

Bible Study Note

When is Deleavening to be undertaken?

The Meaning of Exodus 12:15

**By Craig M. White
Version 1.2**





When is Deleavening to be Undertaken?

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Our purpose and desire are to foster Biblical, historical, and related studies that strengthen the Church of God's message & mission and provides further support to its traditional doctrinal positions.

Introductory Comments

Some are of the opinion that deleavening should be undertaken *on* the first day of Unleavened Bread (ULB) which is an annual Sabbath and holy day. And that leaven only symbolises vanity and not all sin.

Is that a correct view?

The Scripture pertaining to this is as follows:

“This day shall be for you a memorial day, and you shall keep it as a feast to the LORD; throughout your generations, as a statute forever, you shall keep it as a feast.

Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread. On the first day you shall remove leaven out of your houses, for if anyone eats what is leavened, from the first day until the seventh day, that person shall be cut off from Israel.

On the first day you shall hold a holy assembly, and on the seventh day a holy assembly. No work shall be done on those days. But what everyone needs to eat, that alone may be prepared.” (Ex 12:14-16, ESV)

Given the above, when should deleavening take place?

Can one overdo deleavening?

It is true that up to the late 1960s some taught that every crumb should be hunted down and removed, creating a burden on believers.¹ Some went to the opposite extreme believing that this pertains only to items already leavened (such as breads) and not the leavening product as well.

Perhaps there is something metaphorical here: it is impossible to remove every crumb, just as it is impossible to remove every aspect of falling short of God’s glory. In other words, we can NEVER be perfect as God is perfect. But we can strive toward that with His help through His spirit and other means (such as angelic assistance and the brethren helping each other) – that is the typology.

Some overdid de-leavening, but that was either taught by their pastor (backed up by the regional director), their own personal belief or a leftover view representing the 1960s teachings.² It is not a Pharisaical interpretation by the Church, but one that reveals an overzealousness.

¹ It was even believed that egg whites or foods ‘puffed up’ without leaven should be thrown out. This was thought to be in adherence to the ‘spirit of the law’ but was taken too far and was eschewed by the late 1960s.

² A good article on this may be found at www.cgg.org/index.cfm/library/article/id/108/deleavening.htm

When to Deleaven?

The practice of many is to deleaven prior to the evening of the first day of ULB over several days (and to incorporate Spring cleaning into this annual ritual). This author's personal practice is to do a Spring clean (removing fine pieces of leaven) and the actual removing of obvious leavened items on Passover day.

I do this due to the typology that Passover pictures the cleansing of the sinner to become clean and pure before God – we are freed from the slavery of spiritual Egypt and flee it and all its filth.

“But God be thanked that though you were slaves of sin, yet you obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine to which you were delivered. And having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness.” (Rom 6:17-18)

Once cleansed of sin (which is the falling short of the glory of God – see Rom 3:23-24) we must then continue in God's way. That means striving to put sin out of our lives – as Christians, we must be careful that we don't live a double life and become hypocritical like the Pharisees, lest we miss out on salvation – it is this duplicity that is a great sin to God. That is mixing God's way with the world. Sin includes anything that is contrary to the way of God, including deliberately breaking His commandments; false doctrines; bad behaviours and mixing truth with error = hypocrisy.

Sin is essentially not being able to become 100% pure and Godlike in this life. Only Christ's shed blood can cleanse us from sin and His advocating to us with the Father can save us. His pure mercy is what we cry out for to attain salvation – we cannot do it on our own as sin resides in us all the time, no matter the striving and progress we make (Rom 7:17-22). Of course the Law cannot save – nothing can but God Himself. The Law is not a Personage that can undertake salvation – it is a standard of God that we must strive to for character development.

To iterate, sin is not only breaking the Commandments and Torah principles (often termed 'Law' in the Bible), including the inability to keep them perfectly, but also not having faith (Rom 14:23). It is missing the mark of perfection which we all do.

Thus, after Passover cleansing, we need to strive to get out and keep out anything that prevents us from becoming Godlike – falling short of His glory. That is what this de-leavening is about when one compares the physical and spiritual Exoduses. For an Israelite or Christian to practice hypocrisy is sin because God's way, after cleansing at the Passover, has become polluted and corrupted. E. g., going to Church or pretending to be a Christian while doing all sorts of things. That is what the Pharisees were like.

