

ABOVE ALL THINGS

When Jesus walked physically on this earth, He taught his disciples many things. Since His time here was so brief, no doubt all that He taught them was extremely important. He didn't waste His time just babbling about trivial subjects. When He taught, He was expressing truths which were essential to His followers – the things which He had received from His Father (Jn 17:8).

With this in mind, let us look at one particular peril about which Jesus warned us. He warned us to beware of the leaven (or yeast) of the scribes and Pharisees.

Now when Jesus said this, He emphasized it in a special way. To Him this was an extremely important message for us to understand. In fact, it was so essential that He put it at the highest level. He established it as one of the most consequential things that He taught.

He said: “Above all things, beware of the yeast of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy” (Lk 12:1 FLNT). You see, He emphasized this teaching by saying: “Above all things.” This must be really important! It must be a kind of key to knowing how to obey and follow Jesus. Therefore, we will take some time here and investigate just what Jesus was teaching.

It is possible that many have read this verse repeatedly, but yet not really understood it. Just like Jesus' disciples who became confused and didn't grasp what Jesus was saying, we too can easily read and even re-read this passage without really receiving the revelation of what Jesus was trying to convey. However, since Jesus emphasized this teaching so clearly, it must be crucial for us to see what it is that He is teaching us.

To begin, we should understand that this word “hypocrisy” comes to us from the Greek word “HYPOKRITES” which was a person who acted in a Greek play. From this we can understand that, in essence, a hypocrite is an actor. It is someone who is pretending to be something he is not.

How do good actors do their jobs? Basically, they study the person whom they are going to imitate. They might read about that person. They may be able to meet the person face to face. Or, they might be able to watch some video of that person’s life.

While learning about him, they memorize his facial expressions. They study his mannerisms, the way he dresses, and how he acts and reacts in different situations. They learn to imitate the voice and the way of speaking of the one they are copying. They even try to enter into the psyche of the other person so they can think as they do.

Then they take what they have learned and apply it by imitating the person whom they have studied. They begin to act and speak as if they were that person. Those who are really talented at acting can produce a very convincing imitation of that other person.

Now then, how does this apply to our walk with Jesus? What is it about this sort of activity that it is so essential for us to avoid? Why would Jesus so forcefully warn us against this particular practice? Let us examine these questions together.

One source which believers have for how Christians should behave is their “church.” From those around them and perhaps from sermons from the pulpit, they learn things about how they should conduct their lives.

Perhaps they learn about how they should behave. Possibly they learn new “Christian” vocabulary. They may notice that other believers don’t swear as much. They might learn that drunkenness is bad, lust is not good and lying is against the teachings of the scriptures. These and

many other things new believers pick up from their environment and those around them.

Some believers are also studying their Bibles. From the scriptures, especially the New Testament, they read about Jesus. Through their reading, they can extract many truths about His character and personality. They also learn about how He taught us to live, expressing various virtues which Jesus set up as goals which we are expected to attain.

Perhaps they learn about the necessity of forgiving each other. They see that they must be generous with their time and money. They understand the importance of meekness and humility.

They are taught that they will suffer persecution and that they must remain faithful through all kinds of trials and tribulations. Finally, they realize that they must be loving to everyone in all sorts of situations.

Now what many Christians do when they begin to appreciate these virtues and see that God requires them to express them in their lives is to begin to put them into practice. They begin to train themselves to imitate what they see in the scriptures. They begin to act out what they have understood.

For many, their Christian lives are based on ever more learning. They learn how to worship, learn how to pray, learn how to cast out demons, learn how to study the Bible, learn how to evangelize and many other things.

Some spend their time continually studying the Bible or listening to others who do so, constantly refining their lives to conform to what they see there. They modify their hair styles and their dress. They try to change their speech habits. They try to treat others in a different way than they did before. They even attempt to control their inner selves, i.e. their temper, their desires, and even their thoughts. Perhaps those who

have a strong will and, therefore, are “good” at this can produce something that could be thought of as an imitation of Jesus.

Yet for far too many, their inner lives do not correspond to what they pretend to be in front of other Christians. Their actions are not a result of a transformation of their inner selves. Their life is not a spontaneous expression of Jesus’ nature but just an imitation of it. They are not really what they pretend to be. Instead, it is a behavior they have learned and practiced. It is a reproduction or simulation of how they think they should behave. It is just an act.

