

March 2001

Frank W. Nelte

THE LEAVEN OF THE PHARISEES

During the Seven Days of Unleavened Bread we are instructed by God to not eat any leaven or any leavened products, as well as having removed all leaven and leavened products from our homes and premises. And while it is certainly important for us to approach this instruction conscientiously and carefully, but without becoming fanatical, the more important aspect without doubt is that we strive to deleaven our lives SPIRITUALLY.

But what is meant by "spiritual leaven"? How can we identify it? And, specifically, what is meant by "the leaven of the Pharisees"?

The best way to understand this is if we let Jesus Christ in His own words both explain it and identify it for us. So that is what we'll do in this article.

HOW JESUS CHRIST EXPLAINED THIS

In Luke chapter 12 a vast multitude of people had gathered together. Here is what Jesus Christ said to His disciples at that point in time:

In the mean time, when there were gathered together an innumerable multitude of people, insomuch that they trode one upon another, he began to say unto his disciples first of all, **BEWARE YE OF THE LEAVEN OF THE PHARISEES, WHICH IS HYPOCRISY**. For there is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed; neither hid, that shall not be known. (Luke 12:1-2 AV)

Jesus Christ here explained the expression "the leaven of the Pharisees" to mean "HYPOCRISY".

The context of the previous verses (i.e. Luke 11:53-54) shows that the Pharisees and the scribes had been asking Christ questions, not to receive correct answers, but in the hope of provoking Jesus Christ into saying something that they would be able to use as evidence against Him.

So what does "hypocrisy" mean?

Hypocrisy refers to: - acting under pretense

- acting deceitfully

- pretending to do what is right

- the acting of a stage-player

So Jesus Christ is telling us that "the leaven of the Pharisees" is "PRETENDING to do what is right", "ACTING UNDER PRETENSE", and "ACTING DECEITFULLY".

Have you perhaps thought that the Pharisees were examples of "fervently obeying God"? Sometimes ministers have made statements to the effect that ... "the Pharisees DID have a certain amount of righteousness, as Jesus Christ Himself said ...". But is that really correct? WHY would Jesus Christ at

one point say that the Pharisees had righteousness, and then at another point say that they "PRETENDED to do what is right"? Both these statements cannot be true.

Let's look at Matthew 5:19-20, which is the Scripture that is sometimes misunderstood to infer that the Pharisees were to a degree "righteous".

Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach *them*, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. 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 5:19-20 AV)

Some people have argued that this verse INFERS that the Pharisees simply must have had some righteousness, or else Jesus Christ would not have made this statement. But let's look at the Greek text of this verse.

The Greek text for Matthew 5:20 reads as follows:

"Lego gar humin hoti ean me perisseuse he dikaiosune humon pleion ton grammateon kai pharisaion ou me eiselthete eis ten basileian ton ouranon." (Matthew 5:20 TR)

The Greek word for "righteousness" is "dikaiosune". This word is only used once in this verse; it is NOT used in reference to the scribes or the Pharisees. That is why in the KJV it appears in italic print when used for the scribes and the Pharisees.

This fact that the word "righteousness" is not even used in reference to the Pharisees is acknowledged in many of the more recent translations. For example, Green's Literal Translation of the Bible renders this verse as follows:

For I say to you, If your righteousness shall not exceed *that* of the scribes and Pharisees, in no way shall you go into the kingdom of Heaven. (Matthew 5:20 LIT)

Notice that here even the word "that" in reference to the Pharisees is rendered in italics, to show there is no word for it in the Greek text.

In the RSV this verse reads:

For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5:20 RSV)

The next thing to note about the Greek text of this verse is that the verb translated "SHALL EXCEED" is "perisseuse", which is the aorist active subjunctive form of the verb "perisseuo". Now the "subjunctive mood" in biblical Greek is defined as follows:

"The subjunctive mood is THE MOOD OF POSSIBILITY AND POTENTIALITY. The action described may or may not occur, depending upon circumstances. CONDITIONAL SENTENCES of the third class ('ean' + the subjunctive) ARE ALL OF THIS TYPE, as well as many commands

following conditional purpose clauses, such as those beginning with 'hina'."

Notice that in the transliterated text above we have the expression "ean perisseuse", which very clearly and plainly identifies this as A CONDITIONAL OR HYPOTHETICAL STATEMENT! That's what the subjunctive mood in combination with the particles "ean" or "an" conveys in Greek.

So note carefully:

1) NOWHERE in the entire New Testament did Jesus Christ ever say that the Pharisees were "righteous"! However, MANY TIMES He said that they were "hypocrites". The terms "righteousness" and "hypocrites" are mutually exclusive.

2) The only place where in our English translations He APPEARS to have used the word "righteousness" in reference to the Pharisees is Matthew 5:20; and there the word "righteousness" is NOT used in the Greek text ... it is incorrectly supplied in some translations, like the KJV, while others, like the RSV, have correctly omitted to use the word "righteousness" in reference to the Pharisees.

3) The use of the subjunctive mood, together with the conditional particle "ean" (meaning "if..." or "in case ...", etc.), makes clear that this is purely a hypothetical statement. It is NOT intended to be based on "facts"! It is given to make a point in a very emphatic way!

4) The reason the statement is made is BECAUSE THE PHARISEES DIDN'T HAVE ANY RIGHTEOUSNESS! In our context today, Jesus Christ might have said: "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of MARTIN LUTHER or of ADOLF HITLER, you shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven", with the very clear insinuation that neither Martin Luther nor Adolf Hitler actually had any "righteousness".