During the Feast of Unleavened Bread, it is required to eliminate all leaven from our dwellings in order to prevent the consumption of leavened items, as stated in Ex 12:15. This not only pertains to the yeast used for baking, but also includes any leavened products that have already been prepared. The spiritual significance of leaven as a representation of sin,

insincerity, and moral decay is highlighted in I Cor 5:6-8, where Paul encourages believers to discard the old leaven and become a new batch without leaven. While discarding the yeast starter culture alone may appear sufficient, retaining leavened products in the household poses a potential risk of unintentional non-compliance. Hence, the customary practice of removing all leavened items aids in our faithful adherence to this directive. Although discarding the starter culture holds symbolic importance, commencing afresh with a new culture following the festival symbolizes liberation from sin, insincerity, and moral decay.

As one person wrote to me:

“Ex 12:15 Seven days shall ye eat unleavened bread [*massot*, plural]; even the first day ye shall put away leaven [*se’or*] out of your houses: for whosoever eateth leavened bread [*hames*]...

Ex 12:19 Seven days shall there be no leaven [*se’or*] found in your houses: for whosoever eateth that which is leavened [*hames*], even that soul shall be cut off from the congregation of Israel.

Note three different words in 12:15

“15, 19 Two distinct words are used for “yeast” or “leaven”; ...se’or ... and hames...” (Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Exodus, Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Vol. 2, p. 375*).

Ex 12:20 Ye shall eat nothing leavened [*hames*]; in all your habitations shall ye eat unleavened bread [*massot*].

Lev 2:11 No grain offering that you present to the LORD may be made with leaven [*se’or*], for you are not to burn any leaven [*hames*] or honey as an offering made by fire to the LORD. (Berean Standard Bible).

Lev 2:11 No cereal offering that you offer to the Lord shall be made leavened, for you must not turn into smoke any leaven or any honey as a food gift to the Lord (Jacob Milgrom).

“*leavened ... leaven. hames ... se’or*. The difference between the two is that “*se’or*, leavens the dough and the leavened dough is called *hames*,” (*yahel ’or*). Thus *hames* is an elliptical term for bread that has been baked with a leavening agent, *se’or*, probably “sourdough,” a leaven consisting of yeast and lactic acid, which itself is not eaten (Kellermann 1980). Similarly, Akk. *emesu* ‘be sour’ and *emsu* ‘sour’ (adj) are used in connection with wine, vinegar, beer, fruit, or leavened bread, in other words, with foods that have fermented and, in the case of bread, to which leaven has been added. **Fermentation is equivalent to decay and corruption and for this reason is prohibited on the altar.** The objection may be posed: how is it, then, that wine, the quintessence of fermentation, is offered up on the altar? It should be noted that the wine libation is not burned on the altar hearth but poured out at the altar base (Sir 50:20-21) and thus does not violate the prohibition to “turn into smoke” any

fermented substance” (Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16. Anchor Bible*, p. 188).” [emphasis mine]

No Leaven for Seven Days

The simplicity of tents, houses, and furniture facilitated a straightforward and quick process of "de-leavening." However, this does not imply that a duration of one or two hours into the 15th day is acceptable. Rather, it indicates that all leaven must be removed immediately before the onset of the 15th day.

In Ex 12:19 it clearly states that during the seven-day festival, no leaven should be present in the houses. This implies that even on the first day, leaven must be removed from the homes. Logically, if leaven was to be removed on the first day, it would have to be done at sunset to mark the start of the day. However, completely ridding the house of leaven in that brief moment would be impractical. It's likely that most leaven was removed beforehand, with only a small amount discarded at the specific moment. Nevertheless, the emphasis is on the complete removal of leaven, which could not be accomplished in the fleeting first-day transition.

Upon entering the Promised Land, Israelites had to travel to the central place of worship for Passover and Unleavened Bread, which was the tabernacle and later in their history Jerusalem. Those living far away (not necessarily the entire family, but at least the husband or father) would have had to depart several days early to arrive in time, and thus would have already removed leaven from their homes before the journey. Therefore, they were unlikely to be removing leaven on the first festival day, as they were already away from home.

