

The Leaven of the Pharisees

Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness. - Matthew 23:27

A timely warning for Christians. The Pharisees were held accountable for allowing themselves to come to the point of self-deception and blindness that resulted in their acting hypocritically. Rather than considering the Pharisees from a perspective of condescension, we should consider how easily we can and do fall into the same trap.

Chapter 1 - Being "right" is not the same as following truth.

One of the things exhorted in the bible is Christian unity. Sadly one of the most noticeable characteristics of Christians over the centuries is a tendency to attack and even kill each other. While denominations no longer launch armies against each other, there is often scathing denunciation or mocking derision held for any who adopt a doctrinal "flag" other than one's own.

This is not a recent phenomena;

For it hath been declared unto me of you, my brethren, by them which are of the house of Chloe, that there are contentions among you. Now this I say, that every one of you saith, I am of Paul; and I of Apollos; and I of Cephas; and I of Christ. Is Christ divided? was Paul crucified for you? or were ye baptized in the name of Paul? - 1 Corinthians 1:11-13

Today we might find those who claim Christ to say, "I am of Luther", "I am of Calvin", or "I am of KJV only". A common thread through these is a prideful arrogance, a feeling of having "gotten it right", and even a mocking of others. This lack of humility is the same condition to be found with the Pharisees.

Part of the problem is attempting to run Christianity as an organized system as opposed to just simple relations between people. Two people have more of a chance to work out problems between each other. Organizational systems usually define themselves in opposition to other systems such that there is little chance to resolve differences as remaining steadfast is seen as the only way to defend the organization from attack.

An individual may seek to learn and change his views as he grows in understanding. An organization cannot allow change as it would be seen as an acknowledgment of error.

Here we see the problem with organizations. They have to claim to be "right". Christianity was intended to be dynamic with each Christian growing and maturing. Organizational systems tend to be static requiring compliance and adherence to doctrinal declarations they have deemed not only to be "right" but by definition also "complete".

In a way, the organizational system approach to Christianity serves as a model for what goes wrong in a Christians life when he begins to follow the path of the Pharisees. There is an established template of what is "right". This then leads us to focus on works and accomplishment. We then see ourselves as having appropriated "rightness" and begin to be prideful for our faithful accomplishments.

The Christian life was never intended to be agreement with a particular creed or set of doctrinal statements. Christianity is so much more.

Christ in you, the hope of glory: - Colossians 1:27b

The Christian has new and eternal life, the life of Christ. We have God living in us and desirous to work in us to turn from our old selfish and destructive nature and allow his work in us to make us a new creation inclined to righteousness. Our transformation is to be much more than "doing good" or "being right". In fact, it is when we think of ourselves, this way, we actually elevate our flesh (pride) and make ourselves useless for God to work in us.

One way to reflect on this problem is to consider how we deal with error. A Christian being led by the Spirit of God is going to be actively seeking how to be more like Jesus. He is going to make mistakes, but be open to instruction and correction, in fact he will be seeking it out. In contrast the Christian attached to an organizational system may become rather inert. He may have his desire to follow the Lord channeled into rituals or rule observance so that his actions can be measured and verified to be in compliance. This is what happened to the Pharisees. They were no longer living by faith as Abraham did. Rather they saw in the law which was supposed to expose their sinfulness and humble need for a Savior a way to prove their own righteousness. When the promised Messiah (Jesus) finally did arrive, they not only could not recognize him, but they saw him as a threat and felt the need to kill him.

For I say unto you, That except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven. - Matthew 5:20

This book is an attempt to expand on how this Pharisaical “leaven” can come to infest and cripple a Christian. The Christian may have never had any intention other than to serve his Lord. Yet, in spite of every good intention, come to see self-righteousness as a substitute for the righteousness of Christ. We are all subject to these influences. It is not so much a matter of resisting sin, as it is being aware of how our inattention can allow us to drift, our fear can cause us to seek comfort, and how our vanity can approve that which cripples our faith. Like a ship’s captain that has lost his ability to see his compass, the Christian who becomes so diverted is likely to end up at a destination he did not expect.

Chapter 2 - When “leaven” (hypocrisy) is not intentional it is self-deceptive.

Beware ye of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy. - Luke 12:1b

Jesus gave his disciples this warning in the context of being enticed by the Pharisees to say something by which they could accuse him. The word “hypocrisy” was used at the time to refer to stage actors who would present a performance that was by definition other than who they actually were.

Today we mostly use the word “hypocrite” to refer to someone like an actor who presents an image inconsistent with reality. Often we think of a scoundrel or manipulator trying to gain some advantage through misrepresentation. With this emphasis on intentionality, it is easy to overlook the more common and damaging aspect of hypocrisy that of self-deception. Like an actor that “gets lost in his part”, a Christian can come to a point where what he does, thinks, and says is different than reality. He can sound very sincere because he believes it himself.

In the warning Jesus gives the disciples he uses the word “leaven”. The slow, pervasive, and inflating aspect of yeast (leaven) would indicate the Jesus was warning less about intentional hypocrisy than about how one can be brought to this state unawares.

We have an example of one way this can overtake a Christian with the example of Peter and Barnabas.

But when Peter was come to Antioch, I withstood him to the face, because he was to be blamed. For before that certain came from James, he did eat with the Gentiles: but when they were come, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing them which were of the circumcision. And the other Jews dissembled likewise with him; insomuch that Barnabas also was carried away with their dissimulation. But when I saw that they walked not uprightly according to the truth of the gospel, I said unto Peter

before them all, If thou, being a Jew, livest after the manner of Gentiles, and not as do the Jews, why compellest thou the Gentiles to live as do the Jews? - Galatians 2:11-14

Here we have a record of being “carried away” with dissimulation (hupokrisis - elsewhere translated hypocrisy). Here the motive is fear and the sort of “herd mentality” common with peer pressure.

There was an episode of the Twilight Zone where a man found a mirror that had been painted over. When he scraped off some of the paint, he discovered that it was a portal to another world. After scraping off all the paint, he went through only to learn that he could not find his way back. Truth is a little like that. When we deviate, even slightly, we begin to lose our ability to find our way back. Hypocrisy (intentional or otherwise) is a disconnection from truth. It can have lasting consequences.

If we can see from the example of Peter and Barnabas what a slight drop in vigilance can allow, how much more should we seek to recognize when this happens to us.

In the example of Peter and Barnabas we have them on the path of truth and serving Jesus who is truth. Their acquiescence to the preferences of the visitors (the Jews of the circumcision) might have seemed to them only a courteous accommodation. They may have even felt that they might be able to “win over” these people through their accommodation. They probably correctly anticipated that if they failed to provide such accommodation, the visitors would “pitch a fit”. It is understandable that they would want to avoid such a confrontation seeking “peaceableness” instead.

This is what makes the “leaven” of hypocrisy so tricky. It can start so small that we never notice its encroaching growth. We can even consider what we are doing as righteous or godly.

If we examine Peter and Barnabas we might be able to determine at what point they started to diverge from truth. It seems they thought they had to act a certain way to achieve a certain result.

Embedded in this are several elements

1. Shift from trust in God to trust in self.
2. Implying that simple faith in Jesus is insufficient.
3. Imputing to those of the circumcision an authority not deserved.
4. Subverting their previous testimony to the gentiles.

It is often when we start to think that we need to control or direct things, even with good intentions, that we step into the flesh and risk disconnecting ourselves from God. When we see things in terms of what we can or should do, slowly we begin to see ourselves as the one who decides what is right. Jesus is a better example of how to avoid the elevation of self that can arise.