[Comment: I was raised in the Lutheran Church and have made enough of a study of the life and works of Martin Luther to know that his views were a whole lot more perverse than those of Adolf Hitler. Hitler simply put into practice some of the things Luther had advocated centuries earlier. And Martin Luther assuredly didn't have any real "righteousness".]

5) Understand that a person either has righteousness before God or he doesn't have it. But it is NEVER a case of having "SOME" righteousness, but just "not enough of it". Recall the principle of Ezekiel 3:20, which says:

Again, When a righteous *man* doth turn from his righteousness, and commit iniquity, and I lay a stumblingblock before him, he shall die: because thou hast not given him warning, he shall die in his sin, AND HIS RIGHTEOUSNESS WHICH HE HATH DONE SHALL NOT BE REMEMBERED; but his blood will I require at thine hand. (Ezekiel 3:20 AV)

This principle is stated again in chapter 18.

But when the righteous turneth away from his righteousness, and committeth iniquity, *and* doeth according to all the abominations that the wicked *man* doeth, shall he live? ALL HIS RIGHTEOUSNESS THAT HE HATH DONE SHALL NOT BE MENTIONED: in his trespass that he hath trespassed, and in his sin that he hath sinned, in them shall he die. (Ezekiel 18:24 AV)

6) So Jesus Christ tells us that the Pharisees were hypocrites, and they were certainly not "righteous". The principle of Ezekiel 18:24 prevents ANY "righteousness" being ascribed to people who are by God

called "hypocrites".

Now let's take a closer look at hypocrisy.

THE EFFECT OF HYPOCRISY

Let's start by looking at something Paul tells us in Galatians.

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. (Galatians 2:11-13 AV)

There are two words here in verse 13 that we should take note of. The Greek word that is translated as "dissembled" is "sunupokrinomai". This word is made up of "sun" (meaning "with") and "hupokrinomai" (meaning "to simulate, feign, pretend"). So the whole Greek word literally means "TO ACT HYPOCRITICALLY WITH ...".

Next, the Greek word that is translated as "dissimulation" is "hupokrisis", which is the word normally translated as "HYPOCRISY" (as in Luke 12:1, etc.).

Now that we have seen what the original Greek words used in this verse mean, let's notice where a number of the more recent translations openly acknowledge this double reference to hypocrisy.

And with him the rest of the Jews acted INSINCERELY, so that even Barnabas was carried away by their INSINCERITY. (Galatians 2:13 RSV)

And the rest of the Jews joined him IN HYPOCRISY, with the result that even Barnabas was carried away by their HYPOCRISY. (Galatians 2:13 NAS)

The other Jews joined him in his HYPOCRISY, so that by their HYPOCRISY even Barnabas was led astray. (Galatians 2:13 NIV)

And the other Jews joined him in this HYPOCRISY, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their HYPOCRISY. (Galatians 2:13 NRSV)

All of these translations are simply acknowledging what Paul wrote in Greek, that this problem revolved around HYPOCRISY!

These verses are important for us to understand because they show us THE EFFECT of hypocrisy.

THE EFFECT OF HYPOCRISY IS THAT IT DECEIVES PEOPLE!

In this case in Galatians chapter 2 hypocrisy managed to deceive even Barnabas, even as hypocrisy has no doubt on many occasions deceived you and me. We thought people were speaking or acting in sincerity and in truth, and we only later learned that they had deceived us by their hypocrisy. Hypocrisy is

a very potent form of lying.

When we understand it correctly, it becomes quite clear that Paul wasn't mincing any words about the Apostle Peter and the other Jews at Antioch at that particular time. The KJV words "dissemble" and "dissimulation" both mean "TO HIDE UNDER A FALSE APPEARANCE", but they are not used very much today, and many of us might miss the strong indictment they convey. The word "hypocrisy" is used much more commonly today to convey the same concept.

So hypocrisy is a very powerful form of lying, which easily has the effect of deceiving people.

THE ACCOUNT IN MATTHEW CHAPTER 16

Here is another account where Jesus Christ referred to "the leaven of the Pharisees". Notice the context:

The Pharisees also with the Sadducees came, and tempting desired him that he would shew them a sign from heaven. (Matthew 16:1 AV)

The Pharisees were urging Christ "to prove" that He was the Messiah. They were trying to provoke Him into performing a miracle, not because it would have convinced them, but because perhaps it might be something they could use against Him. So Jesus Christ responded:

He answered and said unto them, When it is evening, ye say, *It will be* fair weather: for the sky is red. And in the morning, *It will be* foul weather to day: for the sky is red and lowring. O YE HYPOCRITES, ye can discern the face of the sky; but can ye not *discern* the signs of the times? (Matthew 16:2-3 AV)

Here we have another occasion when Jesus Christ called the Pharisees "hypocrites" ... because He saw their real motive, which was to try to trip Him up. Their hypocrisy was a form of lying, trying to cover up their real motivation in asking Him for a sign from heaven. They were OBVIOUSLY not willing to accept the numerous miracles He had ALREADY performed up to that point in time. And so Christ concluded the conversation by saying:

A WICKED AND ADULTEROUS GENERATION seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given unto it, but the sign of the prophet Jonas. And he left them, and departed. (Matthew 16:4 AV)

The expression "a wicked and adulterous generation" is an obvious reference to the Pharisees, again showing that Jesus Christ was not about to ascribe any "righteousness" to them! People who are designated by God as "adulterous" simply don't get to be called "righteous" by the same God!

