

The Leaven of Hypocrisy

Luke 12:1-12

There are a number of processes involved in making bread. According to Peter Reinhart, author of several bread-baking books, stage three of the process is fermentation, or leavening. This is the most critical stage because it's when the dough comes alive. He describes this portion of the process as the "leaven factor." "It's it's a term that has emerged as my core theme in life," says Reinhart, as he explores philosophy through the art and craft of baking bread.

"One of the things I discovered was that slow-rising bread has better flavor than fast-rising bread. I began to see the parallels in other aspects of life. With any kind of slow-fermentation foods, it's about complexity. Human beings, if nothing else, are complex. The deeper I got into bread, the more this metaphor began to come to life for me."

If you're a student of the Scriptures you know that leaven generally refers to sin and its negative effects. Leaven or yeast begins the process of fermentation. While this can be helpful when it is controlled, if left to itself it leads to spoilage, corruption, and defilement.

In Luke 12:1 to 12, Jesus warns His disciples about the dangerous leaven of the Pharisees... hypocrisy! Listen now as I read this portion of the Holy Scripture; **Luke 12:1 to 12.**

The background to this teaching is Jesus' recent public rebuke of the Pharisees. Two things happened as a result of this confrontation. First, the religious leaders became more vehemently opposed to Jesus and His ministry. Second, this opposition from the religious leaders plus Jesus' authoritative teaching inspired the common people. According to our text the crowds around Jesus were growing bigger and bigger. This increased the hatred of the religious leaders as they saw their influence slipping away.

Our text reveals Jesus' teaching on the leaven of Pharisees. As yeast activates the fermentation process in baking bread, so the leaven of the Pharisees, hypocrisy, activates several FEARS that can lead us to a life of regret. Our study is titled, "The Leaven of Hypocrisy."

The First FEAR (activated by the Leaven of Hypocrisy) is,

The Fear of Discovery

Nobody likes a hypocrite; but we are all tempted to be hypocritical at times. Why? We're afraid others will discover we are not truly who we say we are. We're not really what we seem to be. We fear that if our true character is revealed, people will reject us.

In the scene just previous to our text Jesus had bluntly rebuked the religious leaders. He saw the bankruptcy of their souls in contrast to the impression of righteousness they gave to the public. He gave specific examples of how different they were inside compared to their outside. They hated Him for shining the light of truth into their darkened lives. How would you and I feel if Jesus exposed our secrets?

The religious system the Jewish leaders created gained them a certain respect from the people. It also ingratiated them with the Roman authorities. As long as they kept the people under control, Rome rewarded them handsomely. Many were wealthy. As a result, many of them worshipped, not at the altar of Jehovah, but at the altar of wealth and prestige. You and I face the same pressures today; to minimize biblical principles for the sake of financial gain.

So Jesus warned His followers; *"Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy."* Jesus said those things that were completely concealed would eventually be revealed. Things hidden would be brought out into the full light of day. The outward veneer of piety would be stripped away and the depravity of soul and spirit would be plainly visible.

The true spirit of these hypocrites is revealed by their words in Matthew 27:25. In that setting of Jesus' trial these leaders prompted the crowds to cry out; *"His blood be upon us and our children."* What terrible consequences resulted from the fear of discovery!

Later, in Matthew 28:13 and 14 the leaders colluded with the Romans by giving a large sum of money to the soldiers and telling them; *"You are to say, 'His disciples came by night and stole Him away while we were asleep.' And if this should come to the governor's ears, we will win him over and keep you out of trouble."*

Fear of discovery motivated their dishonesty! They didn't want the people to know they were complicit, even approving, of the death of Christ. How often have you and I not told the whole truth, giving a false impression in order to protect our reputation, or possessions, or our position? As I prepared this teaching the Lord was revealing areas of hypocrisy in my own life.