Then answered Jesus and said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, The Son can do nothing of himself, but what he seeth the Father do: for what things soever he doeth, these also doeth the Son likewise. - John 5:19

Often the path to play-acting hypocrisy begins with consideration of the appearance of things. We find that we modify what we do and say (even what we believe) to achieve a particular effect only to find that we have become diverted from truth.

Chapter 3 - Master of Our Own Domain

Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths. - Proverbs 3:5-6

Mankind was created to depend on God. It is when we stray from this relationship that bad things start to happen. This vulnerability has been a primary target for Satan. He makes effective use of getting us to consider making our own assessments and taking our own actions;

Now the serpent was more subtil than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made. And he said unto the woman, Yea, hath God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden? And the woman said unto the serpent, We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden: But of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God hath said, Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die. And the serpent said unto the woman, Ye shall not surely die: For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil. - Genesis 3:1-5

Satan assured Eve that her taking independent action from God would not have a penalty but actually be beneficial. This was not true. God knew this would happen and had planned from before creation to have Jesus pay the price for sin that some might be redeemed. While the salvation available by faith in Jesus can rescue us from hell, the Christian also has a means to repair the damage our daily sin causes to our relationship with God. God has provided a way for us to restore our relationship with him when we stray;

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. - 1 John 1:9

The Greek word homologos (meaning the same words) is translated as the word “confess”. This implies that when we can say the same things about what we have done and said that God would say, we can have a restored relationship with God. This “confession” requires both humility and truth. The problem with the pervasive growth of the “leaven” (hypocrisy) demonstrated by the Pharisees is that one becomes distant from both truth and humility having substituted something else for them and being convinced that what is held is the real thing.

If we consider some biblical examples of this sort of substitution, we can begin to get a better picture of how this process can grow to be a debilitating cancer.

But in vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men. - Matthew 15:9

For Christ sent me not to baptize, but to preach the gospel: not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of none effect. - 1 Corinthians 1:17

He answered and said unto them, Well hath Esaias prophesied of you hypocrites, as it is written, This people honoureth me with their lips, but their heart is far from me. - Mark 7:6

Here we can see a divergence from God. What is less obvious is the motive force that leads to this state. It could be summed up as human will apart from God (selfishness). This is often seen in the behavior of children who insist on having something or doing something they desire in opposition to parental instruction. It has been said regarding children, “They want what they want when they want

it”.

For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry. Because thou hast rejected the word of the LORD, he hath also rejected thee from being king. - 1 Samuel 15:23

At first glance the comparison of witchcraft and rebellion might seem like apples and oranges. However, at their core both activities are about getting what you want. Human history could be considered an accumulation of evidence for the pain and suffering caused by our attempting to get what we want.

There is a bumper sticker that declares “He who dies with the most toys wins”. While there are many iconic ways to emblemize the selfishness of the world apart from God, this serves well to also connect it with a sort of infantile component.

The opposite of selfishness is love.

Love suffereth long, and is kind; love envieth not; love vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not its own, is not provoked, taketh not account of evil; rejoiceth not in unrighteousness, but rejoiceth with the truth; beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things. - 1 Corinthians 13:4-7

God himself is the example to us of this self-sacrificial love;

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on him should not perish, but have eternal life. - John 3:16

Have this mind in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: who, existing in the form of God, counted not the being on an equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men; and being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, becoming obedient even unto death, yea, the death of the cross. - Philippians 2:5-8

We have an example of ultimate selfishness in the rebellion of Satan;

How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! how art thou cut down to the ground, which didst weaken the nations! For thou hast said in thine heart, I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God: I will sit also upon the mount of the congregation, in the sides of the north: I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will be like the most High. - Isaiah 14:12-14

While we may not have the grandiose ambitions of Satan, we can still in our own small way begin to follow a path away from God that makes us just as blind as the Pharisees became.

Thou blind Pharisee, cleanse first that which is within the cup and platter, that the outside of them may be clean also. - Matthew 23:26

We see with the example of Eve how easily we can be seduced away from God to use our own ideas as

the basis for making decisions. With the example of Peter and Barnabas, we find that we do not even need temptations from Satan as there is that within us that can divert us from faithfulness to God into seeing our own plans as if not virtuous, then at least acceptable.

There was a popular book written after WWII titled, "God is my Co-pilot". While well intentioned and seeking to be a testimony of faith, the implied subordinate position of God in the relationship testifies to much of the trouble Christians have had in modern times.

And he went a little further, and fell on his face, and prayed, saying, O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt. - Matthew 26:39

As with all things, Jesus is an example for us to see that even when faced with great difficulty, setting aside what we would prefer is essential in our relationship with God.

Much of modern life (education, corporate employment, and even social activities, are constructed such that God seems irrelevant or even an obstacle. This can make it difficult for a Christian because when God is not given his proper place, we often fill that void with our own ambitions, plans, and desires. This can be dangerous enough for the Christian, but there is also a danger that he can be attracted to a flavor of Christianity that feeds his self-preoccupation.

We may have plans and ambitions, but we need to remember that it is God who should be directing us and not the other way around.

And who of you by worrying and being anxious can add one unit of measure (cubit) to his stature or to the span of his life? - Matthew 6:27 (AMP)

But God said unto him, Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee: then whose shall those things be, which thou hast provided? - Luke 12:20

Those whose path through life has little room for God find that that in which they have trusted will fail them.

Can the rush grow up without mire? can the flag grow without water? Whilst it is yet in his greenness, and not cut down, it withereth before any other herb. So are the paths of all that forget God; and the hypocrite's hope shall perish: - Job 8:11-13

How much more the one who distorts his view of God so much that while he thinks he honors God, his trust is really in himself.

Therefore when thou doest thine alms, do not sound a trumpet before thee, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. - Matthew 6:2

Chapter 4 - The Natural Man

But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned. - 1 Corinthians 2:14

While people who are not Christian cannot receive the Spirit of God, there is a condition for Christians called “walking according to the flesh” that mimics this condition.

And I, brethren, could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, as unto babes in Christ. - 1 Corinthians 3:1

Here Paul calls those in Corinth first “brothers” (implying they are Christian). Then he calls them “carnal” (meaning according to the flesh). There is the implication that some Christians are carnal and others spiritual.

Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted. - Galatians 6:1

When Paul cautions the Galatians, he shows us something interesting. It would seem that a path that leads to a loss of spirituality can be found in failing to remain “meek” (gentle, humble). This is a major element in the growth of the leaven of hypocrisy.

The natural man is what we inherit from Adam. It is only when we receive Christ and are born again do we receive the Holy Spirit.

For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive. - 1 Corinthians 15:22

Even then, we have the ability to frustrate the work the Holy Spirit would desire to accomplish in us.

Quench not the Spirit. - 1 Thessalonians 5:19

The entire letter to the Galatians was written because they had allowed themselves to be influenced by Jews that had convinced them that to be really complete, they needed to follow the law that was given to Israel. They represent the starting point of a path that ends up with the Pharisees. For this reason it can be beneficial to examine what they were doing and what instruction Paul gave them regarding the danger of their actions.

O foolish Galatians, who hath bewitched you, that ye should not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ hath been evidently set forth, crucified among you? This only would I learn of you, Received ye the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith? Are ye so foolish? having begun in the Spirit, are ye now made perfect by the flesh? - Galatians 3:1-3

Paul contrasts the life Christians are called to live (that of the Spirit) with that which we all too often follow (that of the flesh). This dual nature of Christians can cause some confusion. On the one hand, we often think that we have nothing to do with our old nature;

Knowing this, that our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin. - Romans 6:6

Lie not one to another, seeing that ye have put off the old man with his deeds; - Colossians 3:9

Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new. - 2 Corinthians 5:17

In the letter to the Romans Paul contrasts his struggle with the flesh in chapter seven with the victorious Christian life in chapter eight. It is interesting that his struggle with the flesh is summed up in the transition to chapter eight;

O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death? - Romans 7:24

Here the solution to the problem of the flesh is given not as a “what” or a “how” but as “who”.