After saying the above words Jesus Christ departed by boat with His disciples. Continuing in verse 5 we read:

And when his disciples were come to the other side, they had forgotten to take bread. Then Jesus said unto them, Take heed and BEWARE OF THE LEAVEN OF THE PHARISEES AND OF THE SADDUCEES. (Matthew 16:5-6 AV)

Here Jesus Christ pointed out that BOTH GROUPS, the Pharisees and the Sadducees, had a certain

"leaven". The disciples misunderstood what Jesus Christ meant with this expression, and they applied it to physical bread.

And they reasoned among themselves, saying, *It is* because we have taken no bread. (Matthew 16:7 AV)

Jesus Christ then explained that their application of His statement to physical bread was evidence of their LACK OF REAL FAITH! If they had had real faith, they would have known that Christ wasn't really concerned about physical food one way or the other ... it was unimportant to Him. This He explained in the next few verses.

Which when Jesus perceived, he said unto them, O YE OF LITTLE FAITH, why reason ye among yourselves, because ye have brought no bread? DO YE NOT YET UNDERSTAND, neither remember the five loaves of the five thousand, and how many baskets ye took up? Neither the seven loaves of the four thousand, and how many baskets ye took up? (Matthew 16:8-10 AV)

If Christ hadn't in any way been worried or concerned about food when He had been in desert areas with thousands of people on two separate occasions, WHY would He possibly have been concerned about physical food on THIS occasion in Matthew 16? As He explained:

How is it that ye do not understand that I spake *it* not to you concerning bread, that ye should beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees? (Matthew 16:11 AV)

Only then did the disciples really understand what Jesus Christ was speaking about.

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 AV)

The word "doctrine" here simply means "TEACHINGS"!

So in this passage Jesus Christ was saying that "THE TEACHINGS OF THE PHARISEES" were "leaven"; and in Luke 12 He explained that their "leaven" was "HYPOCRISY". Putting the information from both passages together, we see the following:

THE TEACHINGS OF THE PHARISEES WERE HYPOCRITICAL ... DESIGNED TO MAKE THEM APPEAR RIGHTEOUS ON THE SURFACE, WHILE IN ACTUAL FACT THEY WERE WICKED AND ADULTEROUS!

The same is also true for the teachings of the Sadducees.

So notice carefully:

It is THE TEACHINGS that are the vehicle for the hypocrisy! Everything is done for show, to APPEAR righteous on the outside. But the inside is rotten and filthy and unrepentant, as we will see in a little while. And OBVIOUSLY, there is no way that Jesus Christ would ever ascribe "righteousness" to such people!

So, to summarize, Jesus Christ has explained the expression "the leaven of the Pharisees" in two distinct ways:

1) People ACT UNDER PRETENSE, they outwardly do what appears right and good, and they hide those of their actions they don't want you to know about. This application is on the individual and personal level. The indictment of "adultery" that Jesus Christ pronounced against the Pharisees falls into this category.

2) THE ACTUAL TEACHINGS THEMSELVES are hypocritical, aimed at making people LOOK good without actually having to BE good! Adherence to a set of rituals ensures that one is judged "good and righteous" ... irrespective of whether those rituals have anything to do with what God actually desires or not! Adherence to strict rituals becomes the ultimate judge for salvation for every person. As long as all the rituals are strictly performed, a person can literally "get away with murder" in such a system.

Now understand something:

THE TEACHINGS OF ALL RELIGIONS ARE LIKE THIS ... THEY ARE HYPOCRISY, AIMED AT MAKING THEIR FOLLOWERS "LOOK GOOD"!

[By "all" religions I mean all EXCEPT the true religion of the true God.]

SO WHAT ABOUT US?

As we observe these Seven Days of Unleavened Bread, we need to examine ourselves for "leaven". And Christ identified "leaven" as referring to "hypocrisy".

Satan is the "god" of this present age (2 Corinthians 4:4), meaning that he is the "god" of ALL of the religions that exist and have ever existed (except the true one of course). And Satan has been a liar since long before God created Adam and Eve (John 8:44). And hypocrisy is a very powerful form of lying, which Satan has always used to deceive human beings.

So every one of this world's religions is a form of hypocrisy. They are mostly designed to make people "look good" by simply adhering to strict outward rituals, while absolving people from any responsibility to "change what is on the inside". Adherence to outward rituals is all that is required. Some of the eastern religions do focus to some degree on the inward thoughts in combination with outward rituals, which may open people's minds to undesirable outside influences (i.e. to demon influence).

Understand that it is THE RITUALS that make a religion "look good" to the followers of that religion. It is the same with physical bread ... it is the leaven that makes the bread look really good. And I have even seen highly skilled bakers achieve "a leavened look and texture" in bread without actually using any leaven or baking powder. But it is "the leavened look" that makes bread desirable to most of us ... and it is the rituals attached to a religion that are aimed at making that religion "look good" ... either by allowing people to do things they really want to do or by allowing people to feel good and righteous in return for the things they do.

So what about us? Are we on guard against this leaven? Do we use outwardly visible actions to hide other things in our lives? Do we use visible compliance with Sabbath and tithing laws to hide other areas of our lives which are not in agreement with the laws of God? No amount of "serving the brethren" or "faithfully tithing" will achieve anything in the sight of God if there is still any area of our lives where we knowingly hold back from whole-hearted obedience to the spirit and intent of all of God's laws ... that's the lesson of Ezekiel 18:24. In such situations James 4:17 always applies.

