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West Suffolk Epistle West Suffolk Baptist Church



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Thoughtfully Reformed - Redemptively Relevant

Beware the Leaven of the Pharisees

“Beware!” This is an ominous warning. It is the warning Caesar heard that made his bones tremble: “Caesar! Beware the Ides of March!” It is the warning the sailor Ishmael heard from the waterfront prophet before he signed on with the crew of the *Pequod* to join Ahab in his maniacal quest for Moby Dick.

The simple sign Beware of the Dog! is enough to give a burglar pause. The word *beware* posts a warning that stops us in our tracks, a caveat that conjures up visions of a menace that can quickly destroy or hurt us.

It was this word that Jesus used to startle His followers into vigilance against a deadly danger. “Beware the leaven of the Pharisees” (Luke 12:1, NASB). Jesus put up a signpost for the church, a divine call to heed the threat of a poison that could be swallowed by the unsuspecting. He warned of wolves in sheep’s clothing, of rapacious killers that disguised themselves under the cloak of gentle spirituality.

The danger is one that kills by small doses. It is injected in seemingly harmless amounts, but it is potent in its full impact. “A little leaven leavens the whole lump,” He said (1 Corinthians 5:6).

Jesus’ words are a warning against allowing in an infectious element that can ruin the whole Christian life. It is something that rises from a small beginning. The warning is coupled with another frightening caveat. Jesus said, “Unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:20).

If we fail to heed a Beware of the Dog sign, we may get bitten on the leg and get our pants ripped. But this warning of Jesus involves far more than a loss of some blood or a patch of our trousers. It means the loss of the kingdom of God.

What is this dreaded leaven of the Pharisees? In a word, it is the leaven of *hypocrisy*. It is the leaven of a false kind of righteousness. It is the leaven of deception, a masquerade of righteousness that is a substitute for the real thing.

“Unless your righteousness *exceeds*...” The word *unless* introduces a necessary condition for something else that follows. Here Jesus warns that our righteousness absolutely must surpass the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees or we will miss the kingdom.

This warning is one of the most neglected warnings Jesus ever pronounced. It is lightly dismissed by the modern Christian, who sees no real threat in it. After all, what do we have to worry about? We view the Pharisees as the treacherous, corrupt group of unprincipled men who actually plotted the murder of Christ. What could be more diabolical than that? Surely it is a small thing for any lover of Christ to surpass Jesus’ most hostile enemies in righteousness. The Pharisees have become the symbol of corruption to us. At first glance it would appear that the weakest Christian should have no problem in surpassing the Pharisees in righteousness.



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We might offer an easy answer to Jesus' warning. We might ask, "What do we have to worry about?" As Christians we are justified by faith. By faith we receive the righteousness of Christ Himself. Surely Christ's righteousness surpasses the righteousness of the Pharisees. If we have the righteousness of Christ, what do we need to worry about?"

The easy answer is nothing! To be sure, if we truly have faith in Christ we do possess His righteousness. We are declared to be justified by God. The kingdom is ours. Nothing could be more certain than the fact that all who possess the righteousness of Christ will surely inherit the kingdom of God. Nothing more is required than the righteousness of Christ. No righteousness can possibly exceed that righteousness with which the Christian is cloaked by faith. In this sense the hymn writer was correct: "He's all I need."

That's the easy answer. The deeper question, however, still remains. How do I know I have the saving righteousness of Christ? Can I not deceive myself into thinking I have the real thing when in fact my faith is fraudulent? Just because a person claims to believe in Christ is no guarantee that he has saving faith. It is by our fruits that we demonstrate the reality of our faith. We know that God is pleased with those who truly honor Christ. We feel just as certain that He is not pleased when men blithely use the name but avoid any real life-affecting commitment to Him. This is the scary part of Jesus' warning.

Both the Warning and the Dog

There are homeowners who post signs saying *Beware of the Dog* when in fact they don't own a dog. They claim a dog when there is no dog. The warning has no reality to back it up. Jesus had harsh words to say about people who used words but had no reality to back them up. His words are a real threat to those whose righteousness is not genuine.

A local newspaper told an anecdote about a burglar who stalked the neighborhood watching for homes left unguarded by people leaving for vacation. He watched as a family loaded their suitcases into their car and departed. He waited until dark and then approached the front door and rang the bell. There was no answer. The burglar neatly picked the lock and let himself in. He called into the darkness, "Is anybody home?" He was stunned when he heard a voice in reply, "I see you, and Jesus sees you." Terrified, the burglar called out, "Who's there?" Again the voice came back, "I see you, and Jesus sees you." The burglar switched on his flashlight and aimed it in the direction of the voice. He was instantly relieved when his light revealed a caged parrot reciting the refrain, "I see you, and Jesus sees you." The burglar laughed out loud and switched on the lights. Then he saw it. Beneath the parrot's cage was a huge Doberman pinscher. Then the parrot said, "Attack, Jesus, attack!"