A big problem for Christians is thinking that since the old nature was “put to death” that it no longer can exert an influence. This can lead the Christian to act as if he has nothing about which to be concerned. He may even come to think the he is almost sinless. This is fertile ground for pride which can erode “meekness” and make one vulnerable to the leaven of hypocrisy.

Chapter eight of Romans is more a description of what is possible for the person who trusts in Jesus. It is not a guarantee that the difficulty of dealing with the flesh has been dealt with.

For if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die: but if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live. - Romans 8:13

Here the verb tense information in the Greek is often missing in translation. The word “mortify” (put to death literally or figuratively) would better have the word “habitually” added to convey the fuller meaning from the Greek. We get the idea not so much that the problems with the flesh have been done away with, but rather that we now have the possibility that they need not overwhelm us as the by power of the Holy Spirit they can be choked out. The idea is that the more freedom and cooperation we give the Holy Spirit, the less power the flesh will have over us.

This contrast is also stressed particularly in Galatians chapter five. Remember the Galatians were starting to slip into the type of hypocrisy that had consumed the Pharisees. Paul details the need for the ascendancy of the Spirit to resist the attraction of the flesh.

This I say then, Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh. For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other: so that ye cannot do the things that ye would. - Galatians 5:16-17

Chapter 5 - All the World is a Stage

Satan cannot be everywhere at once. As a result, he has to influence the world to adopt collective systems that will give him increasingly greater control. We are told that Satan sets the course of the world (insofar as he is allowed by God);

Wherein in time past ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience: - Ephesians 2:2

One of the ways Satan has set the course of this world is to place an emphasis on theater. The introduction of classroom education was clever in several ways. One of them was that the model of the

teacher/class became a performer/audience model. We find that even churches often follow this model. Together with TV and movies, the imprint of the various roles with which our children are presented often makes more of an impression on them than the little time they have with their parents. Perhaps more insidious than being shaped to fit a particular slot in the world system machinery, is the further “shaping” such influence can have on even thoughts and behaviors.

Our minds can be shaped to see ourselves as an almost fabricated persona complete with a script to follow.

For as he thinketh in his heart, so is he: - Proverbs 23:a

We get the word hypocrisy from the Greek “hupokrisis” meaning acting or to speak from under a mask (a common theatrical method in ancient Greece). Our modern society makes this problem so much worse than it was in the past. Technology has produced media capable of almost constant bombardment.

The purpose of this bombardment is to influence the nature of people away from the image and influence of their parents to make them compliant components in the systems Satan needs them to fill. These forces of compliance manifest in driving us to act out roles as they are designed to resonate with our own internal fleshly inclinations towards Pharisee-like hypocrisy.

We are channeled to take our place in the world. If we are charming enough we can be popular, if we are clever or shrewd enough, we can acquire wealth. Even for the unexceptional, we can come to the expectation that our performance of our role will result in a “successful” life.

One of the most basic things children learn is what they have to do to get what they want. For example, a baby quickly learns to cry in order to get fed. As the child grows, he will attempt exploring the utility of lying and stealing to get what he wants. If parents provide negative consequences, the child may learn to minimize these attempts. However, the question of what do we have to do to get what we want is still hard-wired into us (the selfishness of the flesh).

The theatrical role oriented perspective with which we are bombarded everyday carries with it the assumption of implicit cause and effect dynamics from which we come to have expectations of what has to be done to get what results. For example, the hard driving ambitious college student may come to adopt the role of the up and coming young lawyer who will get a big paycheck, a fast car, and have a successful urban life. That these roles are distortions of reality becomes more apparent when the person (no longer young) after working 90 hours a week as an associate at a law firm for 20 years finally realizes that he will not gain the partnership that he thought would give him the “good” life.

When the media based theatrical imprint is intentionally diminished in a more natural home environment. The increased influence of family can work to help in the character development of a child as he learns that he needs to restrict his selfishness so that he can learn love (selflessness) and have more successful relationships.

In modern society, the advancement of social development (through the classroom, playground, TV, and the Internet) at the expense of familial development reduces the more natural development of impediments to selfishness. As a result, in addition to the expansion of things like consumerism, children grow to see relationships less in terms of affection, accommodation, and love and more in

terms of utilitarian mechanical pragmatism (how people can be used).

As humans, we still retain the need for approval, affirmation, and understanding. However, now when the family is less a source of this than the peer group, the process of “socialization” touted by educators tends to create an individual deficit that could be called social dependency. A child formed to have limited function outside a role provided for him may develop in such a way as to experience anxiety when even just considering acting independently.

The movie Zieleg was a fictional portrayal of a man who had a chameleon like ability to blend in with whatever group he was with. Today many children grow up with such a need for social approval that they assume roles which conform their behavior, values, and even thinking to accommodate conformity to the group.

Considering that we are immersed in a world where we see the future in terms of what roles we can fill, our friends in terms of adapting to their expectations, and our desires in terms of what we have to do to get what we want, it should come as no surprise that we are more vulnerable to the difficulties that can come from assuming a role than previous generations.

The Christian may also find a selection of stereotypes available in the religious realm. There is the faithful church goer, the zealous contender, the lofty lecturer, the long suffering server, the financial benefactor, or the autocratic administrator. There are also many other possibilities. The nature of an organizational system often aids in reducing activities to roles.

Systems with predefined functions often have predefined roles. When Christians adopt roles to serve the organizational purposes of a system, we often begin to see ourselves as a sort of mechanical extension of the system. We can lose joy and begin a sort of Christian “drudgery”. However, the problem of hypocrisy emerges when we begin to see ourselves as Christian “successes”.

But the end of the charge is love out of a pure heart and a good conscience and faith unfeigned: from which things some having swerved have turned aside unto vain talking; desiring to be teachers of the law, though they understand neither what they say, nor whereof they confidently affirm. - 1 Timothy 1:5-7

The example of the ambitious young lawyer that was tricked into a life of virtual economic slavery because he selected a role that was not as advertised is still better off than the Christian who ends up acting some parody of real Christianity and having to stand in front of Jesus one day filled with shame for his negligence.

There are Satanic as well as fleshly forces working to draw and keep us in the artificial reality of play acting roles. As Christians we need to be aware of these forces and endeavor to follow truth so that we are not diverted into the worship of self.

Modern society provides the prosperity needed for the mind to wander into delusional realms that were seldom explored when life was historically more difficult. Today many people have no trouble imagining that they are of the opposite sex, identify as animals, or even think they are dragons. The world of play-acting in imaginary realms can seem attractive, but like a Frank Lloyd Wright house, it is not conducive to real life.

Chapter 6 - Sincerity

“It’s not a lie if you believe it” - George Kastanza giving advice to his friend Jerry Sienfeld on how to beat a lie detector.

The origin of the word “sincere” is from the practice of Roman pottery manufacturers to put a piece of wax to fill the void in a defective piece of pottery and pass it off as if it were good. The word “sincere” comes from the phrase “without wax”.

There are two ways to sell a piece of pottery with wax. The first is to be such a good actor that you can exude honesty and sincerity. The second is to convince yourself that there really is no wax. You can exude sincerity because you have come to think that you are speaking the truth.

Self-deception is rather common, and it shows how distant we have become from him who is truth. We can see from the bible that this separation from truth is harmful;

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. - 1 John 1:8

In the very next verse John tells us that we can restore our relationship with God by “confessing” (saying the same words) about our sin that God does. However, this is something that cannot be done without truth and humility (which is the result of really understanding truth).