While this revelation is promised for the Pharisees in a negative sense, verse three changes to the positive and relates to the disciples' ministry. Recall that not long before this, the Seventy had been sent out to preach the kingdom of God. Jesus promised them that their ministry would be supernaturally expanded. The things they had spoken in obscurity would be proclaimed abroad for all to hear.

The faithful are almost always in the minority; they don't hold the reins of power. They may be tempted to hide because of the threat of persecution. Throughout the church age, much Gospel proclamation has taken place in secret.

When I visited China in 2004 I had the privilege of attending a house-church. Actually, it was a small, Bible Institute for Chinese believers. It was located in a section of the city where even the police feared to enter. We went to the meeting place in groups of two or three - under the cover of darkness. The intensity of their worship and their praying was something I'll never forget. But what was being taught in the "darkness" of that hidden Bible school would ultimately come to light as the students went back to their home communities to share the Gospel!

And the whispers in the closet Jesus spoke of in verse 3 may be the place of prayer He designated in Matthew 6:6. Jesus promised that the message proclaimed by faithful Believers would be 'heralded' from the housetops.

Are there things in your life that cause you to fear discovery? Are there things you're hiding from other people because it may change their opinion of you? Do you have secret sins that are threatening to explode into the light of day? If so, you have two options. You can continue trying to hide them and eventually have them brought to light by others. Or, you can acknowledge and confess them now and find forgiveness and healing. What will you choose?

The Next FEAR (activated by the Leaven of Hypocrisy) is,

The Fear of Death

Notice the change of tone in verse 4. Jesus says, "*But to you, my friends...*" In contrast to the warnings about the hypocrisy of the Pharisees, Jesus calls the disciples His friends. Friends are not just people with whom we share a common life. They are those with whom we also share common commitments and goals. This is the only place Jesus used this word in the Synoptic

Gospels. It expresses His confidence in the disciples and His approval. He entrusted them with His secrets and the carrying out of His will.

He goes on to say *“Do not fear those who kill the body and can do nothing more.”* Fear of death causes you and me to make wrong choices. Remember Peter’s choice when questioned about his friendship with Jesus? With an oath he said he didn’t know the man. Proverbs 25:29 tells us *“The fear of man brings a snare, but whoever trusts in the Lord will be safe.”*

The fear of man is misplaced; yet like leaven, it often exerts a powerful influence in our lives and decision making. All man can do is kill the body, our temporary dwelling. Instead, Jesus said we should fear God; because He not only has the power to kill, but to cast into Hell. That’s an eternal destination, an eternal punishment! Jesus wanted you and me to understand the difference between these degrees of death and to choose wisely.

Hell is a neglected subject in the wider church today. But Jesus gave a substantial amount of teaching on the subject. He taught it was a real place of eternal torment from which there will be no escape, Matthew 25:46 and Mark 9:48. It will be populated by any and all who refuse to accept the blood of Jesus as the only acceptable payment for their sin, John 3:36.

Because of the fear of men, some Bible teachers have tried to say that Hell is only allegorical; it’s not a literal place. That goes directly against what Jesus told the disciples here and against numerous other portions of Scripture.

Others have said that a loving God would never send anyone to a place of eternal torment. There is a sense in which that is true. God is not to blame for the choices people make; choices that will lead to their eternal punishment. But we must never elevate our intellect or emotions above the Word of God. He tells us in Isaiah 55:8 and 9 that His ways and His thoughts are so much higher than ours. He speaks with authority and we can only submit.

To those who were concerned about losing their physical life, Jesus reminds them the smallest birds, which have little value, are noticed and cared for by His Father. Furthermore, the Father is able to account for all the hairs on your head. Incredible! So do not be afraid. You are made in God’s image and are so much more valuable to Him than the sparrows. God not only knows the hairs of our head, He knows all our activities and our thoughts, Psalm 139.

You and I do not need to fear physical death. Psalm 116:15 reminds us that *“Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints.”* And First Corinthians 15 and many other

Scripture portions assure us of our resurrection. Let's not let the leaven of hypocrisy activate the fear of death in our lives. Let's live openly and confidently in God's promises!