Historically we know that the Jewish people eventually interpreted the directive in verse 15 to mean leaven should be removed on the eve of the festival, the 14th day. This task was typically carried out towards the end of the 13th day and throughout the 14th. During temple times, individuals would have already removed leaven from their homes before traveling to Jerusalem, though they may have carried some leavened bread with them, discarding any remaining upon arrival.³

Fred Coulter adds to our understanding in *The Christian Passover*:

“When we examine God’s commands for observing the Feast of Unleavened Bread, we find that the Passover day was also one of “the unleaveneds.” These commands, as recorded in Exodus 12, are listed below:

1) By the beginning of the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, all leavened bread had to be put out of the houses (Ex. 12:15, 19). The King James translation of Verse 15 appears to command that leaven be put out on the first day: “...even the first day ye shall put away

³ It is said that Polycrates observed the Passover on the same day the Jews disposed of leaven, early on the 14th day - the final act of discarding leaven.

leaven....” The words “shall put away” also appear in the JPSA version, but this translation of the Hebrew text is incorrect. As Verse 19 shows, all leaven had to be removed before the beginning of the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Verse 15 is correctly translated “shall have put out leaven.”

2) No leaven was to be found in their houses at any time during the seven days of the Feast of Unleavened Bread (Ex. 12:19).

3) They were not to have any leavened bread within any of their borders, which included the entire country (Ex. 13:7).

4) Unleavened bread was to be eaten for the Passover as well as for the seven days of the Feast of Unleavened Bread (Ex. 12:8, 15).

A great deal of time and work was required to prepare every house and building in the entire country for the eight-day observance of the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Not only did all leavened bread have to be removed, but unleavened bread had to be prepared ahead of time.” (p. 229) [emphasis mine]

Other translations throw light on the true meaning of Ex 12:15:

“You shall eat unleavened bread seven days. Indeed, **on the first day you shall cause leaven to cease from your houses**. For anyone eating anything leavened, that soul shall be cut off from Israel, from the first day until the seventh day.” (*Green’s Literal Translation*) [emphasis mine]

“For seven days you must eat unleavened bread. **From the very first day you will have your houses clear of all leaven**. For whoever eats leavened bread from the first day to the seventh will be cut off^[d] from Israel.” (*The New American Bible (Revised Edition)*) [emphasis mine]

“Seven days ye eat unleavened things; only -- **in the first day ye cause leaven to cease out of your houses**; for any one eating anything fermented from the first day till the seventh day, even that person hath been cut off from Israel.” (*Young’s Literal Translation*) [emphasis mine]

“Shivat yamim shall ye eat matzot; **but the first day ye shall put away se’or (yeast, leaven) out of your batim (houses)**; for whosoever eateth chametz from the first day until the seventh day, that nefesh shall be cut off from Yisroel.” (*Jewish Orthodox Bible*) [emphasis mine]

The above translations seem better than others and demonstrate that there is no 100% consensus on translation, but at least the above translations represent a better sense of the Hebrew.

The Symbolism of Leaven

This is an associated issue that has raised its head again.

Does the leaven of Lev 23 throw light on that mentioned in Ex 12?

“You shall count seven full weeks from the day after the Sabbath, from the day that you brought the sheaf of the wave offering.

You shall count fifty days to the day after the seventh Sabbath. Then you shall present a grain offering of new grain to the LORD.”

You shall bring from your dwelling places two loaves of bread to be waved, made of two tenths of an ephah. They shall be of fine flour, and they shall be baked with leaven, as firstfruits to the LORD. (Lev 23:15-17, ESV)

The leaven referenced in this context is *distinct from* the leaven associated with the ULB, as it serves a different purpose.

This sort of occurrence where something can symbolise more than more thing, can be found throughout Scripture: for example, a door is used for an entry into a house for a wedding (Matt 25:10-11); or outreach to preach the Gospel (II Cor 2:12-13; Col 4:3-4); or symbolically entry into the temple (Rev 3:8); or door of knowledge (Luke 11:52) etc. They may be interrelated, but essentially, they are not the same, are they?

Similarly, a lion can represent Christ (Rev 5:5); Judah (Gen 49:10-11); Assyrians (Is 5:29; Nah 2:11-12); or the devil (I Pet 5:8-10) - dependent upon context.

Leaven can be associated with sin (I Cor 5:1-8), hypocrisy (Luke 12:1), false teaching (Matt 16:6-12) and thus pride and arrogance. Or it can be used of the Kingdom (Matt 13:33-37) which is currently unknown by the world, but all-pervading and it also transforms us.