Here we have the crux of the problem. Our self-deceptions lead us to be distant from truth and truth is what we need to be restored. A ratchet is a mechanical device that holds something (frequently a rope or cable) in tension. It allows the rope to be tightened, but cannot be undone. In a way this is a picture of the leaven that had so permeated the Pharisees. They were only able to “ratchet” further and further from the truth. They were essentially prisoners of their own self-deceptions and immune to any correction.

Some key indicators of this condition are;

1. Pride (which cannot exist where truth is appreciated).

And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. - Matthew 6:5

2. Smugness (which grows in contempt for others).

And he spake this parable unto certain which trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others: - Luke 18:9

3. A sense of accomplishment (the feeling that one has achieved completion).

Two men went up into the temple to pray; the one a Pharisee, and the other a publican. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. - Luke 18:10-11

Sincerity, like earnestness, is more indicative of magnitude than accuracy. Without truth, it can carry us far away from reality. What can make this more difficult is when we confuse truth with “being right”. At first glance one might think they were the same thing. However, “being right” has more to do with conformance to some standard. For example, the Pharisees thought they had kept the law. In a similar way today Christians can come to think they have achieved some level of performance through keeping a set of rules, mastery some difficult teaching or doctrine, belonging to the correct denomination, or even just thinking they have done well.

A Christian may have indeed avoided the “really bad” sins, done some good works, found a better understanding of a doctrine, or some other achievement. However, it is just this focus on what and how works are done that was misleading Peter and Barnabas.

A person who comes to view what he does as “right”, virtuous, or praiseworthy is seldom open to even considering he is in error. Sincerity is a passionate emotion. However, like other feelings it can be deceptive.

But we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags; and we all do fade as a leaf; and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away. - Isaiah 64:6

We do not want to mistake sincerity for truth.

Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity. - Matthew 7:21-23

Coming to sincerely believe they had kept the law was a big problem for the Pharisees. When confronted with something like the law that was given to Israel, a person faced three choices. He could admit that he was a failure and throw himself on the mercy of God (this was what was supposed to happen). He could make a token acknowledgment of the law, but for most purposes live a life that ignored it (this is what most people did). The last possibility was to convince himself that he had achieved keeping the law. Jesus spoke to this idea by expanding on the law.

Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment: But I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment: and whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council: but whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire. - Matthew 5:21-22

Self-deception is key to being able to convince yourself that you have kept the law, fulfilled all requirements, or have not sinned. We can say to ourselves that we are good people, good people would not be angry, therefore I have never been angry with my brother.

Chapter 7 - Cognitive Dissonance

“It is a happy faculty of the mind to slough that which conscience refuses to assimilate.”

— William Faulkner

A relatively famous psychology experiment was conducted once where students were divided into two groups. Both did a tedious job. One group was paid \$10/hr. and the other group was paid \$1/hr. Then individuals from each group were recorded describing their work to others. The first group reported the job was dull and boring, but it paid \$10/hr. The second group was recorded touting the challenges of the work. The conclusion was that the human mind finds it difficult to maintain inconsistencies (i.e. boring work for low pay). As a result, reality is distorted to remove the anxieties caused by inconsistencies.

The students who were paid \$1/hr. had convinced themselves to see some merit in what they were doing so that they wouldn't be stuck having to wonder why they were wasting their time for \$1/hr.

The ease with which we can twist reality (truth) for our own comfort underlies the warning about the leaven of the Pharisees. Peter and Barnabas were in danger of following a path where they would first excuse what they had done and then come to justify it.

The mind is not only taken captive through the comfort of altered reality. Consider the influence of riches (that the bible also calls "deceitful").

And when he was gone forth into the way, there came one running, and kneeled to him, and asked him, Good Master, what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life? And Jesus said unto him, Why callest thou me good? there is none good but one, that is, God. Thou knowest the commandments, Do not commit adultery, Do not kill, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Defraud not, Honour thy father and mother. And he answered and said unto him, Master, all these have I observed from my youth. Then Jesus beholding him loved him, and said unto him, One thing thou lackest: go thy way, sell whatsoever thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come, take up the cross, and follow me. And he was sad at that saying, and went away grieved: for he had great possessions. And Jesus looked round about, and saith unto his disciples, How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the kingdom of God! - Mark10:17-23

Here we have an example of how a young man came to be convinced he had kept the law. Jesus rather than confronting his limited understanding of the breadth of the law (Matthew 5:28) instead confronts the true object of his faith (his riches).

The young man had come to a point where his mental process had become disconnected from reality. It would have been impossible to convince him that he had become captive to unreal thinking (i.e. it was his riches that sustained him instead of God). He had apparent confirmation of his "rightness" by his wealth and achievement in keeping the law. We find that prosperity can be a curse and occasional difficulties a gift from God that keeps us from traveling too far down the road of self-deception.

Be of the same mind one toward another. Mind not high things, but condescend to men of low estate. Be not wise in your own conceits. - Romans 12:16

We live in an age of unprecedented prosperity. Even people on welfare have more comfort than most kings and emperors throughout history. We have hot and cold running water, indoor plumbing, air conditioning, central heating, and 24 hour entertainment. The comforts of prosperity were a snare for the rich young ruler of Jesus's day, just as they are for us.

The patriotic zeal and fever for war in the run up to WWI was intense. However, many combat veterans returned from the trenches after an almost constant barrage of artillery fire with a different view of the nobility of war. Painful reality has a way of purging ones delusions.

Prosperity can create alternatives to reality that allow comfort to be the determining factor of what is real over truth. The popular phrase from the 60s “If it feels good, do it” reflects a little of the measurement criteria used for determining the best course of action when circumstances are not difficult. A man with a prosperous career as an attorney spent three years using cocaine and following this principal until he was homeless and destitute. Reality became his teacher that perhaps it was time to select a new philosophy of life.

The distortion we can have in our thinking caused by the comforts of prosperity are illustrative of the distortion we can have that results from our seeking to avoid the discomfort of truth. Just as a drug addict will do or say almost anything to chase after the feelings he desires, those who seek the comforts of the mind will alter their thinking to accommodate thoughts that are inconsistent with reality.

It would never cross the minds of the Pharisees that they were pompous showboats sadly trying to gain admiration from others to fuel their delusional sense of superiority. Like leeches they were feeding off the reactions they could manipulate in others.

Moreover when ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. - Matthew 6:16

Here we have a closer parallel to the world of acting. Someone can become almost addicted to an audience reaction as if it verifies the high opinion that one came to have of himself. In classical cognitive dissonance, beliefs are altered to be consistent with behaviors to reduce discomfort. In actual practice everything (beliefs and behaviors) are malleable because what matters most are the feelings one gets from thinking one is superior, successful, accomplished, or simply better.

People can become addicted to the sensations they create in their own minds. Jesus called this sort of seductive call to abandon reality “leaven”. It can start small and grow without notice.

Chapter 8 - Legend in Our Own Mind

Pride makes us artificial and humility makes us real. - Thomas Merton

When King David was young, he was on the lamb. King Saul was trying to kill him. Many of the most beautiful psalms were written from the heart of a young fugitive whose survival was only in the hands of the God in whom he trusted.

And when he had removed him, he raised up unto them David to be their king; to whom also he gave testimony, and said, I have found David the son of Jesse, a man after mine own heart, which shall fulfil all my will. - Acts 13:22

However, after years of being king, David had become so narrow in his focus that he had a woman's husband killed so that he could have her for himself. This was not done in shameful secrecy, but from a perspective having no thought of wrongness. God finally had to send Nathan to penetrate David's blindness.