The Final FEAR (activated by the Leaven of Hypocrisy) is,

The Fear of Denial

Confess or deny; those are the options for disciples according to verses 8 and 9. To confess Christ means to identify with Him. There is a state or condition of oneness. This oneness will cause Christ to declare us to His Father. Confess or deny are the only options you and I have too. In the Greek text, these words are polar opposites – own or disown!

The leaven of hypocrisy causes us to vacillate between the two. In the presence of those who agree with us it is easy, even beneficial to confess Christ. But when we're among those who are hostile to the Gospel what is our response? Our fear of shame in the presence of God must be greater than our fear of man or we will compromise the truth to gain man's favor.

Unfortunately, we often have a greater fear of being denied by men than the fear of being denied by God. Perhaps this is because one is immediate and the other is future. Jesus said in Luke 9:26 that if we're ashamed to identify with Him and His words among men, then He'll be ashamed to identify with us - before the Father and the holy angels. First John 2:23 reminds us that if we deny the Son we do not possess life from the Father.

Verse 10 of our text has been the subject of much controversy; blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Remember, it is in the context of denying and confessing - and the leaven of hypocrisy. It is also in the context of making an oral defense of the Gospel under persecution.

Think about what Jesus said as He was dying on the cross; "*Father, forgive them because they don't know what they are doing.*" It was possible for a pious Jew under the influence of his early training to see Jesus as an impostor, a sham. But to resist the power of the Holy Spirit demonstrated at Pentecost was another matter.

On the day of Pentecost Peter stated to the crowd; "*And now, brothers, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers. But what God foretold by the mouth of all the prophets, that his Christ would suffer, he thus fulfilled. Repent therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out, that the times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord...*" Things are different now; the Holy Spirit of God is here!

Anyone who refuses to acknowledge the validity of the Spirit's presence and activity cannot be forgiven until such a time as he does acknowledge it. Paul tells us in First Corinthians 12:3 *"No one can say, 'Jesus is Lord,' except by the Holy Spirit."* Jesus pointed out that the disciples must depend on the Holy Spirit to give them words to speak when they were called before the authorities. To deny the Spirit would leave them defenseless before their adversaries.

As a further indication of importance of relying on the Holy Spirit, Jesus told them not to plan their defense beforehand. He was not talking about their preaching; He was talking about them facing hostile authorities in the synagogue, magistrates, and civil authorities. In those settings He promised the Holy Spirit would give them the words they needed when they needed them. The Spirit would be there to empower them with the exact words needed for the situation.

What about you? Do you have a fear of denial that causes you to quench God's Holy Spirit working in your life? Are you willing to declare Christ before men, by your character, your speech, and your conduct? Or are you fearful about what others may say? Remember, if you want Jesus to own you before His Father, you must be willing to own Him now.

Are you afraid of death? You needn't be! Christ has set us free from the controlling influence of sin and death. Our future is secure in Him; death has lost its sting!

My friend, is there hypocrisy in your life? I already admitted to you that the Lord revealed some areas of hypocrisy in my life. If there are things in our lives that we are trying to hide from other people, isn't that an evidence of hypocrisy? After all, God knows all about us. He knows not only our actions, but the motives behind them. According to Psalm 139:2 He knows our thoughts before we do! Yet somehow, we have the mistaken notion that we can hide things from Him. How foolish of us to think and act that way.

I encourage you to face your fears, the things that motivate hypocrisy in your life. Talk to God about them; He understands. Then find another brother or sister you can trust and share your fears with them. Ask them to pray with you and for you. Remember the words of Second Timothy 1:7, *"For God has not given us a spirit of fearfulness, but one of power, love, and sound judgment. Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord..."*

My friend, Jesus' warning to beware the leaven of hypocrisy is just as needed today as when He gave it to His disciples. How will you respond to that warning?