Therefore to him that knoweth to do good, and doeth *it* not, to him it is sin. (James 4:17 AV)

Furthermore:

Even when there is no area of our lives where we are knowingly holding back from full obedience (which hopefully is the case for all of us), do we look upon strict adherence to "all of God's laws" as our "ticket to salvation"? In other words, do THE TEACHINGS become the most important things in our lives? For example, would WE have reasoned like David when he was hungry and asked the priest to give him "the showbread" which was strictly limited for use by the priest and his family (see 1 Samuel 21:4-5) ... or would we have said: "the law says that only the priest's family can eat this bread, so therefore I couldn't possibly eat this"? In other words, do we view God's laws and instructions as if they are RITUALS which are an end in themselves? Or do we view God's laws and instructions as God's OBVIOUS intent to influence our minds and our ways of thinking and behaving to come into harmony with HIS way of thinking, where our faithful outward obedience is only an expression of an inward humble submission to God's wishes and desires, and where our outward obedience NEVER obscures our awareness of our inward inadequacy to really be like God in dealing with life's situations (see Romans 7:14-25), where the outward obedience NEVER leads us to feel that we have "earned" God's favour and salvation by our "good conduct"?

Do we really understand that all of God's laws are aimed at helping us to come to grips with the process of "renewing OUR MINDS" (see Romans 12:1-2), to change from the state of being naturally and spontaneously hostile to God and to His laws (see Romans 8:7) to the state of being willingly and voluntarily submissive to ALL of God's wishes for us, the state of seeking to do everything we come to understand is "PLEASING TO GOD" (see 1 John 3:22)?

In the world's "leavened" religions the outward actions are the most important thing, and in most cases there is little or no concern with the "inward man". Good outward actions and strict compliance with prescribed rituals is all that is needed.

With God's true religion THE INWARD MAN is by far the most important thing. True repentance is a process that takes place in the mind! Correct and precise compliance with outward actions and conduct is UTTERLY WORTHLESS BEFORE GOD if it is produced by a carnal and unrepentant mind! Correct compliance with all outwardly required actions is ONLY of value before God when it is produced by a mind that is repentant and willingly submissive to God. That is very clear from what Paul wrote in Romans 8:8.

So then THEY THAT ARE IN THE FLESH CANNOT PLEASE GOD. (Romans 8:8 AV)

The expression "they that are in the flesh" is Paul's way of referring to people who are still carnal and unrepentant, as were the Pharisees for example. In the expression "they ... CANNOT please God" Paul used the Greek absolute negative form. It means that "they ABSOLUTELY cannot please God, no matter what they do outwardly" ... as long as they are not willing to first change their minds INWARDLY.

As we go through the process of examining our lives for "spiritual leaven", these are some of the things that we need to examine. Is there any such "leaven" in OUR lives?

Now since Jesus Christ identified this "leaven of the Pharisees" as HYPOCRISY, therefore we should look at exactly where Jesus Christ called the Pharisees "hypocrites", to help us further identify this "leaven". As it happens, there is a passage in which Jesus Christ called the Pharisees "hypocrites" SEVEN TIMES, following each pronouncement with a brief explanation. Christ breaks their hypocrisy down into seven specific areas.

Let's carefully examine all of those areas.

MATTHEW CHAPTER 23: THE SEAT OF MOSES

Then spake Jesus to the multitude, and to his disciples, Saying, The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat: (Matthew 23:1-2 AV)

Seven chapters earlier in the same gospel (i.e. Matthew 16) Christ had ALREADY warned His disciples to beware, be on guard against, and watch out for THE TEACHINGS of the Pharisees. In Luke 12:1 Christ identified this "leaven" as "HYPOCRISY". It follows that here in Matthew 23 Christ is not about to show unqualified support for those teachings of the Pharisees ... an idea that some people have read into the first three verses of this chapter.

The Greek for the verb "sit" in this verse is "ekathisan", which is the aorist tense, active voice and indicative mood of the verb "kathizo". The indicative mood in Greek expresses "A SIMPLE STATEMENT OF FACT". And that is precisely what we have here.

Jesus Christ was stating THE FACT that the Scribes and the Pharisees were occupying the "seat of Moses". Christ did not say that they SHOULD have been on that seat; He didn't say that God GAVE them this position; and He didn't say who else had sat on that seat since Moses had died about 1400 years or so earlier. Christ simply stated THE FACT that at that point in time the Pharisees were on that seat.

"The seat of Moses" had not always been occupied by the Pharisees. The sect of the Pharisees only sprang up at some time between 180 B.C. and 100 B.C.. Their power-base was not really established all at once. Because of the religious corruption of the priesthood at that time (second century B.C.), the Pharisees (mostly laymen without any priestly or even levitical connections) managed to usurp a certain amount of religious authority. They were self-appointed! The basis for their claims to religious leadership lay in their knowledge of and their education in the Scriptures of the Old Testament, and not in any genealogical claims (e.g. such as claiming to be of the line of Aaron). They had no claims to having been appointed by God.

What exactly did Christ mean by "the seat of Moses"? Did Moses actually have "a seat"? What did Moses do "from a seat"? It wasn't that he "gave laws" from a seat, was it? No, the laws he gave he had brought down from the mountain, after having communicated with God. And those laws he did not give "sitting down".

The expression "Moses' seat" is not used anywhere else in the Bible, only here in Matthew 23:2. And Moses is not really recorded as having had a seat (excluding the occasion when he raised his arms in prayer to God and then sat on a rock because of sheer tiredness), except for one occasion, in Exodus chapter 18. Notice the account.