Note:

“This complex picture teaches that God's acceptance of the leavened loaves is dependent on everything else that the priest holds up before Him. That is, God accepts a harvest of devotion and service to others (the grain offering) that contains differences and carnality (two loaves with leavening) only in conjunction with a substantial burnt offering, a peace offering, and especially, a sin offering. Then, and only then, God accepts the leavened offering, but even so, He does not allow it on His altar. He accepts it for use by the priest, but His portion must be without leavening.” (David Grabbe, “Pentecost's Two Leavened Loaves (Part Three),” C.G.G. Weekly Newsletter, 7 May 2021

www.cgg.org/index.cfm/library/weekly/id/1052/pentecosts-two-leavened-loaves-part-three.htm)⁴

⁴ For understanding the counting from ULB to Pentecost, refer to the paper *Pentecost and its Observance*, United Church of God, 1997.

Symbolism of sin and perversion:

The topic is thoroughly examined in I Cor 5. This means that despite one's intellectual understanding of the distinction between moral and immoral actions, and our acceptance of Jesus as the Messiah, we must still be mindful of our behavior.

“It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father's wife.

And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you.

For though absent in body, I am present in spirit; and as if present, I have already pronounced judgment on the one who did such a thing.

When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus,

you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.

Your boasting is not good. Do you not know **that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?**

Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed.

Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.” (I Cor 5-8, ESV)

This specific sin mentioned by Paul in I Cor 5 is condemned in the Old Testament, but Paul feels the need to address it again.

God needed to keep His people separate from Egyptian culture as explained in Lev 18. God had love for the Egyptians. However, their culture was detestable. God desired for His people to behave unlike the Egyptians with the puffed-up arrogance of the Pharaoh and the filthy lifestyles of the people in general.

This reminds one of Absalom, the traitor who tried to seize the Royal throne from David. He raped his father's concubines in public (II Sam 16:22)!

Recall also the issue with Reuban who had a relationship with Bilha, Jacob's wife and resultantly lost his firstborn status due to this sin (Gen 35:22).

All these qualify as sins of perversion.

Symbolism of hypocrisy and division:

Another sin that leaven represents is that of the false doctrines taught by the Pharisees and Sadducees (Matt 16:5-12) which produces hypocrisy – one of the worst form of sins.

“When the disciples reached the other side, they had forgotten to bring any bread.

Jesus said to them, “**Watch and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.**”

And they began discussing it among themselves, saying, “We brought no bread.”

But Jesus, aware of this, said, “O you of little faith, why are you discussing among yourselves the fact that you have no bread?

Do you not yet perceive? Do you not remember the five loaves for the five thousand, and how many baskets you gathered?

Or the seven loaves for the four thousand, and how many baskets you gathered? How is it that you fail to understand that I did not speak about bread? **Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.**”

Then they understood that he did not tell them to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.”

Refer to the **Appendix. Beware the Leaven of the Pharisees** for further information.

“For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God,

having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power. Avoid such people.

For among them are those who creep into households and capture weak women, burdened with sins and led astray by various passions, always learning and never able to arrive at a knowledge of the truth.” (1 Tim 3:2-7, ESV)

Hypocrisy – saying one thing and doing another; appearing to obey God and His Law on the surface; or to do the right thing in front of men (Matt 23:23-28).

It is a form of self-righteousness – thinking that they are so right yet are feigning righteousness. Their appearances and actions belie deeper problems – duplicity.

God is not given the glory for anything – they take that to themselves.

“You were running well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth?

This persuasion is not from him who calls you.

A little leaven leavens the whole lump.

I have confidence in the Lord that you will take no other view, and the one who is troubling you will bear the penalty, whoever he is.” (Gal 5:7-10)

Symbol of spiritual arrogance and oppression:

This seems to be revealed by the prophet Amos:

“Hear this word, you cows of Bashan, who are on the mountain of Samaria,

who oppress the poor, who crush the needy, who say to your husbands,
'Bring, that we may drink!'

The Lord GOD has sworn by his holiness that, behold, the days are coming upon you, then they shall take you away with hooks, even the last of you with fishhooks.

And you shall go out through the breaches, each one straight ahead; and you shall be cast out into Harmon," declares the LORD.

"Come to Bethel, and transgress; to Gilgal, and multiply transgression; bring your sacrifices every morning, your tithes every three days; **offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving of that which is leavened**, and proclaim freewill offerings, publish them; for so you love to do, O people of Israel!" declares the Lord GOD." (Amos 4:1-5)

These offerings, including the leaven component, are not accepted by God. There is the use of sarcasm here in condemning the practice of pretending to be righteous, yet simultaneously oppressing others. It is a false leaven.

