of God

During Superbowl XXXVII, a FedEx commercial spoofed the movie *Castaway*, in which Tom Hanks played a FedEx worker whose plane went down, stranding him on a desert island for years. Looking like the bedraggled movie character, the FedEx employee in the commercial goes up to the door of a house, package in hand. He explains to the lady at the door how he survived five years on an island, guarding her package in order to deliver it to her. She simply says, “Thank you.” Curious, he asks the lady what was in the package that he had so dutifully cared for all these years. She opens it and shows him the contents, saying, “Oh, nothing really. Just a satellite telephone, a global positioning device, a compass, a water purifier, and some seeds.”

All we need for life is just as available if we will only look. The Bible has never been more available to Christians than today. Read it. No one commits to regular Bible reading because every day promises a spiritual jolt to the system. That can happen, but we commit ourselves to God’s Word for the same reason one commits oneself to taking his daily vitamins; the long-term, cumulative benefits of better health, a resistance to sickness and our general well-being.

Deadly influences abound that undermine Christian growth as well as the work of the Kingdom of God. The Pharisees and Herodians are long dead, but their leaven remains. Jesus Himself remains with us today, willing to guide us by His Spirit through the Bible. There is no reason other than carelessness that God’s people should ever drift from the safety of God’s hand.