Jesus has the quintessential Doberman. His bite is worse than his bark. Jesus is really righteous, and so should His followers be. The sign *Beware of the Dog* points to a clear reality in His case. The words are not empty. There is a real dog on the premises, and He makes the sign very meaningful.

Beware of the Dog—a notice that is only valid if there is really a dangerous dog present. "We Christians, God's beloved children, have Christ's righteousness"—a valid statement only if we are truly aiming for righteousness. No pretense, just reality.



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Beware the Leaven of the Pharisees *Continued from Page 2*

The fruit of our righteousness must exceed the pretense of righteousness displayed by the scribes and the Pharisees. On the surface the Pharisees achieved a high level of righteousness. Their righteousness was external. It was only an outward show. But their outward show was a brilliant display of virtue. It fooled a lot of people. Most tragically, it fooled the Pharisees themselves. They actually were able to convince themselves that they had the real thing. “Abraham is our father,” they said (John 8:39). They claimed to be loyal to Moses. They were convinced they were in the kingdom. But they were not pleasing to God, who hates pretense.

Let us examine the level of righteousness the Pharisees achieved. We begin by noting that the Pharisees began as a kind of Puritan reform movement in Israel. There were no Pharisees in the Old Testament. They came into being in the period between the close of the Old Testament and the advent of the New Testament. They originated as a group of men who were concerned about the inroads of paganism into the Jewish nation.

Israel was being secularized. The Jews were moving away from fidelity and obedience to the covenant God had made with their fathers. The Pharisees were called Pharisees because the word meant “separated ones.” These men separated themselves from the trends toward paganism. They devoted themselves to the zealous pursuit of righteousness. They were almost fanatical in their drive to obey God. Their concern for godliness was neither casual nor superficial. They were seriously acting to please God.

The origin of Pharisaism was noble. But their movement soon degenerated into a kind of external pietism that was rooted in self-righteousness. They began to trust in their own good works, so that when their Savior came they not only missed His salvation but they plotted against Him. Their fatal error was this: They did not think they needed Christ. They thought they could please God without accepting the Redeemer He sent.

What were the Pharisees like in Jesus’ day? What follows is a brief sketch of the marks of the first-century Pharisees.

The Pharisees were Evangelistic

Jesus said to the Pharisees, “You travel over land and sea to make one proselyte, and when he is won, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves” (Matthew 23:15).

Imagine the evangelistic zeal of people who would cross land and sea for one convert. This is missionary outreach of a higher order.

I hate to travel. I wish God would let me confine my ministry to my hometown. But I am required to travel great distances to carry out my work. When I am invited to speak, however, I usually consider the potential size of my audience before agreeing to travel. So far, I have not crossed the United States in order to preach to one person. I stand ashamed by the goal of the Pharisees in this regard.

They were evangelists. But Jesus marked them as evangelists of hell. They shame us in their zeal even as Mormons shame Christians and as communists tend to be more zealous for their cause than we do for ours.



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Beware the Leaven of the Pharisees *Continued from Page 3*

But the warning is clear. Even though Christians are called to the evangelistic and missionary enterprise, the mere fact that we are involved in such work is no guarantee that we have exceeded the righteousness of the Pharisees. We should be alarmed if we are not zealous for evangelism and missions, but if we are, that does not in and of itself prove that our faith is genuine.

The Pharisees were Tithers

On one occasion Jesus acknowledged that the Pharisees were scrupulous in their giving patterns. They did not fail to pay their tithes. Jesus noted this in the midst of proclaiming a curse upon them:

Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithes of mint and anise and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith (Matthew 23:23). The Pharisees fell into the trap of majoring in minors. Their priorities were reversed. Outward became more important than inward. They exalted minor matters to a high level in order to obscure their failure to be faithful in more important matters. But at least they paid their tithes.

In Israel the tithe was usually paid in terms of produce or livestock. The first fruits of their crops and herds were returned to the Lord. That the Pharisees were scrupulous about tithing is seen in Jesus' recognition that they even tithed from their mint and cumin. That would be comparable to a modern person who kept such strict accounts of tithing that when he finds a dime on the street he makes sure that he returns a penny to the Lord.