The enduring significance of Amos 4:4-5 persists into the present day, acting as a perpetual tale against the pitfalls of religious insincerity. In a society where adherence to religious rituals may eclipse sincere spiritual connection, this scripture prompts us to reflect on the genuineness of their worship practices.

These individuals present an outward appearance of righteousness, but their actions do not align with their claims. They aim to convince others that they are teaching or behaving correctly, when in reality, their true motives are self-serving. Their underlying goal is to elevate themselves at the expense of putting down those around them.

Symbolism for the Kingdom:

Leaven can also symbolise something good.

In Matt 13:33 Christ states:

"He told them another parable. "The kingdom of heaven **is like leaven** that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened."" (cp Luke 13:21)

Of this verse, the commentaries are generally of the view that it follows on from the previous two verses and reveals a slow and steady growth of the Kingdom.⁵

⁵ David Guzik's commentary is of a different view, but his assessment seems unlikely:

"Another parable He spoke to them: "The kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal till it was all leavened."

a. **The kingdom of heaven is like leaven:** Jesus used a surprising picture here. Many, if not most, regard this as a beautiful picture of the kingdom of God working its way through the whole world. Yet **leaven** is consistently used as a picture of sin and corruption (especially in the Passover narrative of Exo 12:8; Exo 12:15-20). Again, both the content and the context point towards this being a description of corruption in the kingdom community.

i. "There would be a certain shock in hearing the Kingdom of God compared to leaven." (Barclay)

For example Adam Clark wrote:

“The kingdom of heaven is like unto leaven - On the nature and effects of leaven, see the note on Exo 12:8. As the property of leaven is to change, or assimilate to its own nature, the meal or dough with which it is mixed, so the property of the grace of Christ is to change the whole soul into its own likeness; and God intends that this principle should continue in the soul till all is leavened - till the whole bear the image of the heavenly, as it before bore the image of the earthly. **Both these parables are prophetic, and were intended to show, principally, how, from very small beginnings, the Gospel of Christ should pervade all the nations of the world, and fill them with righteousness and true holiness.**” [emphasis mine]

To iterate, leaven represents all types of sin - anything that separates us from God and keeps us from striving for the glory of God. Especially the very serious sin of hypocrisy.

This is because the prime purpose for man to become like God and to inherit eternal life in His Family. Salvation is the means to that goal which is the deliverance from sin and to commence an exodus, through the wilderness of this life, until we cross the spiritual River Jordan into the Kingdom. By being delivered from sin (spiritual leaven) on an ongoing basis, we can strive toward the glory of God - becoming like Him.

Concluding Remarks

All-in-all, when we put together the relevant verses concerning what leaven symbolises, they add up to various aspects or examples of sin. As such these days DO symbolise attempting to get ALL sin out of our lives and not merely vanity (the wrong sort of pride). In fact, all sin is a form of vanity

During these days, we eat unleavened bread - it is in our mouths, representing that we must “eat” of, consume and internalise His Word and His Laws which assists in coming out of sin. His commandments and Way must be adhered to.

Individuals may possess a certain level of sincerity and honesty without possessing goodness. They may find pleasure in indulging in sinful behavior; or even sin in ignorance. While this is happening, it is not possible to be truly spiritual and yet simultaneously take

b. **Leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal till it was all leavened:** This was an unusually large amount of meal. It was much more than any normal woman would prepare, and again suggests the idea of massive or unnatural size.

i. “*Three measures of meal* would be about 40 litres, which would make enough bread for a meal for 100 people, a remarkable baking for an ordinary *woman*.” (France)

c. **Hid in it:** The idea of hiding leaven in **three measures of meal** would have offended any observant Jew. This certainly isn’t a picture of the church gradually influencing the whole world for *good*. Rather, in the context of increasing opposition to His work, Jesus announced that His kingdom community would also be threatened by corruption and impurity.

i. G. Campbell Morgan wrote that the leaven represents “paganizing influences” brought into the church.”

pleasure in sin while also professing to follow the teachings of God. Wickedness cannot coexist in the presence of God. Also, if we associate ourselves with those who revel in sin, wrongdoing, immorality, dirty talk and language, we may find ourselves being influenced and brought down to their level.

God requires us to be free of leaven (symbolically) and to eschew all those items or things in our lives that lead one into sin.