And Nathan said to David, Thou art the man. Thus saith the LORD God of Israel, I anointed thee king over Israel, and I delivered thee out of the hand of Saul; And I gave thee thy master's house, and thy master's wives into thy bosom, and gave thee the house of Israel and of Judah; and if that had been too little, I would moreover have given unto thee such and such things. Wherefore hast thou despised the commandment of the LORD, to do evil in his sight? thou hast killed Uriah the Hittite with the sword, and hast taken his wife to be thy wife, and hast slain him with the sword of the children of Ammon. - 2 Samuel 12:7-9

This is another example of how complacency over time can lead us incrementally from a fearful and heartfelt dependence upon the Lord to a point of pride and blindness where we can even murder and think nothing of it. This same process of prideful ossification can be seen with the Scribes (often associated with the Pharisees).

Beware of the scribes, which desire to walk in long robes, and love greetings in the markets, and the highest seats in the synagogues, and the chief rooms at feasts; Which devour widows' houses, and for a shew make long prayers: the same shall receive greater damnation. - Luke 20:46-47

Here these people would even profit in some way with real estate transactions that exploited the vulnerability of widows. We also find the Pharisees cheating by trickery in their business dealings.

Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye compass sea and land to make one proselyte, and when he is made, ye make him twofold more the child of hell than yourselves. Woe unto you, ye blind guides, which say, Whosoever shall swear by the temple, it is nothing; but whosoever shall swear by the gold of the temple, he is a debtor! - Matthew 23:15-16

Few people are rescued from such a state of blindness. With David we have an example of pride brought low. David was finally able to see truth and reality but at great cost.

To the chief Musician, A Psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet came unto him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba. Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy lovingkindness: according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I acknowledge my transgressions: and my sin is ever before me. - Psalm 51:1-3

Consider again the coupling in first John of the blindness of pride contrasted against the restorative acknowledgment of truth;

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. - 1 John 1:8-9

Since God is truth, it is essential for Satan to construct his social systems such that he can advocate pride as a tactic to insure we remain separated from God. Regardless whether it is called, positive affirmation, self-esteem, confidence, worth, respect, satisfaction, assurance, regard, or even narcissism, we (like a drug addict) are so easily lead away from the discomfort of truth to the more pleasant world

of delusion.

The play acting (hypocrisy) of the Pharisees came as a result of “leaven” working its slow way through them facilitated by pride, complacency, and sufficiency.

We can see the blindness created by this deviation from truth.

Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall. - Proverbs 16:18

One of the tactics Satan has been advancing is using the concept of relativism to erase the influence of absolute. Only three things are called truth, the bible, God, and Jesus. It is the absolute that gives us reality. When we lose our connection to or appreciation for truth, we divert from God and his word into a world where we can begin to see ourselves in greatly inflated terms.

And he said unto them, Ye are they which justify yourselves before men; but God knoweth your hearts: for that which is highly esteemed among men is abomination in the sight of God. - Luke 16:15

The Christian needs to reject the comfortable path and be actively seeking truth. Even though truth can be uncomfortable, it is essential to eternal life.

Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: - Matthew 7:13

Chapter 9 - Fat and happy

What I fear is complacency. When things always become better, people tend to want more for less work. - Lee Kuan Yew

Because of sin, God changed creation to be difficult;

And unto Adam he said, Because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, of which I commanded thee, saying, Thou shalt not eat of it: cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life; Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field; In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return. - Genesis 3:17-19

In addition, God brings us difficulties;

And ye have forgotten the exhortation which speaketh unto you as unto children, My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art rebuked of him: For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth. - Hebrews 12:5-6

It is fairly easy for Satan to set the course of this world according to the principles of fast, cheap, and easy. The appeal is strong.

There is a way which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death. - Proverbs

14:12

In addition to the deceitfulness of riches, other worldly comforts can work to remove any desire to follow truth;

But Abraham said, Son, remember that thou in thy lifetime receivedst thy good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things: but now he is comforted, and thou art tormented. - Luke 16:25

But what went ye out for to see? A man clothed in soft raiment? Behold, they which are gorgeously apparelled, and live delicately, are in kings' courts. - Luke 7:25

And I will say to my soul, Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry. - Luke 12:19

The problem of our getting comfortable and letting complacency make us inert from the path the Lord would have us walk was recognized by Moses;

And it shall be, when the LORD thy God shall have brought thee into the land which he swore unto thy fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give thee great and goodly cities, which thou buildedst not, And houses full of all good things, which thou filledst not, and wells digged, which thou diggedst not, vineyards and olive trees, which thou plantedst not; when thou shalt have eaten and be full; Then beware lest thou forget the LORD, which brought thee forth out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage. - Deuteronomy 6:10-12

Complacency is not necessarily limited to physical comforts. One can also arrive at a belief system that provides assurances of completion which remove any incentive to continue a spiritual path. For example if a person thinks of themselves as “elect”, even though they may not be tempted to go on a spree of sinful indulgence, they may not see much need of growing in faith, drawing nearer the Lord, or pursuing Christ-likeness.

If a Christian is inclined towards legalistic systems, he may feel that having achieved success in rule observance, there is little left to do in his Christian walk. Many denominations assure their members that their baptism, church membership, or sacrament observance fulfills all Christian requirements so that they can get on with their real lives. Sadly, many church systems even operate to quench questioning or any spark of initiative in a church member to divert them away from an ardent seeking after the Lord into a program, event, or class.

Complacency is not only a failure to progress in the Christian life, it is fertile ground for the development of the blindness that can result in the play-acting of hypocrisy. The person who has an arrested spiritual development may feel that there is no need to progress because he has achieved all that is required. This perspective tends to foster smugness and then even contempt for others. A Christian can act as though he has finished the race because he has lost sight of the finish line (Christ-likeness).

Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, - Hebrews 12:1

For if any be a hearer of the word, and not a doer, he is like unto a man beholding his natural face in a

glass: For he beholdeth himself, and goeth his way, and straightway forgetteth what manner of man he was. - James 1:23-24

It is so easy to slip into a life that takes God for granted and allows us to pursue our own plans and interests. It would be cruel for God to give us salvation and leave us here in this sinful world unless there was work of his here he wanted us to do. Our neglect of God's purposes is a pretty poor response to his gift of eternal life.

How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation; which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed unto us by them that heard him; - Hebrews 2:3

Sadly, churches have had much responsibility in creating passive Christians. The structure of running Christianity as a system requires Christians to be functional components. In addition, the promulgation of salvation criteria promotes the idea that Christianity is limited to just getting to heaven. Once Christianity can be reduced in one's mind to criteria that can be accomplished, all sorts of options open up to pursue our own interests. This is most obviously demonstrated by the fact that most claiming the name of Christ only set aside an hour a week to concern themselves with him.

Chapter 10 - Everything is Going According to Plan

A man's heart deviseth his way: but the LORD directeth his steps. - Proverbs 16:9

When man lived closer to nature, vicissitudes of weather made clear to him his need of his God. Urban life opens many other possibilities that have a less clear connection to God.

Go to now, ye that say, To day or to morrow we will go into such a city, and continue there a year, and buy and sell, and get gain: Whereas ye know not what shall be on the morrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away. For that ye ought to say, If the Lord will, we shall live, and do this, or that. - James 4:13-15

A Christian can come to the point where he thinks little of God and focuses mostly on his own plans and how to achieve them. He may come think of schooling, employment, social position, or savings as the key elements to secure his future. He may become so woven into the fabric of the world system that there is little distinctive about him that would testify to his faith.

Ye adulterers and adulteresses, know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God. - James 4:4

We can think we are being prudent, in planning our future and making provision for ourselves and family. However, it is very easy to erode faith in God by placing faith in our own cleverness, skills, or resources.

for whatsoever is not of faith is sin. - Romans 14:23b

But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you. - Matthew 6:33

Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. - Proverbs 3:5

Our focus on our own plans (even if well meaning) can work to exclude our Lord from our thoughts such that by default, we elevate ourselves and start a process of leavening. We end up constructing a mental edifice that does not honor our God but ourselves.