We could take a few lessons about tithing from the Pharisees. The latest survey I saw indicated that of those church members who identified themselves as "Evangelical" only 4 percent were tithers. If the survey is accurate, it would mean that 96 percent of evangelical Christians regularly and systematically rob God. In this area our righteousness falls short of the Pharisees. We might protest and say, "But we pay attention to the big things. We might not tithe but we are concerned about justice and mercy."

For the most part such protests are as hollow as they sound. We are called to be faithful in little things before we graduate to the big things. Even if it were true that we are so busy doing the big things that we have overlooked little things like tithing, it would not excuse us for robbing God.

On the other hand, if we are part of the small group who does tithe, we would have nothing of which to boast. We would simply be doing what it is our duty to do. Tithing itself would be nothing greater than what the Pharisees did with scrupulosity.

Let me say again that we need to beware not only of the leaven of the Pharisees, but also to beware of judging the Pharisees too harshly. In their desire to please God they overemphasized the small (and visible) acts of righteousness. How tempting for us to so underplay these small acts that we end up neglecting both small and great matters. And if we neglect all, we are no more pleasing to God than were the Pharisees.



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Beware the Leaven of the Pharisees

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The Pharisees were Men of Prayer

Jesus spoke of the Pharisees' pattern of prayer. They enjoyed making a public display of their piety. They assumed a reverent posture and offered eloquent prayers. They knew nothing of the kind of wrestling with God that characterized David's prayer life. Where David's pillow was wet with his tears, the pillows of the Pharisees were dry as a bone. And they had no prayer closet because a human audience could not fit in one.

The Pharisees piety was external. They were like the farmer in the story of a pig with a wooden leg:

A man and his wife returned home from church and enjoyed a Sunday supper. After dinner they decided to go for a ride in the country. During their leisurely tour the husband was startled to see a pig with a wooden leg in a pasture by the road. "Look at that!" he said to his wife. "There's a pig with a wooden leg!"

The man was amazed that a farmer would be so humane as to provide a wooden leg for his wounded pig. He insisted that they stop at the farmhouse and inquire about the circumstances that led to his porcine prosthesis. He knocked at the farmer's door and introduced himself to the farmer.

"I'm sorry to bother you, sir, but I am intrigued about the pig you have with a wooden leg. Would you mind telling me how it came about?"

"Not at all," said the farmer. "A few months back my grandchildren were here for a visit. One afternoon they wandered into a pasture where our bull was grazing. The bull charged them in fury. The pig noticed the danger and put himself between the children and the bull and headed the bull off. That pig saved my grandchildren's lives. The very next day one of the children fell in the farm pond and was drowning. That pig dove into the water and saved her life.

"So you see," said the farmer, "the pig is almost like family to us. That's why it has a wooden leg. I just couldn't bring myself to eat that pig all at one time!"

So much for the humane farmer. He wasn't *too* devoted to the heroic pig, but he at least wanted to *appear* grateful. The wooden leg symbolized, to passersby, the farmer's humaneness, but the passersby did not know the whole story. His concern for the pig was as deep as the Pharisees' real love for prayer. But at least the Pharisees prayed. They heaped up vain repetitions, but they at least went through the motions. Some of us have prayer lives that are so barren that we neglect even the motions of prayer. We displease God by hypocritical prayer, but we displease Him as well by our failure to pray.



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Beware the Leaven of the Pharisees *Continued from Page 5*

The Pharisees read their Bibles

Jesus rebuked the Pharisees by saying: “You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life” (John 5:39). The Pharisees were learned in theology. They could recite chapter and verse of their Bible, the Old Testament. (They would have been champions in the “sword drills” so dear to Sunday school teachers!) But they missed the heart and soul of the Word of God.

But at least the Pharisees were diligent in searching the Scriptures. Many Christians never read the Bible. They have good intentions of reading it some day, but in the meantime they put it off. When theological disputes arise they may quote a text here and there, but there are few who embark upon a diligent *search* of Scriptures. We go to Bible studies where we have enjoyable fellowship, neat discussions, and tasty snacks. Often we do everything at Bible studies except study, and often when we do study, the word *superficial* seems to apply.

Jesus loved the Word of God. It was His meat and His drink. He calls His people to be diligent students of Scripture. But He demands more than the acquisition of Bible knowledge. We must have a sound doctrine of the Bible. But even this is not enough. The righteousness that pleases Him is a righteousness that proceeds from being doers of His Word and not hearers only.

Evangelism. Tithing. Prayer. Bible study. These are but a few of the rigorous activities of the scribes and the Pharisees. In all these things they excelled. But their activity was almost solely external. They were hypocrites. They went through the outward motions of piety, but their hearts were far from God. They kept the letter of the law but killed the spirit of the law.