This unfortunate fact is revealed in their private lives. When they are alone, when no one else is watching, when they are just with their families or close friends, their actions are different. Their character in private doesn’t match their actions in public. This is true for far too many believers.

Furthermore, in times of stress, pain, or difficulty, what is expressed through them is often not the virtues they have been pretending to have in front of others. When extreme situations come along, it is often not the nature of Jesus which they express.

They become irritable, angry, offensive or selfish. They do and say things which hurt others. When the pain of some situation or temptation comes along, it overcomes their ability to control themselves and act “like a good Christian.” It is then that what is really in their hearts comes out. Often, it is not very pretty.

Many realize that their lives don’t really measure up to God’s standard. So they hide their sins from others and even try to hide them from themselves. Perhaps they excuse themselves for this double life by thinking that everyone else is just the same. After all, they reason, no one is really perfect.

So, even though they have things in their hearts which they don't like and of which they and God don't approve, they just put on a good face in front of Christians so they won't be rejected by them.

This type of Christianity is common. It is what many consider good and even right. In fact, this "acting like a Christian" is an almost universally accepted method among countless believers around the world. What could be more correct than trying to put into practice what we learn in the Bible? What could be better than "biblical" Christianity? Shouldn't we be trying to imagine what Jesus would do in each situation and then try to practice it?

Why would Jesus so forcefully and clearly warn us against such activity? It is because it is just an imitation, a piece of theater. It is just a human being trying to act like God.

Since this may startle or even offend some readers, let us take some time to investigate this together.

To begin, we must affirm here that Jesus really does expect His followers to express all of His many virtues. The few mentioned previously are only a small example of the innumerable characteristics of His holy life. Yes, He really does expect that our lives will be full of and actually express all His wonderful attributes. We cannot, indeed we must not, ever, simply excuse ourselves from such holiness and purity by imagining that it is not possible.

Unfortunately, many believers, after trying for many years to attain these virtues, have simply given up and changed their theology to excuse themselves from expecting any kind of visible godliness in their lives.

What then is God's plan? How can we attain to what we see in the Bible if it is not to imitate what we have read about? How can we be truly, visibly, actually righteous? What is the way if it is not to study the Bible

and try to practice what we read there? How can we avoid being merely an actor on the Christian stage?

THE FATHER'S LIFE

When Jesus came to earth, He was an expression of something very precious – the Father's life. We read: "In him was *the Father's* life and this life was the light of men" (Jn 1:4 FLNT). This word "life" here in Greek is ΖΩË, which is used almost exclusively in the New Testament to refer to the life of God.

Jesus was full of this supernatural life. Although He inherited a human life from Mary his mother, He chose to live by the superior life within Him, the life of His Father, God. He said: "As the living Father hath sent me, and I live by the Father..." (Jn 6:57 KJV).

You see, this was the secret of Jesus' holy life. He "lived by the Father." His countless virtues, His great power, His incredible holiness, His love and service to mankind was a result of the Divine life within Him. Jesus was not imitating His Father. He was not acting. He was just expressing the nature of the life which was inside of Him. He was allowing the life of God to live through Him.

God is holy. He is righteous, just, and good. He is not trying to be this way. It is not the result of any effort on His part. He just *is* this way. The word "righteous" is, in fact, merely the definition of His holy nature. All the virtues we read about in the Bible are really just an expression of the nature of God. Not only this, but since God is by nature completely holy, He cannot even be tempted by sin (Js 1:13). In fact, He abhors it. It has no attraction whatsoever for Him.

What sin really is, is anything which is contrary to the nature of God. It is He who made the universe and everything in it. He is the Supreme Being. He is the Master of all. Since He is the Creator, it is His character which defines what is right and what is wrong.

The “right” things are those which harmonize with who He is. The “wrong” things are anything which are in violation of, or contrary to, His nature.

Sin is what separates man from God. This is because when we practice things which are opposite to who God is, this causes a separation between us and Him. Think about this. If you know someone who is constantly acting in an offensive way, you begin to avoid them. It is unpleasant for you to be around them. They always grate on your nerves by doing or saying things which you don't like.

Therefore, you distance yourself from them to minimize or eliminate the disagreeable result of being near them. In a similar way, sin separates us from God. Furthermore, those living in sin have a tendency to avoid intimacy with God, since their conscience troubles them when they draw near to Him.

As a result of Adam and Eve's rebellion, mankind fell into sin. Their human nature was changed. It became sinful. The fall of Adam and Eve was disastrous, not only for them but also for us, their descendants. This alteration of their nature was profound and irreversible. They, and as a result, we, became sinful. We sin, not because we just slip up once in a while and err, but because it is in our very nature to do so.