A Song of degrees for Solomon. Except the LORD build the house, they labour in vain that build it: except the LORD keep the city, the watchman waketh but in vain. - Psalm 127:1

For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if any man build upon this foundation gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble; Every man's work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man's work of what sort it is. If any man's work abide which he hath built thereupon, he shall receive a reward. If any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire. - 1 Corinthians 3:11-15

Chapter 11 - Measuring Hypocrisy

“Humility is the proper estimate of oneself.” - Charles Spurgeon

For I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think; but to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith. - Romans 12:3

We may not have come as far as the Pharisees in contamination with the leaven of hypocrisy so that we steal widows homes from them, but we all have drifted from our Savior, the truth, and faithfulness at different times and to different degrees. It can be helpful then to consider what indicators there might be to warn us if we are starting to become inflated with the leaven of hypocrisy.

One measure of our Christian faith and assurance of salvation is our “love of the brethren”.

By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another. - John 13:35

If we have contempt, mock, or are smug in regard to our brothers in Christ, it may indicate we are not even Christian. However it can also indicate that we have come under the influence of pride and have been led to a point of “play-acting” superiority.

Another measure of our spiritual condition can be the interest or lack of it in God’s word.

And they said one to another, Did not our heart burn within us, while he talked with us by the way, and while he opened to us the scriptures? - Luke 24:32

This is my comfort in my affliction: for thy word hath quickened me. - Psalm 119:50

As we drift further from our Lord, his words become less clear and even irrelevant to that with which we are preoccupied. We can give perfunctory acknowledgment to the worth of his words, but they seem to find little purchase in our hearts. Christians in particular can be quite zealous for a particular bible translation. They can even memorize many verses. However, our great external concern may hide the

fact the God's word has little effect on our lives or in our hearts.

This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoureth me with their lips; but their heart is far from me. - Matthew 15:8

We all too often measure the external such as works and accomplishments. We can even overvalue the declaration of belief. It is really what is in the heart at the core of our being that is the true measure of our spiritual condition.

O generation of vipers, how can ye, being evil, speak good things? for out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh. - Matthew 12:34

To measure the condition of the heart one has to weigh the volume and character of words. Do we too often speak of ourselves, our desires, our accomplishments, or do we speak of the wonders of the Lord and the many blessings he has bestowed. Do our words mirror an attitude of gratitude and thankfulness or do we complain and mock.

For as he thinketh in his heart, so is he: - Proverbs 23:7a

We tend to measure things by detecting whether it is present or not. Like a broken bone, one either has it or one does not. It is often easy to dismiss something like hypocrisy since we see it as an intentional act and dismiss it because we do not see ourselves as culpable.

We often fail to see hypocrisy (in the Greek sense of play acting) as something that happens to us as opposed to something we do. When we give consideration to the process of what might be called "leavening" we see the danger that Jesus was warning of, that of being slowly diverted from him into a world where self reigns supreme as evidenced by the delusional condition of the Pharisees.

Churches can encourage a sort of "dormant" Christianity where having been assured of a heavenly destination, one just waits out the clock. The bible gives a different picture of the Christian life. There are many verbs used that imply an activity level that is seldom reached.

Seeking - But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you. - Matthew 6:33

Crying out - So that thou incline thine ear unto wisdom, and apply thine heart to understanding; Yea, if thou criest after knowledge, and liftest up thy voice for understanding; If thou seekest her as silver, and searchest for her as for hid treasures; Then shalt thou understand the fear of the LORD, and find the knowledge of God. - Proverbs 2:2-5

Surrendering - I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God. - Romans 12:1-2

Following - And he said to them all, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me. - Luke 9:23

There is an expectation of activity in the life of a Christian that is often unfulfilled. Sometimes this is

because of bad teaching. Sometimes it is the result of distracted attention. It can also be a result of a person not even being a Christian. However, it can also be a result of “leaven” that has started to grow in a life like barnacles on the hull of a ship. As time progresses less and less headway is made until things slow to a stop. Unfortunately, this condition of Christian paralysis can be masked by a flurry of business with committees, programs, events, and even classes.

Chapter 12 - Doctrinal Contributions

“You can believe in whatsoever you like, but the truth remains the truth, no matter how sweet the lie may taste.” - Michael Bassey Johnson

Then understood they how that he bade them not beware of the leaven of bread, but of the doctrine of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees. - Matthew 16:12

Doctrine (teachings) can carry a powerful influence. They are often presented with authority and can even press in on one if made with clever speech or compelling power. Like a powerful tidal current it can draw some into its conformity. This was what happened to Peter and Barnabas. They found it difficult to resist the social power of those carrying the doctrines of the Pharisees.

There are those who tout their intellectual accomplishments plumbing the depths of arcane writings to summon the power of bluster to bully others into compliance with their doctrines. While many on this path of elevating their own reason stop at the smug sense of superiority of the Pharisees, historically many completely left Christianity on the progressive path of Renaissance humanism, enlightenment, down to the liberalism of today.

Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools, - Romans 1:22

Doctrine (teachings) can come from a humble heart seeking to point the way to a closer walk with God or they can come from one whose credentials and accomplishments testify to the approval of men. We know that there will be false teachers.

For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. - Acts 20:29

The Christian is well advised to avoid being taken in by often loudly and forcefully presented claims (doctrines) that may be misleading. The Bereans give us a good example of how to consider the seeming avalanche of doctrinal claims.

These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so. - Acts 17:11

One of the hallmark characteristics of unhealthy doctrine is its presentation as something that has to be accepted. Truth is the only thing that can withstand scrutiny. The Christian has the advantage of the Spirit of truth.

Even the Spirit of truth; whom the world cannot receive, because it seeth him not, neither knoweth him: but ye know him; for he dwelleth with you, and shall be in you. - John 14:17

Here again Christianity administered as an organizational system runs into problems. A system will

maintain a doctrinal “package” that is essentially inviolate. Some churches have a package that is closer to truth than others. While the question of how accurate a particular “package” is remains, there is a larger problem.

Whereas the object and purpose of our instruction and charge is love, which springs from a pure heart and a good (clear) conscience and sincere (unfeigned) faith. - 1 Timothy 1:5 AMP

Much of Christianity has lost the understanding that teaching (doctrine) is supposed to accomplish changes in the lives of its members. This relational engagement all too often has been replaced with lectures reiterating doctrinal dictums that seem abstract and have little traction in the actual life of a believer.

This may be that like the teacher who blames the student for failing, the church often blames its members for failing to figure out how to apply the word to their own lives. In all fairness, some church leaders have a sincere desire to aid their members in spiritual growth or recovery from fleshly entanglements, but are unable to because of the constraints of the system they administer.

Other church leaders attempt to focus on rule following as a means of spiritual growth and castigate their members for failing to overcome their sin. It can be helpful to consider the nature of church leadership.

Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: - Hebrews 17a (KJV)

Obey = peitho = persuade, convince
them that have the rule = hegeomai = a chosen leader
submit = hupeiko = cessation of resistance

Alternatively = Stop resisting and allow yourselves to be persuaded by those you have chosen to follow.

God favors those who seek truth.

RUN TO and fro through the streets of Jerusalem, and see now and take notice! Seek in her broad squares to see if you can find a man [as Abraham sought in Sodom], one who does justice, who seeks truth, sincerity, and faithfulness; and I will pardon [Jerusalem--for one uncompromisingly righteous person]. - Jeremiah 5:1 (AMP)

“Seeking” is an interesting word. It implies both initiative and evaluation. There is also an implication of progression such that false starts, wrong turns, and blind alleys can be expected along a path of seeking. Unfortunately this process is not very compatible with systems that seek to control and regulate.