The Scriptures warn us that man looks at outward appearances but God looks on the heart (1 Samuel 16:7). This is not to say that God cares only for the spirit of the law and not the letter. We cannot excuse external disobedience by appealing to a warm heart within. The Christian life that pleases God is one that is both internal and external. Authentic righteousness keeps the spirit and the letter. That kind of obedience exceeds the scribes and the Pharisees. It is the kind of obedience to which we are called. ~ *Pleasing God - Dr. R.C. Sproul, Sr.*

Why Was the Reformation Necessary?

The church is always in need of reform. Even in the New Testament, we see Jesus rebuking Peter, and we see Paul correcting the Corinthians. Since Christians are always sinners, the church will always need reform. The question for us, however, is when does the need become an absolute necessity?

The great Reformers of the sixteenth century concluded that reform was urgent and necessary in their day. In pursuing reform for the church, they rejected two extremes. On the one hand, they rejected those who insisted that the church was essentially sound and needed no fundamental changes. On the other hand, they rejected those who believed that they could create a perfect church in every detail. The church needed fundamental reform, but it would also always need to be reforming itself. The Reformers reached these conclusions from their study of the Bible.



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Why Was the Reformation Necessary?

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In 1543, the Reformer of Strasbourg, Martin Bucer, asked John Calvin to write a defense of the Reformation for presentation to Emperor Charles V at the imperial diet set to meet at Speyer in 1544. Bucer knew that the Roman Catholic emperor was surrounded by counselors who were maligning reform efforts in the church, and he believed that Calvin was the most capable minister to defend the Protestant cause.

Calvin rose to the challenge and wrote one of his best works, “The Necessity of Reforming the Church.” This substantial treatise did not convince the emperor, but it has come to be regarded by many as the best presentation of the Reformed cause ever written.

Calvin begins by observing that everyone agreed that the church had “diseases both numerous and grievous.” Calvin argues that matters were so serious that Christians could not abide a “longer delay” for reform or wait for “slow remedies.” He rejects the contention that the Reformers were guilty of “rash and impious innovation.” Rather, he insists that “God raised up Luther and others” to preserve “the truth of our religion.” Calvin saw that the foundations of Christianity were threatened and that only biblical truth would renew the church.

Calvin looks at four great areas in the life of the church that needed reform. These areas form what he calls the soul and the body of the church. The soul of the church is composed of the “pure and legitimate worship of God” and “the salvation of men.” The body of the church is composed of the “use of the sacraments” and “the government of the church.” For Calvin, these matters were at the heart of the Reformation debates. They are essential to the life of the church and can only be rightly understood in light of the teaching of the Scriptures.

We might be surprised that Calvin placed the worship of God as the first of the Reformation issues, but this was a consistent theme of his. Earlier, he had written to Cardinal Sadoletto: “There is nothing more perilous to our salvation than a preposterous and perverse worship of God.” Worship is where we meet with God, and that meeting must be conducted by God’s standards. Our worship shows whether we truly accept God’s Word as our authority and submit to it. Self-created worship is both a form of works-righteousness and an expression of idolatry.

Next, Calvin turned to what we often think of as the greatest issue of the Reformation, namely, the doctrine of justification:

We maintain, that of what description so ever any man’s works may be, he is regarded as righteous before God, simply on the footing of gratuitous mercy; because God, without any respect to works, freely adopts him in Christ, by imputing the righteousness of Christ to him, as if it were his own. This we call the righteousness of faith, viz., when a man, made void and empty of all confidence of works, feels convinced that the only ground of his acceptance with God is a righteousness which is wanting to himself, and is borrowed from Christ. The point on which the world always goes astray, (for this error has prevailed in almost every age,) is in imagining that man, however partially defective he may be, still in some degree merits the favor of God by works.



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Why Was the Reformation Necessary? Continued from Page 7

These foundational matters that form the soul of the church are supported by the body of the church: the sacraments and the government of the church. The sacraments must be restored to the pure and simple meaning and use given in the Bible. The government of the church must reject all tyranny that binds the consciences of Christians contrary to the Word of God.

As we look at the church in our day, we may well conclude that reformation is needed—indeed, is necessary—in many of the areas about which Calvin was so concerned. Only the Word and Spirit of God will ultimately reform the church. But we should pray and work faithfully that such reform will come in our time. ~ *Dr. W. Robert Godfrey*

Remembering the Reformation

Does the Protestant Reformation still matter? If so, why? These are important questions, especially in our day and age, because for many living today in the twenty-first century, what is important is not the past, but the future. We live at an unusual time in history. In terms of technology, the world has changed faster in the last one hundred years than it did in the previous two thousand years combined. This has affected us in many ways. Our generation no longer looks to the wisdom of the past for guidance; instead, we look for the next new invention. History is “yesterday’s news.” What matters is tomorrow.