Mankind likes to ignore or cover over this fact. Society tries very hard to project a kind of “righteousness” and goodness, sweeping the ugly side of the human nature under the rug by trying to live by a set of rules and putting those who violate them – the “real sinners” – in prison or even killing them. Or, they invent an easier, human kind of righteousness, such as not eating animals or not criticizing people who have certain unusual tendencies.

But the truth is that all of us are sinners. The most ugly, repugnant sin lies in the heart of every man and woman. While much of this putrid

expression of sin is kept in check by societal norms, our own consciences, laws, police, etc., it lives in every person.

As mentioned before, the “uglier” kinds of sins are often exposed when we are under extreme pressure. When everything is going well, we are often able to hide our inner impulses from ourselves and others. But when we find ourselves in situations of unbearable stress, pain, or fear they manifest themselves.

An example of this could be what happened in New Orleans, Louisiana after a recent hurricane. When the public utilities and other supplies were cut off, people found themselves without food and water. Suddenly they were starving and dying of thirst. In this extreme situation, neighbors who had known each other for years began to act in different ways than before.

Instead of greeting others and being friendly, they attacked each other and even killed each other to get what they felt they needed. The sin which was hidden deep in their hearts found its expression under extreme duress.

Now some might excuse this behavior by blaming the circumstances in which it occurred. However, let me be frank with you. Nothing can come out of you which was not already within your heart.

Circumstances do not make you what you are, they just expose what you are. They merely strip away the natural inhibitions and societal restraints which hide what we are from ourselves and from others.

The truth is that we are all capable of the most heinous sins. Murder, rape, hate, robbery and every kind of ugliness lives within every human heart. If you do not know this about yourself, it is because you have never been put into an extreme situation where what is inside of you has been exposed.

I am not insisting here that all human beings will sin in the same way, but only stating a truth: all of us are sinners and this sin is most frequently brought to the surface under duress.

Of course, pressure is not the only thing which brings out our sin. We all sin many times a day naturally and without any effort. These sins may not be so obvious or repugnant, but nonetheless, they are activities, words, and actions which violate the nature of our holy God. They are merely the automatic expression of our fallen human nature.

Perhaps we envy someone else. Maybe we wish we had what they have, be it good looks, money, fame, etc. It might be that we tell “little” lies to avoid punishment or get ahead financially or socially. Sometimes we hate other people who have mistreated us. We lose our temper. We hurt others. Perhaps we drink too much or practice sex outside of the marriage covenant which God ordained as the only condition in which sexual relations are approved by Him.

The list is endless, but such a “list” is merely a recitation of all human activities which violate God’s holy nature.

This tendency to sin, this fallen, ugly nature which we all possess is incurable. That’s right. There is no way to fix it. It is a fatal flaw that has been introduced right into our human life. It is called the “flesh” or the “fallen nature.”

Many Christians today recognize this deficiency. So, they go about trying to correct this sin tendency by training themselves to act like Jesus. They are studying, listening to messages and sermons, going to conferences and retreats – all with the idea that they can teach themselves to behave in a different way. They can learn to act, speak, and even think like a “good Christian.” Much, if not most, of Christian teaching today is involved in this effort to improve or correct the old nature.

Yet, my dear friends, this is what Jesus calls “hypocrisy.” It is merely acting. It is just theater. It is something which He instructed us to avoid. In fact, He said it was to be shunned “above all things.”

Dictionary.com defines “hypocrite” in this way:

From the Greek HYPOKRITES, a stage actor.

a person who pretends to have virtues, moral or religious beliefs, principles, etc., that he or she does not actually possess...

a person who feigns some desirable or publicly approved attitude, especially one whose private life, opinions, or statements belie his or her public statements.

WHAT THEN IS THE ANSWER?

If then, studying the Bible and training ourselves to be better is not the answer, what is? If this fallen nature is incurable, what can we do? How can we fulfill God’s requirements and actually become righteous?

The answer is that we must receive a brand new life. We need the life of God. Just as Jesus expressed the Father’s righteousness by allowing the Father to live in Him and through Him, we too must be filled with a life that is actually righteous. Our own life does not and, in fact, can never meet this standard.

Here we find some good news! Through the death of Jesus, the way has been opened up for us, mere human beings, to receive the life of God. He has made the Father’s holy life available to mankind.