Finally, engaging in the extensive cleaning required for the removal of leaven from our homes on the first day of ULB (an annual Sabbath), would contravene the prohibition against work outlined in Ex 12:16. Additionally, this practice would violate the directive against the presence of leaven in our residences as stated in verse 19, since some leaven would remain in our homes by the onset of the 15th at sunset if we postponed the de-leavening process until the holy day. Consequently, this may suggest a potential translation issue; or a figurative expression; or that the Hebrew can be translated *by* or *on*.

We can be certain that the Hebrew text should be interpreted as "by the first day" rather than "on the first day" in verse 15 of Ex 12.

Appendix. Beware the Leaven of the Pharisees

By George P. Ritter

Good News, March 1975, pp. 18-19

That was the warning Jesus Christ gave to His disciples in the twelfth chapter of Luke. Why did He single out the Pharisees for special attention? What was so bad about their "leaven"? And why devote so much space in the four Gospels to this relatively small religious group? Was all this written merely to satisfy the curiosity of New Testament history buffs? Or does it have important significance for today's Christian?

A story usually has a central figure and this one is no exception. Our particular man of the hour is a person of some distinction. For lack of a better name, we'll call him Joe Pharisee.

Now when it comes to religion, Joe is no ordinary run-of-the-mill religionist. And he's acutely aware of this fact. To make matters worse, Joe knows all the right ways to advertise his distinctive qualities.

Joe is not all that different from a lot of people in this respect. In fact, his behavior follows a time-honored tradition spoken of in the eighteenth chapter of Luke. Joe's prototype way back then was also a unique individual — at least in his own eyes. Notice his superspiritual prayer in verse 11: "God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican."

Today we'd probably suspect that Joe's spiritual ancestor was a wee bit pompous. But our friend Joe knows this too. So he's not about to make the same blatant mistake — at least outwardly. Joe goes about his trumpet-blowing in a much more subtle manner. He'd never stoop to making such an obvious comparison between himself and some miserable sinner. Instead, he uses a much more devious form of expression, such as: "Did you hear about old Bill Publican? Well, I think you ought to know he has a drinking problem."

Joe has learned an important lesson. Using this indirect method of condemning someone else, his own relative worth and importance grows accordingly... or at least so he thinks.

The Power of Ritual

But Joe Pharisee doesn't stop with spiritual one-upmanship. He has another device to reinforce his self-esteem. It's called Religious Ritual. Again in the eighteenth chapter of Luke, Joe's prototype is quoted as saying: "I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess" (verse 12). Undoubtedly he was very fastidious in his prayer habits as well.

Now none of these things are wrong in themselves, but the way Joe's prototype self-righteously parades them about is certainly suspect. Joe's predecessor allowed prayer, fasting and tithing to become ends in themselves. Instead of viewing them as a means to accomplish some desired end, they took on the aura of a talisman, a fetish, or a string of rosary beads.

But Joe fervently believes that this type of religious exercise will stand him in good stead with God. He approaches each of these activities with a certain amount of inner formalism and fear. Joe doesn't really trust in God, but rather in his self-imposed ritual.

This type of religious hypocrisy wouldn't be too much of a problem if it were confined to Joe Pharisee's private life. Unfortunately, the "leaven of the Pharisees" ([Luke 12:1](#)) spreads out a lot further.

Joe not only fools himself into thinking he's super-righteous, but a lot of other people as well. And sooner or later plain old Joe turns into Dr. Joseph Pharisee, or Joseph Pharisee, D. O. He's no longer the solitary figure that diligently did his daily laps around the beads. Now he has power and prestige — especially in the realm of spiritual matters.

Dr. Pharisee feels he has a special mission in life. He can now impose his form of worship on others

There's nothing really fancy about how he does this. **He simply insists that his statutes and judgments are binding on the rest of his congregation.** Dr. Pharisee might emphasize a number of rigorous physical requirements concerning what one should or should not do. Lest anyone take these injunctions too lightly, he quickly follows up with dire warnings about the consequences of failure to observe these rituals.

The result of this shock treatment is duly "rewarding." His people are so mesmerized, pulverized and traumatized that they are utterly stifled by "fear religion."

Appearance Is What Counts

Using this tried and true approach, Dr. Pharisee is gradually able to transform his flock into dyed-in-the-wool "gnat strainers" ([Matt. 23:24](#)). Their attention is drawn to such "weighty" matters as hair styles, dress codes, jewelry, how much one can drink, and so forth.