And it came to pass on the morrow, that MOSES SAT TO JUDGE THE PEOPLE: and the people stood by Moses from the morning unto the evening. (Exodus 18:13)

This is an account of people bringing their disputes to Moses for settlement. As Moses explained to his father-in-law Jethro:

And Moses said unto his father in law, Because THE PEOPLE COME UNTO ME TO ENQUIRE

OF GOD: When they have a matter, they come unto me; and I JUDGE BETWEEN ONE AND ANOTHER, AND I DO MAKE [THEM] KNOW THE STATUTES OF GOD, AND HIS LAWS.
(Exodus 18:15-16)

This is the only occasion when Moses had "a seat". He SAT before the people. Notice what was involved here:

- 1) The people wanted to know God's will.
- 2) So Moses EXPLAINED God's laws and judgments to them.
- 3) Then Moses JUDGED by applying God's laws to the people.

It is a simple matter to study into Jewish history for the period after Ezra and Nehemiah and going up to the ministry of Jesus Christ. It is well-known that the Pharisees, as a group, had taken it upon themselves ... "TO MAKE KNOWN THE STATUTES OF GOD AND HIS LAWS"! But, unlike Moses, they had no authority to then also "pronounce binding judgments". That authority was at that time reserved for the Sanhedrin, which included some of the Pharisees, but also many non-Pharisees (e.g. Sadducees).

Thus: WHY did Christ say the Pharisees sat "upon Moses' seat"?

Answer: Because they had taken it upon themselves to be the final authority in explaining the laws of God! They were the ones who, at that time, studied the Scriptures and they SHOULD have been able to explain the Word of God correctly to the people. BECAUSE these lay-people (i.e. they were not "ordained" or "set apart" into any ministry) claimed expertise in understanding the Word of God, THEREFORE it was not difficult for them to gain control of the synagogues throughout the country. This gave them control over the dissemination of God's Word. By assuming the responsibility of explaining the Word of God, they had ipso facto placed themselves upon "Moses' seat". They had NOT been appointed by God!

Now let's look at verse 3:

All therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, [that] observe and do; but do not ye after their works: for they say, and do not. (Matthew 23:3)

This translation is somewhat misleading in that it does NOT really convey correctly what Jesus Christ actually said. There are several things to notice about this verse.

First of all, this statement is A VERY CLEAR CONTRAST BETWEEN TWO THINGS! Using a contrast between two things is a fairly common way for someone to make a point. Now in such a contrast it is ALWAYS THE SECOND POINT that the speaker wishes to highlight. It is never the speaker's intention to highlight the first point he makes ... that first point is nothing more than a way to set the stage for the information he REALLY wishes to present, his second point!

The Apostle Paul used this technique at times. For the sake of establishing a contrast, the Apostle Paul also used the word "all" rather generally. He assumed that his readers would understand that his use of "all" had OBVIOUS limitations. Here are two verses from 1. Corinthians.

ALL THINGS ARE LAWFUL UNTO ME, but all things are not expedient: ALL THINGS ARE LAWFUL FOR ME, but I will not be brought under the power of any. (1 Corinthians 6:12)

ALL THINGS ARE LAWFUL FOR ME, but all things are not expedient: ALL THINGS ARE LAWFUL FOR ME, but all things edify not. (1 Corinthians 10:23)

Even though Paul said four times "ALL THINGS are lawful for me", surely none of us would argue that Paul really meant "ALL THINGS"! It is obvious that he did not mean that killing, stealing, idolatry, lying, coveting, hating, committing adultery, blasphemy, etc. were "lawful" to him. Paul obviously didn't mean "sinning is also lawful for me".

So it is VERY CLEAR that Paul, in using the word "ALL" in a contrast situation, did not really mean "ALL" in the absolute sense. His audience was expected to understand this limitation on his use of "all". He was only using the word "all" to provide A CONTRAST with the fact that NOT "all" things are expedient or edifying.

In the above two verses there is no hint in the Greek grammar that such a limitation for the word "all" should be applied by the reader ... Paul assumed that the limitation on "all" was obvious. But when we examine the Greek grammar of Matthew 23:3, we find that the Greek grammar ACTIVELY IMPLIES LIMITATIONS on the expression "ALL WHATSOEVER" ... and those limitations are NOT really conveyed in our English language translations.

So here is the point:

In 1 Corinthians 6:12 and in 1 Corinthians 10:23 the Greek does NOT imply any limitations on the phrase "ALL THINGS", yet we have no difficulty understanding that certain limitations are OBVIOUSLY implied. But in Matthew 23:3 the Greek very clearly DOES imply limitations on the phrase "ALL WHATSOEVER", yet there are those who feel that IN THIS CASE no limitations should be imposed on this phrase. In both cases we are dealing with CONTRASTS, where the emphasis is clearly on the second point that is presented.

Matthew 23:3 is a clear example of where it becomes a problem if we rely on nothing but our English language translation for our understanding.

Paul was not trying to emphasize that "all things are lawful to him", but rather that "all things are not expedient" and that "all things don't edify". In the same way, Jesus Christ was not emphasizing obedience to the Pharisees, but the matter that we should not follow the bad examples of the Pharisees. And in the rest of Matthew 23 Christ then spelled out exactly how bad those examples were!

Next, here is the Greek text for this verse, transliterated into our alphabet.

panta oun hosa an eiposin humin terein tereite kai poieite kata de ta erga auton me poieite legousin gar kai ou poiousoin (Matthew 23:3)

The verb "eiposin", here translated as "bid", is the second aorist tense active voice and the SUBJUNCTIVE MOOD of the primary verb "epo", which means "to say, to speak". So, exactly like in Matthew 5:20, we again have the use of the subjunctive mood, this time with the particle "an" in place of "ean".