Jesus said: “I have come that they may have *the Father’s* life and have it in abundance” (Jn 10:10 FLNT). God has accepted Jesus’ sacrifice – His death in our place as an offering – and opened up the way for us to receive His life.

When we believe, repent of our previous way of living and open up our being to Him, the life of God is born inside of us. Some people call this being “born again,” yet it is not our old life being born a second time, but the life of Another which is generated by the Holy Spirit in our human spirit. Jesus called it, “being born from above.”

Jesus taught us this in John 3:5-7 where we read: “Truly, truly I say to you, unless someone is born through water [the physical birth] and the Spirit [the new spiritual birth], he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born naturally is the physical body, and that which is born of the Spirit is *our human* spirit. Don’t be surprised that I said to you, you must be born from above” (FLNT).

How wonderful! We can actually experience the birth of another life in our human spirit. Something entirely new can be generated there. A life “from above,” a life which is holy and righteous by nature, can be born into us. Now there is the possibility of living a truly holy life instead of trying to produce an imitation. Now we don’t need to try to act like Jesus. Instead, His very own life can live in us and through us. This is an essential part of the gospel message.

This truth is clarified for us in 2 Corinthians 5:17 where we read: “...when anyone is in the Anointed One, there is a new creation *inside of him*. The original {natural} *man* has been superseded {passed by, Gk}, look, a completely new *being* has been generated [the new spiritual man]” (FLNT). Here then is the secret of genuine New Testament Christianity. When we allow the life of God to be our source – when our being is controlled and animated by this new life – then we express its nature.

When this new life lives in us, it naturally and spontaneously expresses its own nature through us. We can actually have a truly holy life by allowing Jesus to live through us. Holiness cannot be attained by the old life and nature, instead it is the natural expression of the life of God.

Yet when this new life is born in us, it is born as all other creatures are born: an infant. Just as Jesus was born in a manger and then grew up, so the life of God does not enter into us already mature. The Bible specifically uses the word “born” to emphasize that it is a very young, immature life in the beginning.

Although all the characteristics and attributes of God are in this new life, it is still born infantile and immature. Just as the seed of a huge tree contains all the life and nature of that tree in a very small, compact form, so the new life of God which is born inside of us contains all that God’s life is.

All true believers receive this new life from God. Yet many, instead of simply focusing upon nurturing this life so that it will grow, begin working on their old life and nature to try to make it better. This error is understandable. Once they have met Jesus and glimpsed the beauty and holiness of His nature, they want to be like Him.

Furthermore, they read in the New Testament that they must become like Him. So, they begin the effort of trying to restrain, retrain, and reform their old life. As we have seen, this effort is doomed to failure. It is nothing which can achieve the goal or please God. It ends up just being hypocrisy.

Even though all true believers have received God’s life, it is not always God’s nature which they express. Very many people who call themselves Christians, don’t have lives which reflect the nature of God. They may have certain religious experiences, such as times of worship or prayer or special times when they felt an “anointing,” but their everyday lives seem to be full of themselves and not the Divine.

How can we understand this? Naturally, since this new life within us is immature initially, our old life and nature often seem to prevail. Since our old life is more developed and mature, since we have such long experience of being guided by it, this human life is what frequently

expresses itself through us instead of Jesus'. This seems to be especially true in times of temptation or stress.

This explains why so many Christians are not holy. The divine life within them is undeveloped and still immature and, consequently, their natural life is predominant.

THE FIRST ANSWER

What then can we do? There are two sides to the answer to this dilemma. The first is that the new life within us must grow up. It must mature. It must grow to the point that it dominates and predominates within us. In order to grow, all life needs food. This is the key. This new spiritual life must have spiritual food.

Many believers err here. They try to help this spiritual life grow through learning, through accumulating information about God. They study the Bible. They perhaps go to seminary. They read many Christian authors. They attend meetings and seminars. They learn and learn.

But accumulating knowledge and information does nothing to feed the spiritual life. In fact, it can damage it or even kill it! Even the words of the New Testament can be used in a damaging way. We read: "But our competence is from God who also made us qualified dispensers of a new covenant – not of the letter, but of the Spirit – for the letter of *the scriptures* kills but the Spirit imparts *the life of God*" [ZOE] (2 Cor 3:5,6 FLNT).

On the other hand, there is something which does cause this new life to grow. It is called food. This is logical. All life needs nutrition to grow. There are no exceptions. So what is the spiritual food which will nurture this new life? Jesus explains that we must make Him our food. We must eat His flesh and drink His blood. This is the food which nourishes God's life.

