

Restoration
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An Inch of Rhubarb

How not to be a hypocrite

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His preparations for the temple visit were at last complete and he felt ready to stand in the presence of God.

Much time and consideration had gone into the selection of the black calfskin cases, containing the prescribed Scriptures, that would be prominently displayed on his forehead and arms. It really didn't matter what the Scriptures *said* as long as the cases (known as phylacteries) were bigger and more impressive than those of anyone else.

Happily, his coat presented no problems as he had recently instructed his wife to replace the tassels on each corner with new ones of even greater length than those favoured by the trend-setters of Pharisaical fashion.

He felt good as he made his way to the temple. He took the long route via the market place. That way he could be certain of the reverential greetings of lesser men as they acknowledged him with the respect due to a rabbi of his standing.

Of course, it also meant that he might just see a needy person upon whom he could bestow alms — he always carried some small change and a large trumpet for just such occasions!

Opposites

It was good to be different. 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men.' And he had no illusions about what 'other men' were like '...robbers, evildoers, adulterers.'

Then, noticing a particularly vile specimen hiding away in a corner (for he always prayed with one eye open - well, how else can you fully appreciate the impression you are making on both God and men at the same time?), he added, '...or even like this tax collector'.

Especially like this tax collector! Why, he felt, the two of them were exact opposites! One with downcast eyes, overcome by his own worthlessness, reaching for the mercy of God; the other confident in his own worth and acceptability.

'I fast twice a week.' It was common knowledge, the talk of the neighbourhood where he appeared every Tuesday and Thursday, sucking his cheeks in and trying hard to look like death warmed up. 'I... give a tenth of all I get.' And he did - mathematically as much as religiously - even to cutting one inch off every stick of rhubarb!

So he returned home, smug but oblivious of the fact that he had prayed to no-one but his own ego and had impressed nothing but his own self-righteousness (see Luke 18:9-14; Matthew 6:1-8; Matthew 23:5-32).

Humour

There must have been quite a lot of chuckling, and probably not a few roars of laughter, as Jesus caricatured the fastidious hypocrisy of the Pharisees.

Try to capture the humour in the story of a man daintily nibbling on a mosquito-sized morsel, finding it ever so difficult to swallow, and then with one gulp downing a camel, hump and all! Or the man whose self-appointed mission in life is 'speck removing' from the eyes of the afflicted, only to find that he is constantly hindered in his 'ministry' by the resident roof-rafter in his own eye that keeps him twenty feet off target (Luke 6:41-42)!

Sons of the Devil

To Jesus, however, the Pharisees were much more than a legalistic denomination to be ridiculed or ignored. They weren't merely a pain in the neck to those who wanted to move on with God, and certainly not a necessary balance to the 'extremes' of new revelation.

He didn't view them as heaven's alternative for those who preferred the traditional and staid to the innovative and free, nor as a legitimate expression of some facet of truth whose contribution helped fill out the whole.

No! They were the *enemies of righteousness, sons of the devil, children of hell* - those of whom Isaiah wrote, 'They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men' (Matthew 15:7-9; Isaiah 29:13).

Never slow to confront error, Jesus seems at times to have gone out of his way deliberately to offend the sensitivities of the religious self-righteous.

On one remarkable occasion, recorded in Luke 11:37-52, Jesus, after accepting a Pharisee's invitation, entered a Pharisee's house and reclined on a Pharisee's couch before a Pharisee's table to eat a Pharisee's food.

So far, so good. But the calculated ignoring of the Pharisees' custom of ceremonial washing aroused the shocked surprise of both host and fellow guests.

Jesus turned their indignation back upon themselves with one of his most scathing attacks upon hypocrisy. 'Woe to you Pharisees,' he cried. Then he began to castigate them for their obsession with outward form to the total neglect of what really mattered, reviling them for their legalism and self-righteous pride.

No Compromise

Some lawyers - so-called 'experts' on the law of Moses - who were also present, found the atmosphere more than a little disturbing. 'Teacher,' they said, 'when you say these things, you insult us also.'

Cashing in on their affronted dignity, Jesus removed any doubts that might have lingered concerning his opinion of them. 'And you experts in the law, woe to you!' They had burdened the people of their own generation with intolerable obligations which they themselves ignored, while building and beautifying the tombs of the prophets who in past generations their fathers had slain.

Such non-diplomatic and unambiguous speaking led inevitably to growing hostility and underhand plotting against this intolerant preacher from Galilee.

There was to be no compromise from Jesus. He had come to bring the good news of the

kingdom of God, and such a ministry demanded both *compassion* and *confrontation*. He was a man of extreme convictions, loving righteousness but also just as intensely hating wickedness.

Unseen Influence

With great spiritual equanimity, the Son of Man was able to move from decrying to delivering without any conflict of emotion or conviction of conscience. Indeed, immediately following his verbal assault on the Pharisees in their home territory, a crowd of thousands gathered around him to such an extent that they were stepping on one another.

It was *under these circumstances* - the pressing crowds of needy men and women and the increasing vehemence of the religious opposition - that Jesus instructed his disciples as a *priority* to be on their guard against 'the yeast of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy' (Luke 12:1).

Although he despised the attitude of religious hypocrisy, Jesus never underestimated its danger. He described the teaching of the Pharisees as 'yeast', or 'leaven', an unseen, insidious permeating influence capable of affecting the whole batch of dough (1 Corinthians 5:6; Galatians 5:9). It was the working of that same yeast that not very long after was to turn the cry in Jerusalem from 'Hosanna' to 'Crucify.'