Now where at the time of the KJV being translated the word "bid" had the meaning of "beseech" and "entreat", it today often implies a command. But the verb in the Greek text (i.e. eiposin)

does not imply a command at all. The Greek simply implies "saying", without the imperative mood. The translation which most accurately conveys the mood of the Greek verb is Young's Literal Translation, which reads as follows:

all, then, as much as THEY MAY SAY to you to observe, observe and do, but according to their works do not, for they say, and do not; (Matthew 23:3 YLT)

"THEY MAY SAY" is far less authoritative and commanding than either "they bid you" or "they tell you". It is also a more correct reflection of the Greek verb so translated. "They may say to you" does not imply that you have to get your orders from them.

Now let's examine the Greek words which appear before the verb "say" or "speak". There are four words. They are:

"panta oun hosa an".

"Panta" means "ALL"; "oun" means "THEREFORE" or "then"; "hosa" means "WHATEVER" or "as many as"; and "an" is a Greek primary particle.

In Thayer's Lexicon one and one-half pages are devoted to a discussion of this little primary particle "an". Here is a quotation from Thayer's Lexicon:

"a particle indicating that something CAN OR COULD OCCUR ON CERTAIN CONDITIONS, OR BY THE COMBINATION OF CERTAIN FORTUITOUS CAUSES. In Latin it has no equivalent, nor do the English words 'haply, perchance', or German 'wohl, etwa', exactly and everywhere correspond to it."

In plain English: the use of this Greek particle "an" indicates that the statement COULD OCCUR ... ON CERTAIN CONDITIONS! Or by a combination of "fortuitous" causes!

The CONDITIONAL aspect of this whole statement by Jesus Christ here in Matthew 23:3 is therefore emphasized in two specific ways:

- 1) By the use of this particle "an" in the Greek.
- 2) By the use of the subjunctive mood with the word "say".

This is unfortunately obscured in our English language translations, because it would be very difficult to convey without becoming extremely verbose. However, in exactly the same way that the Apostle Paul's statement "ALL THINGS ARE LAWFUL FOR ME" in 1 Corinthians 10:23 has some very obvious and self-evident restraints and limitations, so also Jesus Christ's words "ALL WHATSOEVER they bid you observe" has some equally obvious and self-evident restraints and limitations ... as made abundantly clear by Jesus Christ Himself in the rest of this chapter!

The contrasting nature of this statement makes this even MORE obvious! Thus Christ was saying:

"The Pharisees are SUCH UTTER HYPOCRITES that even when they officially teach some things correctly, even then they themselves don't put their own correct teachings into practice!

They don't even practice what they themselves preach!"

MATTHEW CHAPTER 23 CONTINUED

In verse 3 Jesus Christ IDENTIFIED the hypocrisy of the Pharisees, by stating that they PRETENDED to obey God ... when they said what was right, they still didn't do this themselves. Are WE perhaps sometimes like that ... we tell other people what is right and what God expects from us, but we don't even do these things ourselves? Have you ever known of a minister who encouraged church members to regularly pray and study, when it later turned out that the minister himself wasn't doing this? That would have been a clear example of Christ's statement in Matthew 23:3.

Notice verse 4:

For they bind heavy burdens and grievous to be borne, and lay *them* on men's shoulders; but they *themselves* will not move them with one of their fingers. (Matthew 23:4 AV)

So the Pharisees laid heavy loads on other people, while claiming exemptions for themselves. Understand that Jesus Christ was not exaggerating here ... He meant what He said. Anytime a religious leader or a class of religious leaders (e.g. the ministry of a church) imposes some kind of burden upon the ordinary membership of their particular church, while at the same time claiming exemption from this burden for self, it AUTOMATICALLY amounts to hypocrisy and falls into the principle of Matthew 23:4. Specifically, imposing ANY financial requirements upon the membership of the Church, from which requirements the ministry is exempted, is a form of hypocrisy, which Jesus Christ forcefully indicted here in Matthew 23:4.

Continuing with verse 5:

But all their works they do for to be seen of men: they make broad their phylacteries, and enlarge the borders of their garments, (Matthew 23:5 AV)

The Pharisees always tried to show off their good deeds, which is vanity. The lesson for us is that we need to carefully and honestly examine OUR MOTIVATION for the right things we do. Do we do the right things from a right motivation before God, or are all our good deeds the results of a selfish motivation? Jesus Christ's statement makes clear that even GOOD works, when done with a wrong motivation, don't achieve anything in the sight of God.

Verses 6-7 read:

And love the uppermost rooms at feasts, and the chief seats in the synagogues, And greetings in the markets, and to be called of men, Rabbi, Rabbi. (Matthew 23:6-7 AV)

The motive for the good deeds of the Pharisees was a desire for praise and prestige.

In the next 5 verses (i.e. Matthew 23:8-12) Jesus Christ warns us against seeking to be exalted before men by claiming exalted titles.

Thus far in this chapter, in the first 12 verses, Jesus Christ has set the stage for what He is about to say. He now proceeds to call the Pharisees HYPOCRITES seven times, expounding each use of this word with practical examples.

THESE SEVEN EXAMPLES CLEARLY SPELL OUT THE DETAILS OF "THE LEAVEN OF THE PHARISEES"!

So when we examine our own lives for "leaven", THESE SEVEN AREAS are things we should examine very closely for ourselves. Are WE perhaps guilty of any of these seven areas?

Let's look at "the seven hypocrisies of the Pharisees".

THE FIRST HYPOCRISY:

Notice Matthew 23:13:

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 AV)

The first hypocrisy of the Pharisees was that they PERSECUTE TRUE OBEDIENCE! That's what the Apostle Paul had done before his conversion, persecute those who tried to live true Christianity. They tried to stop other people from obeying God, to prevent them from entering into the kingdom of God. This is leaven and hypocrisy.