We read: "Jesus then said to them, 'Truly, truly I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you cannot have *God's* life in yourselves. He who feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has *the Father's* eternal life and I will raise him up on the last day. For my flesh is the true meat and my blood is the true drink. He who feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me and I in him' " (Jn 6:53-56).

This spiritual eating and drinking of Jesus is not something physical. It is also not something we do through a religious ritual during a meeting of the church. It is accomplished through intimate communion with Him. When we open our hearts to Him and have times of intimate, spiritual fellowship with Him, we are eating and drinking of Him.

These "meals" can take different forms. We can feed on Jesus in the scriptures. When we open this book, we should not approach it as a source of information. We should not go there to "learn" something. Instead, when we open its pages, we should open our spirit to God to have communion with Him.

In the pages of the Bible, God is revealed. When we open our spirit to Him, He will reveal Himself to us there. As we meditate on what He is revealing of Himself, our spiritual man is nourished. It is good to read and re-read the passages which He is illuminating. We can ruminate on them, "chewing" and re-chewing what He is speaking to us. This is an important form of spiritual eating.

We can also drink of His Spirit. Times of worship are good for this experience. As we open our spirit to His Spirit during times (individual or corporate) of true spiritual worship we can drink deeply of Jesus. The more we can drink, the better.

I'm not talking here about merely emotional experiences of shouting, jiggling, jumping, clapping, etc. What is necessary here is true, intimate

contact with a living God. During these times, we can drink of all that He is.

Times of prayer can also be times of intimate communion with Jesus during which we can eat and drink of Him. Such experiences nourish our spiritual man. They cause it to grow.

Of course, maturity is not achieved overnight. All life requires time to mature. Therefore, we should seek to have daily communion with our Lord so that the precious life which He put within us can arrive at its full capacity. The Father's life within us must grow up so that its holy nature can be expressed.

THE DIVINE LIFE EXPRESSES THE DIVINE NATURE

Here is a wonderful spiritual truth. The divine life always expresses the divine nature. It expresses true righteousness. Since it is in its essence a holy and sinless life, it can do nothing else. It is an inalterable truth that every life always expresses its own nature. God's life never sins. In fact, it is incapable of sinning. It is always holy. Therefore, we desperately need to be full of and dominated by His life.

We read: "That which is begotten of God [i.e. the new spiritual man] does not sin because *it is* his {God's supernatural} seed *that* has come to live in him. In fact, he [the new spiritual man] cannot sin because it is something which is begotten by God *who is perfectly righteous*" (1 Jn 3:9 FLNT).

Now this is really good news! We can receive a sinless life and then allow it to grow up inside of us. We can have the life of the God of the universe controlling all of our living. We can have Him governing our thoughts, feelings, desires, decisions, and actions. Just as Jesus "lived by the Father" so we too can be filled with and live by the Father too. In this way, we will live a life which expresses true holiness of character.

Now this holiness is “not our own” (Philip 3:9). It doesn’t originate with ourselves. Instead, it is a gift of God. Nevertheless, it is real. It is seen in and through us. It has a visible expression to others. It is not something which only exists in the thoughts of God.

This is good news, but this good news gets even better. We too can overcome temptation. How is this possible? Our God cannot be tempted by sin. Sin doesn’t interest Him. He abhors it. We read: “...for God is incapable of being tempted with evil and he himself tempts no one (Js 1:13 FLNT). Therefore, the more we are filled with and governed by this life, the less we find sin interesting, the less we suffer temptation.

This is truly a victorious life! It is this life which delivers us from self and sin. It is this ZOE life which is saving us from all that we are as natural, fallen human beings. This life, growing up in and living through us is how we are delivered from all that is negative and evil in our nature.

This truth is illustrated for us in Romans 5, verse 10 where we read: “For if, while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more, having been reconciled, we will be being saved by his life *growing up in us*” (FLNT).

Some imagine that after we are “born again” we are going back to Eden. That is to say we will revert to the original state of Adam and Eve before their fall. But this is not the case. We are actually called to something much, much holier and higher than what Adam and Eve had. Yes, they were sinless, but they were not holy. They did not have the same nature as God. They did not have His eternal life, they only had a human, everlasting variety.

We understand this because they fell. They were tempted and succumbed. On the other hand, as we have seen, God cannot be tempted. But Adam and Eve were. The life they had was merely

innocent or sinless, but not truly holy and righteous like God. Therefore, it failed the test.

