

PERILS TO CHRISTIAN USEFULNESS

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Scripture: Matt. 16:6

It is a great joy to see people surrender to do the will of Christ. Our Saviour calls attention, however, to the perils which confront us in Christian usefulness. He called the attention of his disciples sharply to these perils soon after he had fed the 5,000 people and the multitudes were marveling at this great demonstration of power.

It was in crossing the lake that Jesus said, "Take heed and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees." (Matt. 16:6). In Mark 8:15 it is recorded Jesus said, "Take heed, beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod."

It is in calling attention to the leaven of the Pharisees, Sadducees and Herod that the perils of Christian usefulness are graphically described.

In speaking of the leaven of the Pharisees, Jesus calls attention to the danger of an unrepentant spirit.

When John the Baptist was preaching, the Pharisees came out to hear him and John said, "Ye offspring of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bring forth therefore fruit worthy of repentance and think not to say within yourselves, we have Abraham to our father: for I say unto you that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham." (Matt. 3:7-9).

REPEATED REPENTANCE

We must beware of thinking that all the repentance we do is at the beginning of the Christian life. To be sure we come into salvation by means of repentance and faith, but as we go through our Christian lives we repeatedly stumble and fall. Christian growth is hindered if we harbor unconfessed sin in our hearts. We must repent of our sins. Jesus told us, "If any man would come after me, let him deny

himself, and take up his cross daily and follow me." (Luke 9:23)

The Pharisees also gave evidence of much pride of heart. They said, "We have Abraham to our father."

Jesus told of a Pharisee who went up to the temple to pray and he prayed thus with himself, "God, I thank thee, that I am not as the rest of men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this Publican." (Luke 19:11)

Pride of heart that leads men to seek the glory of their fellows can be one of the most damaging and destructive of all perils to Christian usefulness. Jesus said, "How can ye believe, who receive glory one of another, and the glory that cometh from the only God ye seek not?" (John 5:44)

Jesus pointed out the tendency of the Pharisees to seek glory of men as one of their outstanding characteristics. He said, "All their works they do to be seen of men, for they make broad their phylacteries, and enlarge the borders of their garments, and love the chief place at feasts, and the chief seats in the synagogues, and the salutations in the market-places, and to be called of men rabbi." (Matt. 23:5-7)

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus clearly said, "Take heed that ye do not your righteousness before men, to be seen of them; else ye have no reward with your Father who is in heaven." (Matt. 6:1). In giving alms or in praying or in fasting, we are not to seek the attention of men but do whatever our hearts find to do as unto God.

Another outstanding feature of the Pharisee was his tendency toward piety instead of piety. They appeared to be filled with religious fervor but without reality. In the 23rd chapter of Matthew, Jesus told how they would say, "Whosoever

shall swear by the altar, it is nothing; but whosoever shall swear by the gift that is upon the altar, he is a debtor." (Matt. 23:18) Jesus said that the Pharisee would tithe mint, anise, cummin, but leave undone the weightier matters of the law such as justice, mercy and faith.

Jesus said that they were like whited sepulchers which appeared white and beautiful to men on the outside but within were full of dead men's bones. He described the Pharisees as being those who say and do not.

SKEPTICAL ATTITUDES

Our Lord also pointed out perils to Christian usefulness represented by the leaven of the Sadducees. Skepticism was one of their outstanding features. They said there is no resurrection. They had a skeptical attitude with a tendency to look on the temporal rather than on the spiritual.

They were characterized by ambition for power and authority. The high priests and those who were with him belonged to the party of the Sadducees. They opposed Christ largely because of their fear that his spiritual emphases would threaten the power which those men possessed.

The Sadducees were characterized by envy and jealousy. Even Pilate recognized that for envy Jesus had been delivered up. (Matt. 27-18) After the Apostles were filled with power and mighty things were done the Sadducees were filled with envy and jealousy as they saw the crowds thronging to these servants of Jesus Christ. It was this envy and jealousy which motivated the Sadducees to launch persecution, as recorded in Acts 5:18 in which the Apostles were placed in prison but were delivered by an angel of the Lord at night who opened the doors and set them free.

The attitudes of the Sadducees become serious pitfalls for Christian workers. It is so easy for one without being aware of it to fall into envious, jealous attitudes and become ambitious for place, power and glory. If at the heart of our zeal

there lies a desire for self-glory, we are wrong in our relationship to God.

Jesus also warned against the leaven of Herod. The court of Herod was filled with immorality and sensuality. The Herodians represented conformity to the world. They represented sacrificing standards and principles for prevailing trends of popular opinion. They considered virtue to be only relative and not a matter of great consequence.

PERIL TO USEFULNESS

The Herodians represented a tendency to compromise, to lower moral standards. They seemed to feel that an effort to gain temporal advantage even at the price of purity of life and uprightness of character was quite in order.

In our Christian living we are to remember that Jesus said, "Ye are the light of the world; a city set on a hill cannot be hid." (Matt. 5:14) Any tendency to compromise our standards; any tendency to conform to the prevailing tone of the world is a peril to Christian usefulness.

There are those who cry out, "What am I to do? I already am stained by these sins. My service already is hindered and limited by these perils which have been described."

To everyone of us there needs to come an experience of rededication in which we face our own shortcomings and yield ourselves afresh to God. We need to look up to our Lord and confess wherein we have failed Him. Many are the duties neglected. Many are the sins of the spirit. Many are the failures into which we have fallen. Let us even now look up to our Lord and Saviour and say unto him, "Lord, Jesus, I confess my sin unto thee. I ask thee to cleanse my heart. I ask thee for strength and grace that I may live for the Lord, and that my life may be filled with the power of the Holy Spirit that I might be a blessing in this world in which I live."

Remember, regardless of what perils there are before you, "This is the victory that overcometh the world even our faith." (I John 5:4).