Most of Christianity is presented in various franchise brands (denominations). There is a requirement to take an entire “package” of doctrine and settle in. This does not leave much room for seeking. The Christian is expected to grow to maturity, yet often encounters systems that claim completion just as the Pharisees thought they had everything nailed down.

But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ: - Ephesians 4:15

But woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye shut up the kingdom of heaven against men: for ye neither go in yourselves, neither suffer ye them that are entering to go in. - Matthew 23:13

One way to avoid entanglement with the doctrine of the Pharisees is to recognize that if you think you have arrived, you haven't.

Not that I have already obtained, or am already made perfect: but I press on, if so be that I may lay hold on that for which also I was laid hold on by Christ Jesus. - Philippians 3:12

Doctrines put forth that assert one has arrived at Christian completion create a religion of superficiality which is often manifest by worldliness, foolish talk, self-deception, and ignoring the needs of others.

If any man among you seem to be religious, and bridleth not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man's religion is vain. Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world. - James 1:26-27

Chapter 13 - The Unknown

Has the trade of interpreting the Lord's matters gone out, discouraged by the time-worn fact that nobody succeeds at it? No, it still flourishes; there was never a century nor a country that was short of experts who knew the Deity's mind and were willing to reveal it. - Mark Twain

Unto whom it was revealed, that not unto themselves, but unto us they did minister the things, which are now reported unto you by them that have preached the gospel unto you with the Holy Ghost sent down from heaven; which things the angels desire to look into. - 1 Peter 1:12

The word "theology" (the study of God) sounds a little ambitious and possibly irreverent insofar as it implies a subject that can be mastered. There are things the angels do not know. How much more likely that we will not understand some things or even lack the ability to understand even if we were told.

A child does not understand the dangers from which his parents protect him. He does not understand where the food, clothing, and shelter come from. He is often selfish, demanding, and ungrateful. He can even strut around with an imperious attitude of complete understanding. We have a similar relationship with our heavenly father.

But Jesus said, Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me: for of such is the kingdom of heaven. - Matthew 19:14

Seminaries (the main centers where theologians are manufactured) have an incentive to produce those who will be ardent in the advocacy of their doctrines. Truth seems less important than confident assurance of correctness. This often entails providing certainty where realistically uncertainty would be more accurate. For example, the declaration that those punished in hell will be punished forever relies on the assignment of "eternal" to the Greek word *aion*. Considering that we do not know if eternity is the end of time or time unending, it seems a little bold to declare that which is beyond our

understanding. We can know that those who are not saved will be judged by their works and there will be punishment. If this punishment lasts for an “age” (the usual definition for aion) or true eternity is not clearly discernable.

There is a pragmatic advantage of declaring hell as “eternal fire”. Fear can motivate people in the direction you wish to herd them. However, truth is not honored when we exceed that which can be known from God’s word. We begin to insert our own reasoning and conclusions instead of resting by faith in our heavenly father’s goodness and justice.

Acknowledging that which we do not know leaves room for humility. It also leaves room for faith. We can treasure that which God has chosen to reveal to us and trust in him for that which is not clear.

For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts. - Isaiah 55:8-9

There is a danger is declaring things beyond which we can know.

Let no man beguile you of your reward in a voluntary humility and worshipping of angels, intruding into those things which he hath not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind, - Colossians 2:18

There is no end to the number of people willing to tell us what to do. However, we have the responsibility to evaluate what is said in terms of truth. It can be easy to surrender to what someone tells us. However, we are still responsible.

But what I do, I will continue to do, [for I am determined to maintain this independence] in order to cut off the claim of those who would like [to find an occasion and incentive] to claim that in their boasted [mission] they work on the same terms that we do. For such men are false apostles [spurious, counterfeits], deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles (special messengers) of Christ (the Messiah). - 2 Corinthians 11:12-13 (Amp)

Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils; Speaking lies in hypocrisy; having their conscience seared with a hot iron; Forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from meats, which God hath created to be received with thanksgiving of them which believe and know the truth. - 1 Timothy 1-3

There are all sorts of reasons we can come to incorporate false teachings in our belief system. We might buy into some strange doctrine because we are too lazy to seek the truth for ourselves. We may be bullied into going along with something. We can be born into an inherited tradition. We can find a particular practice appealing for reasons of vanity, security, fear, or comfort. However, we are going to have to stand in front of Jesus one day at it will be embarrassing to have to say that we were not satisfied to live by faith, but added to his word to satisfy our own desires.

Let us search and try our ways, and turn again to the LORD.- Lamentations 3:40

Others may mislead us for good intentions or bad. However, it is incumbent us to discern that which is true and which is not.

But in vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men. - Matthew 15:9

Jesus answered them, and said, My doctrine is not mine, but his that sent me. If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself. He that speaketh of himself seeketh his own glory: but he that seeketh his glory that sent him, the same is true, and no unrighteousness is in him. - John 7:16-18

Jesus speaks to a method of discernment based on doing the will of God. We can see where nearness to God, brings discernment.

My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me: - John 10:27

Chapter 13 - Legalism

They shall put you out of the synagogues: yea, the time cometh, that whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service. - John 16:2

The leaven of the Pharisees is often more than just the blindness of smug self-satisfaction in rule following. It can lead to active contempt.

And he spake this parable unto certain which trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others: - Luke 18:9

There are Christians who may have come out of bad experiences to develop a defensive sort of “bunker” mentality where they cling to a particular doctrine, creed, or denomination and scorn those who they see as “wrong”. They often fail to recognize how far this “leaven” has taken them from the Lord they claim to serve.

Some Christians (particularly those with seminary experience) come to a sort of perspective of intellectual pride. They look sometimes with disdain on other Christians who have not achieved their insights and understanding.

A few Christians become accelerated down this path because of taking up leadership or advocacy of a particular issue. By putting the spotlight on one particular theme, you always risk pushing it to an extreme. For example, a study of election can become Calvinism, questions of translation can become KJV only, reaction against the modern assault on the traditional family can become patriarchy. Those who may have started with well intentioned advocacy can end up fostering smug superiority that sadly often ends in failures of the flesh.

Some Christians see a kindred spirit in a leader taking a stand against one thing or another. This tends to build a conclave of the disgruntled. It is not healthy for leaders or followers. The Christian is supposed to focus on and emulate Christ. Becoming indignant about one thing or another fuels self-righteousness and accelerates the growth of leaven.

Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God. - Hebrews 12:2

When we take our eyes off of Jesus, we are likely to forget how far short we fall and begin to think of what we have accomplished. We can begin to measure ourselves by our accomplishments and at the same time impoverish ourselves in matters more important.

Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone. - Matthew 23:23

Chapter 15 - Justification

And the man said, The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat. - Genesis 3:12

We all tend to excuse and justify our actions. It is almost a reflex action. When called to give an account or to explain something we have done, we can be very creative in finding reasons that sound plausible. We prefer to avoid saying, "I was angry" or "I was selfish". We prefer to say, "They made me angry" or "I was only getting what I deserved".

The leaven of the Pharisees is just this sort of self-deception. What we often fail to appreciate is just how dangerous this is. Our innovation can lead us to construct very clever deceptions by which we hope to deflect criticism. However, as we come to believe them ourselves, we distort and corrupt our own thought processes. We should again carefully consider the warning given by John;

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. - 1 John 1:8

We can temporarily avoid the discomfort of criticism and wounded pride. However, the abandonment of truth carries with it a far greater price. Without a habit of honestly acknowledging our sins and faults, we create a false self in whom our increasing satisfaction often expresses itself in pride and smugness.