Interestingly, God's life was offered to them in the Garden of Eden in the form of fruit from a tree, the tree of life, but they never ate of it. They never availed themselves of all that God offered them in this tree. Therefore, they didn't resist sin. Later, after they sinned, access to this fruit was denied them by an angel and a flaming sword (Gen 3:24).

THE SECOND ANSWER

We have studied the "first answer" of how to be free from sin, which was to receive and then be filled and animated by the life of God. The second answer is, perhaps, a little less agreeable. However, when we see how evil and polluted our own natural life is, we will understand the necessity of it. The second answer then, is that our own natural soul life must be killed. It must die.

Why is this necessary? It is because as long as the old, natural life lives, it will sin. It will invariably express its own nature. This too is an inalterable principle. Although we may try to subdue its evil tendencies, although we may try very hard to be better and not sin, the true nature of the old life will sooner or later come out.

No amount of reeducation, restraint, retraining, or reform will get to the root of the problem. Such efforts only serve to hide our true nature. They end up being just acting – our own personal theater. This is what Jesus called "hypocrisy."

The only answer to this problem is the death of the life which sins. We read: "For he that is dead is freed from sin" (Rm 6:7 KJV). As long as the natural soul life is alive it will sin. Only the dead no longer sin.

Perhaps I could tell a story here to illustrate this truth. Many years ago, I had a friend who hunted raccoons to sell their fur and support his

family. He hunted them at night with the aid of dogs who would chase them until they ran up a tree where he then found them.

To help him have success, he bought an expensive hunting dog. Yet when he took the dog out at night, it would only chase deer. This was a huge problem for him. Not only did he not get raccoons, he would lose his dog, since it would chase the deer for miles. The next day, he would have to spend a lot of time trying to find this dog.

In his attempts to cure his dog of this tendency, he tried everything. For example, he even put the dog in a sack scented with deer musk and then kicked and beat the sack. Yet, nothing worked. That dog loved to chase deer.

Then one day reading a hunting magazine he came across an advertisement. It read something like this: "Total cure for dogs chasing deer. Money back guarantee if not satisfied. Price \$12." My friend was doubtful but desperate. He sent off his money and a short time later received a small package in the mail. He eagerly opened the package and found inside two .22 caliber bullets with instructions: "Shoot the dog in the head twice. He'll never chase another deer." In the same way, dead people don't sin anymore.

Some may perhaps be offended with the thought of their needing to die. Yet, we can only be offended if we do not yet see the degenerate side of our human nature. If we have not yet perceived how ugly our sin is and how desperately we need to be saved from it, then we might be resistant to the idea of dying.

However, when by the mercy of God and through His enlightening us, we see how evil our tendencies are, then being free of them through death becomes a delight. We will actually rejoice to know that we can be delivered from what we are and what we do.

This wonderful deliverance also comes to us through Jesus Christ. When He died on the cross, in some supernatural way, we too died with

Him. Through the Holy Spirit, this death can become real to us today. It can be applied to our old life with its fallen nature. We, through Jesus, can actually experience a real death to ourselves. We can and, in fact, should experience this every day.

Of course, God doesn't bless us with this experience unless we are willing. He would never force this upon us. Unless and until we see our sinfulness and hate what we see, we will continue to have it. We cannot be delivered from it. But once we see our sin in the light of God and repent, then our Lord will begin to actually apply His death on the cross to our old man.

After this liberating death comes resurrection. Not only can we experience the death of Jesus, we can experience His resurrection too. In fact this is a necessity. In order to walk "...in *the newness of the Father's life*" (Rm 6:4) we must first pass through death.

No living person has ever been resurrected. Only the dead have the possibility of having this experience. Therefore, the more we allow God to apply the death of Jesus to our old life and nature, the more we will experience of His new life and nature in resurrection. What a blessed deliverance!

We have already mentioned that repentance is part of this process. How then does this work? We read in 1 John 1:9, "When we agree *with God's judgment* concerning our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all immorality of character [of both heart and actions]" (FLNT).

To "agree with God's judgment," is translated in many Bible versions "confess." The Greek word means "to speak together." This means that we are speaking the same thing as God is speaking. We are agreeing with His viewpoint concerning our sin and His judgment upon it.

We are agreeing that our old nature is evil and that people (specifically us) who practice sinful things are worthy of death. This is what it

means to repent. Anything less than this is just an admission of guilt but not a willingness to die to what we have done and what we are.