Bondage

Nor was its influence to disappear with the close of the gospel narratives. The epistles show Paul's persistent warfare against such a spirit within the infant church as men demanded the imposition of traditions and regulations that were not just unnecessary but in direct conflict with the gospel.

Circumcision, dietary abstentions, religious days, prescribed ceremonies and legal obligations all militated, and still militate, against the grace of God, bringing men into bondage again.

Even the apostles Peter and Barnabas became casualties through fear and pressure of the Pharisaical influence. Thank God for the faithful confrontation of Paul (Galatians 2:11-21). He was prepared to call a spade a spade, not waffle about it being 'a tool for digging, usually consisting of a flattish rectangular blade socketed on a wooden handle having a grip at the upper end,' etc, etc.

Yeast Today

It's sobering to discover that it is possible to be born-again and Spirit-filled and yet be guilty of wrong doctrine and practice, as were many of the Pharisees in Acts 15:5. How frightening to find error defended with such passion and zeal! Such a state still persists among the people of God and those who, at least in name, are associated with them.

The yeast of the Pharisees is still fermenting. How then shall we recognise this influence of which we are to be aware and to beware?

Basically, it is an *attitude that refuses to bow unconditionally to the righteousness of God*. In its disobedience, it seeks to justify itself by persecuting those who are obedient, praising those who are not and pressurising those who are undecided.

One thing we all need to know: Pharisees don't fight fair! Their animosity is never aired in the arena of honest debate but in the shadowlands of hearsay, gossip, rumour, half-truth, misrepresentation and downright lie.

All the time promoting themselves as custodians of spiritual integrity, they refuse to enter the kingdom and live by its demands. At the same time, they seek vigorously to keep out others who would live under God's kingdom rules.

They take away the key of knowledge, having firmly locked out of the purposes of God those who look towards them for guidance (Matthew 23:13; Luke 11:52).

Rumour

How many of us would have to admit that our opinions of certain Christians or Christian groups are totally coloured by what we have read or heard of them, not what we have personally experienced and seen?

When Paul said that love 'believes all things' (1 Corinthians 13:7 NASB), he didn't mean that it latches on to every negative report, slanderous comment or libelous opinion of the kind we find flying around in Christian circles these days!

Cast doubt upon a man's covenant relationship with God - 'you are a Samaritan' or accuse him of wrong motives - 'you are... demon-possessed' (John 8:48); suggest that his success comes from some quarter other than God - 'It is by the prince of demons that he drives out demons' (Matthew 9:34); criticise his lifestyle - 'a glutton and a drunkard' (Luke 7:34). Do any of these things and very soon people are convinced that there is 'no smoke without fire' and that the rumours must be true.

In fact, though, the lifestyle and ministry of Jesus was a constant rebuke to the extra-biblical formalism of dead religion and a threat to the monopoly and stranglehold of its traditional leaders. *His life exposed their death and his light their darkness.*

The Pharisees had had their opportunity to come to the light and receive life but had baulked at the cost. The Pharisees had had their opportunity to come to the light and receive life but had baulked at the cost. *'The Pharisees and experts in the law rejected God's purpose for themselves, because they had not been baptised by John' (Luke 7:30).*

Almost invariably, Pharisaical yeast invades the hearts of those who are already entrenched in disobedience over some kingdom demand that appears to cost too much.

Who Can Judge?

Without question there are in the church at large errors to be redressed, attitudes to be exposed, relationships and associations to be terminated and sins to be repented of.

Such problems will never be resolved by adopting the strategy of the Pharisees but by the straightforward righteousness of the kingdom of God.

Some years ago I was involved in a pioneer work in South Wales. After a series of public meetings where God had demonstrated his power with salvation and healing, the local newspaper carried a banner headline, 'Beware of These Religious Frighteners!'

Intrigued, I read the article, only to discover that the story was about our meetings with my name featuring prominently.

It wasn't, of course, an encouraging report. The most hurtful aspect was that the whole thing had been written by a local pastor. He had commented with confident authority on things spoken, deeds done and persons involved in a meeting at which he had never been present.

In no way was it an objective report, nor an exaggerated report, not even a biased report. The whole thing was a fabrication - a total, downright lie.

I needed to see this brother. He obviously had a problem with me, and I must confess that by now I had one with him. We duly met and I asked why he had taken such an un-biblical course as to seek to defame the people of God before the world (see Matthew 18:15-17; 1 Corinthians 6:1-8). His reply was: 'The Holy Spirit directed me to do it this way.'

When I pointed out that the Holy Spirit would never lead anyone to act contrary to the Word of God, and that the Spirit certainly wouldn't associate himself with such blatant untruth, I was asked in tones of pulpit indignation *what right I had to pass such judgments!*

A Better Yeast

The saints of God, of course, do have an obligation to bring judgment. After all, we are destined to judge the world and angels. And we should never be fearful of confrontation over the vital issues of faith and conduct. Even so, we must always be careful that our righteousness surpasses that of the Scribes and Pharisees, or we ourselves won't enter the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:20).

Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees - the hypocrisy, wrong teaching, legalism, tradition and self-righteousness that is the enemy of souls.

We aren't, however, anticipating the triumph of error over truth or tradition over revelation; there is another, more potent, yeast at work. Jesus said, '*The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough*' (Matthew 13:33).

Our yeast must be righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit - kingdom leaven destined to affect the whole world.