We become actors playing a character we have fabricated and come to believe is our true self. These rationalizations are the glue that keep us prisoner under the mask we have constructed. If Hitler could justify killing six million Jews, there is little humans are not capable of justifying.

The Pharisees would cheat each other in business and steal houses from widows. This shows there is no limit to the destruction we can cause ourselves in failing to honor truth.

Buy the truth, and sell it not; - Proverbs 23:23a

One can "sell" truth by exchanging it for something else. One can "sell" truth in exchange for the comfort and even pleasure self-deception brings. Consider the qualities that flourish in the absence of truth like pride, smugness, ingratitude, disregard for others, and even greed, lust, and hatred.

The reflex to protect our comfort at the cost of our souls is one that needs to be replaced with a reflex that is quick to acknowledge fault and speak truth.

Chapter 16 - Summary

God has given you one face, and you make yourself another. – William Shakespeare

Hypocrisy is not so much something we do, it is what happens to us when we “fall asleep at the wheel” of our Christian life.

One of our biggest problems is that we think of Jesus, the bible, church, and all things religious as something we have allocated for an hour or two once a week. Thinking that Christianity is something that is simply done and then only briefly and infrequently allows our lives to be directed according to other forces. When we think we have satisfied religious requirements we risk the same thinking that infested the Pharisees.

The word “leaven” was also used of the Herodians and Sadducees. One can see the faith of the Sadducees as based on their position and birth. The faith of the Herodians seems to have been based on their political and economic connections. While the Pharisees deluded themselves into thinking they were religiously superior by their own merit, the others had faith just as strong. Unfortunately none had faith in God.

We come to play-acting (hypocrisy) by becoming distant from God. The solution is to come closer;

But he giveth more grace. Wherefore he saith, God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble. Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you. Cleanse your hands, ye sinners; and purify your hearts, ye double minded. Be afflicted, and mourn, and weep: let your laughter be turned to mourning, and your joy to heaviness. Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he shall lift you up.- James 4:6-10

James gives us a process that begins and ends with humility. Humility begins when we understand who we are and what we bring to the table.

For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not. - Romans 7:18

Humility continues when we begin to glimpse how great God is;

When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained; - Psalm 8:3

Humility grows as this understanding expands to be present in all of our activities and not just the church ones. For example, a man in casual conversation with some friends when tempted to share his excitement at getting a new boat refrains because he remembers that a friend just lost his job and he wants to not cause his friend anguish. It is when humility grows that we are better able to fulfill biblical admonitions;

Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others. - Philippians 2:4

Humility is the first step in the subordination of the flesh (self). It progresses as control of things and even people are transferred to the Lord even to the point of our own life.

And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony; and they loved not their lives unto the death. - Revelation 12:11

Satan has gone to great lengths to create a society where even the idea God seems laughably primitive. Those who seek to draw nearer their Savior face a difficult time. Faith is made to look irresponsible. Humility is seen as weakness, unless it is the false humility used to manipulate others. Chastity is ridiculed. Having children is seen as not only unwise, but even harmful. The traditional family is seen as toxic.

If we are to heed the warning of Jesus to beware the leaven of the Pharisees, we need to be vigilant of all the snares Satan has prepared to subvert us, the weakness of our own flesh, our own lack of maturity in Christ, and a “Christian” life marginalized to an hour or two once a week. There are many forces that combine to lead us to think we have completed the Christian life and have satisfied all the Christian requirements.

Have we matured to the “full measure of Christ”?

Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ: - Ephesians 4:13

Are we friends with the world?

For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. - 1 John 2:16

Have we ignored the imitation of Christ?

And whosoever doth not bear his cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple. - Luke 14:27

Is our life too comfortable?

Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution. - 2 Timothy 3:12

Is Christ the center of our life?

And that he died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him which died for them, and rose again.- 2 Corinthians 5:15

The leaven of the Pharisees grew until they were only acting religious. They did not even know they had ended so far from God. Trapped by the combination of their own self focus and convinced they were godly, there was little chance of escape from such a dark prison.

The only hope we have of avoiding a similar fate is to cling to our Savior in gratitude and humility. We need to cry out for wisdom. We need to seek truth and walk by the power of the Spirit of truth. We need to reject entanglement with the world. We need to grow in love (selflessness). We need to see our brothers in Christ with less criticism and more compassion. Mockery and smugness should be far from us. Most of all fervent prayer is needed to both focus ourselves on our Savior as well as turn our

attention from those things which divert us.

We get a picture of a life in constant dependence upon our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war after the flesh: (For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds;) Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ; - 2 Corinthians 10:3-5

This requires vigilance in preventing the leaven of the Pharisees from gaining traction with us. Since it is almost impossible to remedy once it gains purchase, prevention is about the only way to be free from its corruptive contamination.

Prevention depends on detecting the presence of “leaven”. Just like a smoke detector identifies the first indication of combustion, we need to construct a mechanism for detecting the early indicators that we are going in the wrong direction. One of the best ways to do this is establishing a process of self-examination.

So whoever cleanses himself [from what is ignoble and unclean, who separates himself from contact with contaminating and corrupting influences] will [then himself] be a vessel set apart and useful for honorable and noble purposes, consecrated and profitable to the Master, fit and ready for any good work. - 2 Timothy 2:21 (AMP)

For I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think; but to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith. - Romans 12:3

But let a man examine himself, - 1 Corinthians 11:28a

Walking in truth is a requirement to see ourselves in truth. This means we need to be honest about all of our sins, motives, desires, acts, and thoughts. When we are honest, we clearly see how petty, vain, ambitious, vengeful, greedy, and generally sinful we really are. It is this clarity of vision that keeps us from the “leaven” that our natural man so eagerly seeks to use to insulate himself from the discomfort of truth.

No one likes to live with discomfort. It is like a man who places his hand on the hot burner of a stove. He may chose to instantly give himself a shot of anesthetic to numb the pain, or he may chose to remove his hand so that healing can begin. The pain caused by seeing ourselves in truth can be intense. However, rather than starting to alter our perception of truth to provide ourselves a comfortable delusion (which is how we come to be hypocrites), we need to apply an appreciation for the love of God and the sacrifice of Jesus that cleanses us from all our sins.

But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. - Romans 5:8

Seeing ourselves in truth brings a painful realization of how far we are from what God desires for us. Rather than trying to sooth our discomfort by thinking that we really aren’t so bad, we need to find

solace in the all pervading love of God through Christ for us.

But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us, Even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved;) And hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus: That in the ages to come he might shew the exceeding riches of his grace in his kindness toward us through Christ Jesus. - Ephesians 2:4-7

The Pharisees demonstrated the opposite of humility.

Behold, thou art called a Jew, and retest in the law, and makest thy boast of God, And knowest his will, and approvest the things that are more excellent, being instructed out of the law; And art confident that thou thyself art a guide of the blind, a light of them which are in darkness, An instructor of the foolish, a teacher of babes, which hast the form of knowledge and of the truth in the law. - Romans 2:17-20

Humility is a sort of gate through which God is able to pour out grace.

But he giveth more grace. Wherefore he saith, God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble. - James 4:6

It is also from the point of humility that gratitude flows.

Enter into his gates with thanksgiving, and into his courts with praise: be thankful unto him, and bless his name. - Psalm 100:4

Satan has conspired for centuries to craft a world hostile to all things godly. If he cannot prevent people from becoming Christian, he desires to divert them into inactivity or even to subvert them to advance his plans. To resist this we need to arise from our slumber and seek truth.

Behold, thou desirest truth in the inward parts: and in the hidden part thou shalt make me to know wisdom. - Psalm 51:6

Like David, we need to awake from an inert and dormant faith that we might be of use to him who has given us eternal life.

Hide thy face from my sins, and blot out all mine iniquities. Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me. - Psalm 51:9-10