Sadly, the same way of thinking has influenced Christians. We look at church history with a jaundiced eye, finding it boring or irrelevant, but we must understand that this is an unwise approach. God has always called his people to remember his gracious works in the past. Israel was called to remember the exodus. Christians are called to remember the death of Christ. The same principle holds true with the lessons of church history. It has been rightly said that those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it. The church simply cannot afford to forget the lessons of the Reformation.

There are hundreds of books on the Reformation, but if one coming to the subject for the first time were looking for the best place to start, he would be hard pressed to find a better introduction than Stephen J. Nichols’ *The Reformation* (Crossway, 2007). For those who find history difficult, Nichols’ style of writing is a breath of fresh air. He does not fill page after page with dry lists of names and dates. Instead, his gift is the ability to draw readers into the lives of the people about whom he writes, allowing us to see these great historical figures, warts and all.

Nichols’ book features eight short chapters, each containing numerous illustrations. As is the case in many Reformation histories, the chapter topics of Nichols’ book are devoted to the various “branches” of the Reformation. Thus, there are chapters devoted to Luther and the reformation in Germany, Zwingli, the Radical Reformers, Calvin, and the English Reformation. However, unlike some books on the Reformation, Nichols also includes chapters on the Puritans, and on significant women of the Reformation.



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Remembering the Reformation

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The church must not forget the lessons learned during the Reformation. We cannot forget what happens when the gospel is obscured and distorted.

In his chapter on Luther, Nichols offers a sketch of the important events that led up to Luther's break with Rome, but he does not lose sight of Luther the man in all of this. We must remember that the Reformers were not ivory-tower theologians, discussing doctrines in the peace and quiet of a modern academy setting. No, the Reformers did their theology in the trenches, and Luther is no exception. Nichols describes Luther's personal struggles in a way that helps readers understand more fully not only what Luther did, but why. He also describes Luther's sense of humor, and his deep love for his wife Katherina. In this way, Nichols helps us to understand that Luther was not a superhuman being. He was a man providentially placed by God in the midst of extraordinary circumstances.

The same style of writing is evident in the remaining chapters of the book. We find the Reformation initiated in Switzerland during a sausage supper in Zurich with a notable young priest named Zwingli present. We discover the origins of the Anabaptists, those Christians whose convictions concerning baptism and the separation of the church and state often resulted in their martyrdom. We encounter the young John Calvin, whose overnight stop in Geneva on his way to Strasbourg ultimately changed his life and the course of church history. We see the Reformation gain a foothold in England as a result of a king's desire for a male heir. In all of this, we are introduced to a fascinating and diverse cast of characters, from the soul-searching Martin Luther to the soul-selling Johann Tetzel, from the non-compromising John Knox to the pragmatic Thomas Cranmer.

In his chapter on the Puritans, appropriately titled "Men in Black," Nichols clears away centuries of misrepresentation. He describes the roots of puritanism in the ups and downs of the reformation in England, agreeing with one scholar that puritanism was the "real English Reformation." In his concluding chapter, Nichols introduces us to some of the unsung women of the Reformation, the wives of the Reformers as well as women who made significant contributions to the Reformation on their own.

The church must not forget the lessons learned during the Reformation. We cannot forget what happens when the gospel is obscured and distorted. The Reformation does still matter. Read Stephen Nichols' book and discover why. ~ **Dr. Keith A. Mathison - Professor of systematic theology at Reformation Bible College in Sanford, Fla.**



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If you have a November birthday or anniversary that is not posted here or is listed in error or you do not want to be published in this newsletter, please e-mail Walt at gwlcf10415@gmail.com.

Birthdays and Anniversaries Corner November 2022

Birthdays

*Brenda A. (1)
Conley L. (1)
Diana K. (3)
April F. (5)
LeAnn M. (10)*

*Audrey D. (11)
Luke P. (15)
Malcolm H. (19)
Walt L. (20)
Althea Marie F. (21)*

Anniversaries

*Gene and Brenda A. (22)
Marlin and Sadie H. (22)*

Grieving the Holy Spirit

We grieve the Spirit when we sin and we especially grieve the Spirit when we sin in ways that cause discord, perhaps because unity is a special work of the Spirit (see John 17). The obvious and important application is this: “Not wanting to hurt [the Spirit] is strong motivation for not intending the harm of his people or purpose”



*West Suffolk Baptist Church
Leadership*

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