When we repent or “agree with God” about our sinful actions, we read that He is then faithful and just to do two things. First, He will forgive us. Then He will work in our lives, applying the death and resurrection of Christ, to cleanse us from these things.

What a wonderful salvation Jesus has provided for us so that we can be free from sin. Not only can we be forgiven, but through the operation of the cross in our lives and the resurrection which comes afterward, we can be delivered from our sinful life and nature. Hallelujah!

ABOVE ALL THINGS, BEWARE

With this foundational understanding of what God’s true plan is, we can now go on to discuss the problem of yeast or “leaven.” It should become apparent from our study why Jesus is so concerned that we avoid this leaven, this hypocritical imitation of Himself, “above all things.”

The last thing God would want from us is an imitation, something our flesh could produce, trying to act and speak like Him. He is looking for something genuine, something that is real in our lives. His plan is to actually change us into His image. He has no interest in our pretending to be something we are really not.

Someday we will stand before Him. Everything we have done, said and thought as well as everything we are will be revealed. All will be brought into the light. If there is anything in us which is not real, if there is any pretense, anything false, anything which is just an act on our part, it will stand out with the utmost clarity to our shame. Jesus explains this in His teaching about leaven. We read: “For there is nothing covered up that will not be exposed, or hidden that will not be revealed” (Lk 12:2 FLNT). It’s all going to come out. It’s all going to be exposed before the watching universe.

Therefore, you don't want to be caught living something which is really just a lie. You don't want to be found with a life which has been merely theater and not the real thing. Our Christianity must be an expression of Christ and not an imitation of Christ.

This genuine expression can only be obtained through a life of total submission to Jesus. It is gained by Him working in our lives to transform us into His glorious image. It is through His grace that He is filling us with His holy life and applying His death and resurrection to our old, natural man with its sinful nature.

On the other hand, any imitation of this reality is done by the flesh. It is just the efforts of the human being to change itself. It is fueled by a desire to appear better than we are in front of others and energized by a strong will with which we try to control ourselves and act better than we really are inside.

CHRISTIAN MEETINGS

Such hypocrisy is even common in Christian meetings. Far too often, such meetings are just theater. People dress up, putting on their best clothes so that they will look good in front of others. They also put on their best faces, so that others won't see their sorrow, suffering or sin.

Many times these meetings are also full of showmanship of various kinds. There might be a band playing with spotlights and other decorations. There is, almost inevitably, a stage of some sort.

Although most of those in the audience may be singing along, it is sad but true that not all are really worshipping. Even the music may be merely soulful and not something inspired by God or led by the Holy Spirit. This then is just acting. It's just a show.

Sometimes there are dance teams with costumes and flags or streamers. Other groups have mime teams and even clowns. Such times may provide more entertainment than genuine ministry of Jesus Christ. If all

this is not truly an expression of Jesus' life inside of us, it is just hypocrisy.

Furthermore, today's preaching is frequently theater. The preacher may have on his special, expensive suit. The oratory might become quite an act, with the preacher using voice modulation, gestures, and other devices to capture and hold the attention of the audience. All of this can appear quite holy, but in some cases, even those preaching are not right with God and have secret sins in their lives.

Jesus often preached sitting down, in a boat or on a rock. He used no theatrical techniques to attract and hold audiences. He humbly ministered what He had received from the Father to others. He never sought fame or fortune. He never acted like He was something special, even though He really was. How does this compare with what we are doing today?

If our meetings together are not an expression of the life of God, it is merely acting. If we are not entering into the Holy Spirit, if we are not truly having communion with God, it is just a human substitute for what the Lord is really after. Such meetings do little or nothing to genuinely minister to those in the congregation.

Not only can meetings which are merely theater not edify anyone, they can actually serve to limit true spiritual progress. Through such hypocritical displays of "Christianity" many are deceived into thinking that they are right with God.

They are going through the motions. They are doing what is expected of them – what everyone else is doing. They are being taught, both through the teaching and by example, that this is what God expects of them too.

However, God can never be satisfied with a substitute. He doesn't care for our acting. He is looking for those who will worship Him in Spirit and in truth (Jn 4:24). This word "truth" means that what we are doing

is genuine. It is real. It is the result of a real transformation of our inner being. It is His life which is being expressed and not a substitute.

THE TEACHING OF THE PHARISEES

Jesus' warning about leaven or yeast is also found in Matthew. We have examined the Luke passage, but in Matthew we find a little more light.