THE SECOND HYPOCRISY:

Notice verse 14 ...

Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye devour widows' houses, and for a pretence make long prayer: therefore ye shall receive the greater damnation. (Matthew 23:14 AV)

The second hypocrisy of the Pharisees was that they STOLE FROM THE POOR! Earlier I mentioned that all religions are a form of hypocrisy. It is interesting to note that ALL of this world's religions that have amassed a certain amount of wealth have done so BY TAKING THIS FROM THE POOR! The wealth of this world's religions is NOT based on rich people having provided that wealth, though rich people have obviously also contributed. But the overwhelmingly large part of the wealth of various churches and religions has come from POOR people. In many cases these religions kept their own followers in poverty, while amassing vast wealth for the church.

In return for the poor people giving to their churches, the churches made A SHOW OF RITUALS for their followers. The rituals were, amongst other things, designed to pressure their followers into making more sacrifices, which those in positions of authority were invariably not willing to make themselves. The wealth of the cardinals and the bishops of the Catholic Church during the Middle Ages in the midst of the abject poverty of the common people all around them is a typical example of this hypocrisy!

As far as the hypocritical long public prayers are concerned, Jesus Christ had already specifically condemned this practice in Matthew chapter 6, where He had said:

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. But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly. (Matthew 6:5-6 AV)

Long public prayers are almost always nothing but a sham. They are not directed at God, but at the audience who is supposed to be impressed by the beautiful words spoken in such prayers.

This too is leaven and hypocrisy.

THE THIRD HYPOCRISY:

Notice the next hypocrisy ...

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! Ye fools and blind: for whether is greater, the gold, or the temple that sanctifieth the gold? And, Whosoever shall swear by the altar, it is nothing; but whosoever sweareth by the gift that is upon it, he is guilty. Ye fools and blind: for whether *is* greater, the gift, or the altar that sanctifieth the gift? Whoso therefore shall swear by the altar, sweareth by it, and by all things thereon. And whoso shall swear by the temple, sweareth by it, and by him that dwelleth therein. And he that shall swear by heaven, sweareth by the throne of God, and by him that sitteth thereon. (Matthew 23:15-22 AV)

The third hypocrisy of the Pharisees was A MEMBERSHIP DRIVE! A membership drive is hypocritical! This is the hypocrisy of sending missionaries to spread false doctrines to unsuspecting native people in third world areas. If the religion has enough impressive rituals attached to it, it is usually successful and grows (e.g. the Spanish conquistadores spreading the Catholic religion to the New World).

God's way is to preach the truth in a general way and to leave it up to God to open the minds of the people so reached, the principle of John 6:65, 44.

The last part of verse 15 (i.e. "ye make him twofold more the child of GEHENNA than yourselves") says in very plain terms: "YOU MISSIONARIES LEAD PEOPLE TO THE LAKE OF FIRE!"

In Matthew 23:16-19 Jesus Christ showed that those who institute these membership drives are invariably greatly impressed by and motivated by MONETARY VALUE, which God calls greed and covetousness. This too is leaven and hypocrisy.

THE FOURTH HYPOCRISY:

Now notice verses 23-24:

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. Ye blind guides, which strain at a gnat, and swallow a camel. (Matthew 23:23-24 AV)

The fourth hypocrisy of the Pharisees was BEING PICKY ON UNIMPORTANT ISSUES! At the same

time they were utterly callous on major issues, like adultery. Jesus Christ's statement regarding "these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone" makes quite clear that God does not want us to approach what we might consider "minor issues" carelessly! Christ's point is that we ought to be conscientious in our approach to God and His laws IN ALL THINGS, be they "major" or be they "minor". It is never a matter of "either/or" with God. It is always a matter of "doing BOTH conscientiously".

This hypocrisy (being very picky about faithfully following some ritualistic requirements) can be seen in many of the world's religions. For the Pharisees a focus on picky insignificant rituals diverted the attention away from the real issues ... the filth and rot and carnality that was on the inside (as we'll see in the next few verses). This too was leaven and hypocrisy.

THE FIFTH HYPOCRISY:

Now notice verses 25-26:

Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye make clean the outside of the cup and of the platter, but within they are FULL OF EXTORTION AND EXCESS. *Thou* blind Pharisee, cleanse first that *which is* within the cup and platter, that the outside of them may be clean also. (Matthew 23:25-26 AV)

The fifth hypocrisy of the Pharisees was that they COVERED UP SELF-INDULGENCE AND GREED WITH A PIOUS EXTERIOR! They were much like some of the "tel-evangelist" scandals that have taken place in the USA over the years.

Notice very carefully what Jesus Christ was actually saying here:

"Extortion" here refers to THE ACT OF PLUNDERING! It means "robbing" and "greedily taking by force"! The word "excess" here refers to A LACK OF SELF-CONTROL! It means self-indulgence!

While the Pharisees had an outward appearance of piety, they were in fact greedy and they robbed people in the name of religion and they lacked self-control! THAT is what Jesus Christ is telling us here in verses 25-26 ... yet some people still feel that 22 verses earlier (i.e. in Matthew 23:3) Jesus Christ was somehow instructing true Christians to implicitly obey "WHATSOEVER" these hypocritical, thieving, self-indulgent Pharisees would pronounce?!?

Matthew 23:26 is God's message for us for these Days of Unleavened Bread. Unleavened Bread pictures "examining the inside of the cup".

THE SIXTH HYPOCRISY:

Now notice Matthew 23:27-28.