Religion becomes the art of putting one's best spiritual foot forward, of saying the right "spiritual" words that will be sure to rightly "edify" the listener. Everybody in Dr. Pharisee's church is out to prove his or her spirituality, lest they be branded a heretic, profligate, or spiritual ne'er-do-well.

In this uptight atmosphere, **Dr. Pharisee's people soon begin laboring under many spiritual upsets, traumas, personal doubts and fears. Subjectively and emotionally it becomes very difficult for them to accept the simple fact that God is their friend.** In their frantic desire to figuratively "tithe of their mint, cummin and anise" ([Matt. 23:23](#)), they have completely lost sight of the "weightier matters of the law."

Obviously this is a pretty good working formula for Dr. Pharisee to follow. It gives him a deep-seated feeling of Power — with a capital "P." Unfortunately, every now and then someone comes along and exposes this spiritual con game for what it is.

Jesus Christ was onto it from the beginning. Notice what He said about it in [Matthew 23:4](#): "For they [the scribes and Pharisees] 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."

Ecclesiastical Vanity

Christ also realized that these backbreaking spiritual burdens were severely limiting people's chances of entering God's Kingdom. That's why He took the Pharisees of His day to task, because they shut up the kingdom of heaven against men, for they neither went in themselves, nor allowed them that were entering to go in ([Matt. 23:13](#)).

However, all of this is usually lost on our Dr. Pharisee. He has more important things to worry about. If he is going to maintain his leadership over the flock, then he thinks he has to hobnob with the people that count; namely, other Dr. Pharisees. That's why those "uppermost rooms," "chief seats" and respectful salutations ([Matt. 23:6-7](#)) are like heady wine to him. It's all a part of the whitened-sepulchre, clean-cup-and-platter routine that Christ vividly described in [Matthew 23:25-27](#).

Yet for all his power and prestige, Dr. Pharisee seems strangely unable to find the time or energy to actually serve his fellowman. He mentally assumes his position of

leadership allows him to be an overlord as well. He is loathe to accept Jesus Christ's definition of leadership as found in Matthew 23:10-12: "Neither be ye called masters: for one is your Master, even Christ. But he that is greatest among you shall be your servant. And whosoever shall exalt himself shall be abased; and he that shall humble himself shall be exalted."

Humility and service is certainly not one of his long suits. When the chips are down or opportunities for such service arise, he usually bails out like a rat on a sinking ship. (Christ's parable of the Good Samaritan illustrates his modus operandi.)

And deep down, Dr. Pharisee may not realize he's not man enough to act like a human being around his flock, so he does the next best thing. He hides behind ceremony and ritual.

Occasionally he may grant some poor unfortunate the opportunity to ascend the steps of his ivory tower. But woe to anyone who would dare try to puncture his imposing facade. That is a big bad no-no in Dr. Pharisee's book.

Any communication that takes place between Dr. Joseph Pharisee and one of his flock has to be done on a teacher-to-pupil basis. None of that direct man-to-man stuff. Why, that would destroy his image! Any attempt at this type of dialogue is usually met with the automatic response: "Who are you to tell me that?" or "Who do you think you are?" (See John 9:34.)

Dr. Pharisee also does not like anyone to question his actions. Nicodemus ran into this type of roadblock. On one occasion he questioned the wisdom of a particular course of action the Sanhedrin had decided upon (John 7:50, 51). But he quickly got the royal putdown, and that ended any further discussion of the matter (verses 52-53).

For the same reason, Jesus Christ was constantly on the receiving end of the Pharisees' bitterness, venom and invective. Unlike Christ, they had no heart for the human race and couldn't stomach anyone who would upset their cherished beliefs and man-made doctrines. **Nor were they happy about the fact that Jesus Christ challenged their flock to think instead of continuing on with the endless ritual of "knee-jerk" religion.**

A Warning for Us

Because of the "leaven" in their hearts and minds, the Pharisees eventually conspired to have the Son of God put to death. Perhaps this one act more than all others ought to remind us of the lethal power of religious hypocrisy.

Let's make sure that we don't allow our minds and hearts to be filled with the "leaven of the Pharisees."

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When is Deleavening to be Undertaken?

Craig M. White

GPO BOX 864

Sydney

Australia 2001

www.friendsofsabbath.org

hrp11@iprimus.com.au