We read: "And Jesus said to them, 'Be on your guard and beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees.' So they reasoned among themselves saying, 'We didn't bring any bread' ... 'How is it that you do not understand that I did not speak to you concerning bread? But beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees.' Then they understood that he did not tell them to beware of the yeast of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees" (Mt 16:6,7,11,12 FLNT).

Here we see that this yeast, this corrupting element, can also be some kind of "teaching." What then does this mean? It is clear that Jesus labeled the Pharisees and Sadducees "hypocrites." Theirs was a life of theater. They worked constantly, perfecting their acting skills to appear righteous to others.

Jesus says: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, *you* hypocrites. For you carefully tithe from the mint, dill, and cumin *you receive*, but you have ignored the more essential matters of the law: justice, mercy, and faith. These you should have practiced while not neglecting the others. You blind guides. You strain out the gnat and swallow the camel.

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, *you* hypocrites For you clean the outside of the cup and the dish, but inside you are full of *greedy* grasping for money and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisees, clean up first the inside of the cup and the dish so that the outside may become clean also.

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, *you* hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which outwardly appear beautiful, but inwardly

are full of dead men's bones and of all kinds of uncleanness. In the same way, you also appear *superficially* righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and sin" (Mt 23:23-28 FLNT).

Not only were the scribes and Pharisees acting in their own personal theaters where the world around them was the audience, they were teaching others to act this way too. They were passing on to others the secrets of deceiving others to think that they were righteous, when in fact, they were not.

They were "ministering" a whole set of rules and regulations to follow. They were teaching people to follow the law. They were establishing principles by which they should live their lives so that they too could appear righteous.

Does this sound like something which is happening in the church today? How much of today's Christianity is involved in just such activity? So many are teaching others how to behave. They teach principles, rules and norms which they think they and others should follow.

This might involve dress codes, whether or not a Christian should be participating in certain sports, if birth control is allowed by God, how to behave in your marriage and your family, how church meetings should be conducted, and many, many other such things.

Now, let's be honest. Many of the things these people teach are right and good. They have a biblical basis. They are actions defined by God and revealed in the scriptures as being in line with His holy nature. So then, what is wrong with this?

Why then does Jesus so forcefully condemn it? What could be wrong with such biblical things?

Jesus condemns it because these teachers are encouraging others to attain these high standards through the efforts of the flesh. They are

teaching others to act in ways which imitate God, but not helping them really enter into God to become free from themselves.

So much of what is taught today fits into this category. It is merely instructing us how to reform the old nature to make it look better. This is merely acting. It is not something which can please God. Furthermore, it is not eternal. It won't stand the test on judgment day.

Such instruction is appealing to the flesh. Not only does it generate an appearance of godliness which we hope others will admire, but it also avoids the cross. It avoids death. Our flesh is very sneaky. It would much rather deny itself some little pleasures than die. It would much prefer conforming itself to some religious patterns, even if they require a little self-sacrifice, than to actually cease to exist.

Many do not realize that the flesh can be very religious. But think about it. There are many, many religions in this world. Most of them teach some form of self-denial, some of them a very severe self-denial. In fact, the really dedicated followers of some of these religions are much, much more severe in their self-denial than many Christians.

But these other religions do nothing to actually transform us into the image of Jesus. Neither does a Christianity which is based on following rules, regulations and norms. You see, the flesh of man can be very religious and even convincingly religious. But this is not a genuine expression of Christ. It is not what our God is seeking. This is why many Christians' lives are mere theater and do not reflect what is really going on inside of them.

God's plan is to give us His life. Then He wants this life to grow up inside of us. The more it matures, the more we express His nature. This is not a result of self-effort. It is not an imitation of anything. It does not require "training" and teaching about how to behave. Instead, it is an automatic and spontaneous expression of Jesus Christ.

Our righteousness cannot be something which we do or even can do. Paul condemns the Jews for this kind of activity. He writes: "For I testify concerning them that they have a zeal for God, but not according to a complete understanding. For being ignorant of God's righteousness and seeking to establish their own righteousness, they do not submit themselves to the righteousness of God" (Rm 10:2,3 FLNT).

The "righteousness of God" is just that. It is His and His alone. It is when He is living in us and when He is expressing Himself through us, that we exhibit a true righteousness which pleases Him. Anything other than this is just hypocrisy. It is something to be avoided "above all things."

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