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. Even so ye also outwardly appear righteous unto men, but within YE ARE FULL OF HYPOCRISY AND INIQUITY. (Matthew 23:27-28 AV)

The sixth hypocrisy of the Pharisees was that they PRESENTED A FALSE FACADE! Just like Tinseltown (i.e. Hollywood), they were fake. Appearances are everything. And religious people DO tend to appear righteous to us (i.e. to the average person). When confronted by someone in religious clothing

(e.g. like a priest or a nun), many people will almost spontaneously "politely defer" to such "religious people", as if they were somehow on a different level from the rest of us ordinary people. And that is **PRECISELY** what "religious garb" is intended to achieve ... to set those wearing such garb on a higher level from everyone else. And all it is is an empty facade.

"Bones" of human beings are always considered "unclean" by God! After Christ's return at some point there will be a war with Gog and Magog (Ezekiel 39). After that some people will be employed for seven months to bury the remains of the rebellious army (Ezekiel 39:12) in order to "CLEANSE THE LAND". And even after that people will **STILL** set up signs by any and every human bone they may come across (Ezekiel 39:14-15) ... to bury it. The point is: **GOD WANTS EVERY HUMAN BONE REMOVED BECAUSE SUCH BONES ARE "UNCLEAN"!**

But the churches of this world look upon bones as "PRECIOUS RELICS" to be given places of honour! And so "the cathedrals of this world" are **FULL OF BONES!** To God this is an abomination. Just like Jesus Christ said about the Pharisees, so the churches of this world are "within full of dead men's bones" ... I have seen scores of such "cathedrals" and "churches" filled with bones in many different countries in Europe. And in this world's churches "the graveyard" is frequently attached to the church building ... they retain the bones of dead men as close to their religious places of worship as possible.

Presenting a false facade is just another form of leaven and hypocrisy. Let's now look at the last of the seven hypocrisies.

THE SEVENTH HYPOCRISY:

Matthew 23:29-33 read as follows:

Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! because ye build the tombs of the prophets, and garnish the sepulchres of the righteous, And say, **IF WE HAD BEEN IN THE DAYS OF OUR FATHERS,** we would not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets. Wherefore ye be witnesses unto yourselves, that ye are the children of them which killed the prophets. Fill ye up then the measure of your fathers. Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell? (Matthew 23:29-33 AV)

The seventh hypocrisy of the Pharisees was that **THEY DON'T SEE THE REAL SELF!** They couldn't see that they themselves were **EXACTLY** like those who had gone before them, as far as how their minds work, was concerned. They were going to reject God's messages **EXACTLY** like those before them had done.

A part of true repentance, and a part of examining our lives for spiritual leaven, is to recognize that our minds work **EXACTLY** like the minds of people who disobey God and who reject God's rule over their lives. A part of true repentance is to recognize that we ourselves are really no different from people in the world! It is only when we freely acknowledge this reality that we can **THEN** come to grips with this unpleasant reality with the help of God's Spirit. That's what the Apostle Paul explained in Romans.

As Paul said:

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 AV)

He continued to say:

But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death? (Romans 7:23-24 AV)

It is only by freely acknowledging our inadequacies and our failings and short-comings to God, that we can then, with the help of God's Spirit, do something about that state of affairs, so that we don't end up as those who went wrong before us ended up.

Notice again Christ's statements in Matthew 23:33.

Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell? (Matthew 23:33 AV)

Christ's references to "serpents" and to "vipers" is His way of saying that the Pharisees were ON SATAN'S WAVELENGTH! Satan is the ultimate "serpent", and the Pharisees and their practices were fully in tune with Satan ... hence they were "a generation of vipers".

Christ's rhetorical question "how can you escape the judgment of Gehenna" shows that the religion of the Pharisees LEADS TO THE LAKE OF FIRE! This is a concluding statement after exposing their total hypocrisy (seven picturing completeness), and this is a very serious matter.

Let's understand that "the hypocrisy of the Pharisees" is really typical of ALL of the religions of this world, including those that are disguised as "Christian". Satan is "the god" of all of those religions (2 Corinthians 4:4). And the seven steps of hypocrisy that Jesus Christ has outlined for us here in Matthew chapter 23 really apply to all false religions to one degree or another. It is never a matter that "SOME FALSE RELIGIONS ARE BETTER THAN OTHER FALSE RELIGIONS"! With God that just doesn't work.

So when we examine our lives for spiritual leaven, then we need to examine ourselves for hypocrisy. Are we really totally and unconditionally and whole-heartedly and willingly submissive to God and His rule over our lives? Or is there any area in our lives which we don't really want to examine, which we would much prefer to ignore?

Seven ways in which religious hypocrisy frequently manifests itself are:

- 1) It resents and persecutes TRUE obedience to God, because true obedience makes this hypocrisy look bad. Just like Cain persecuted his brother Abel.
- 2) With great pomp and show of rituals and ceremony it takes away from those who can least afford to give ... it takes especially from the poor. It keeps the poor poor.
- 3) It engages in a membership drive because growth in membership will make it look good ... like it is being blessed by God (see 1 Timothy 6:5).
- 4) It focuses on picky and insignificant issues as a way of avoiding facing up to the REAL issues.
- 5) It covers up greed and selfishness and self-indulgence and a lack of self-control.
- 6) It presents a totally false facade, which is nothing more than a show of vanity.

7) It is oblivious to the real self, as was the Pharisee in the parable of "the Pharisee and the Publican who went to pray" (see Luke 18:9-14).

As we examine ourselves, THESE are the things we need to look for, because THIS is the leaven of the Pharisees which Jesus Christ told us to beware of.

Frank W. Nelte