“BEWARE OF ... THE LEAVEN OF HEROD”

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INTRODUCTION

Jesus warned His disciples relative to “the leaven of the Pharisees, and of the leaven of Herod” (Mk. 8:15). The disciples were confused and reasoned in their hearts regarding the matter. When they were confused as the result of a similar statement about the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees, Jesus knew they were confused then, too. On that occasion, He mildly rebuked them saying, “O ye of little faith” (Mt. 16:8), but then went on to explain that He was speaking concerning the doctrine of the Pharisees and Sadducees, not leaven of bread. Likewise, in Mark 8:15, Jesus was speaking of the doctrine of Herod and/or of the Herodians. There were many aspects of this doctrine.

The leaven of Herod was a corrupting political influence. It corrupted with worldliness which included; bad politics, adultery, incest, hypocrisy, lasciviousness and murder.

It does not matter how small the quantity of leaven may be, it will permeate the entire bowl of dough. The same is true with false doctrine. A small quantity will envelope the whole person.

The things regarding the doctrine of the Herodians are prevalent today. Thus, Christ’s warning is applicable today.

BACKGROUND OF THE HERODIANS

The background of the Herodians was not Jewish. Idumaens were the descendents of Esau. Their country was conquered by John Hyrcanus. He forced the people to be circumcised. Julius Caesar appointed Antipater, the governor of Idumaea, to be the procurator of
Judaea, Samaria and Galilee. His position allowed him the opportunity to use his influence to place his son, Herod the Great, on the throne.

The Herodians were not a religious sect, but rather a political party. They were the followers and promoters of the dynasty of the Herods. They could not reconcile their ideas with the Lord’s teaching concerning the kingdom of God. The Lord’s influence with the people seemed to be antagonistic toward what they wanted.

The Herodians joined forces with the Pharisees and Sadducees in their efforts to do away with Jesus. For example, they tried to entrap Him (Mt. 22:15; Mk. 12:13). They plotted with the sect of the Pharisees to destroy Christ (Mk. 3:6).

**UNIQUE DOCTRINES ESPoused BY THE HERODIANS**

Religion was adopted by the Herodians as a matter of policy. Their general policy centered in a design to establish a powerful independent kingdom.

The Herodians were unique because of their irreligious, sensual and corrupt living. Yet, they joined forces with the Pharisees and Sadducees in opposing Christ. One can see the sensual ways of the Herodians by examining the lives of the Herods. Their doctrines were as dangerous as that of the Sadducees and Pharisees. Their opposition to Jesus was not based on religion but on their fear that in becoming King of the Jews, Jesus would remove Herod from power.

Their doctrine was unique to that of the Pharisees and Sadducees. The Pharisees claimed to be followers of the Law of Moses, but were corrupt in their doctrine and practice. They did not follow the Law of Moses, but the traditions of their forefathers. The Sadducees denied some of the essential doctrines of Christianity. Without the doctrines denied by them, Christianity would not exist. The Herodians were irreligious, sensual and they lived corrupt lives. The Herodians were referred to as “secularists.” This can be seen in their desire to grow a powerful independent kingdom.

**HERODIAN DOCTRINES JESUS IS WARNING AGAINST**

The “leaven of Herod” is referred to by some as bad politics and by others as a corrupting political influence. These are tied together as the same. Certainly, corrupting political influence would be bad politics. This was accomplished by the way the Herods conducted their lives and business, and with the Herodians promoting it.
Now, we will examine the lives of the Herods. The name Herod was very prominent in the history of the Jews and the early church of the Lord. The name Herod really means “heroic.” This name could not be applicable to the family.

The fortunes of the Herodian family are inseparably connected with the last flickering of the flame of Judaism, as a national power, before it was forever extinguished in the great Jewish war of rebellion, 70 A.D. The history of the Herodian family is not lacking in elements of greatness, but whatever these elements were and in whomsoever found, they were in every case dimmed by the insufferable egotism which disfigured the family, root and branch ... the entire family history is one of incessant brawls, suspicion, intrigue and shocking immorality. In the baleful and waning light of the rule of the Herodians, Christ lived and died, and under it the foundations of the Christian Church were laid.2

The church is referred to as the “Christian Church” in the quotation. However, the church that Jesus built is His church, the church of Christ.

*Herod the Great*

He wanted to protect his kingship. After the birth of Jesus, some wise men traveled to Jerusalem looking for the new born child. They asked: “Where is he that is born King of the Jews?” (Mt. 2:2).

The wise men had come to worship Jesus. When Herod heard about this he was troubled. He gathered all the chief priests and scribes together then demanded to know where Christ was to be born. He was told according to the writing of the prophet the place of birth would be in Bethlehem of Judaea. This prophecy is found in Micah 5:2. Herod was interested in knowing where the star appeared. He sent the wise men to Bethlehem to find the child. He said he wanted to worship Him. Really!?! He had no thought of worshipping. His desire was to destroy the Christ. When the wise men saw the child they rejoiced, worshipped Him and opened the treasures. The wise men gave Him gold, frankincense and myrrh. They were warned of God not to tell Herod where He was. After the wise men left an angel appeared to Joseph and told him to flee into Egypt. He was instructed to stay there until told to return.

God knew that Herod was a hypocrite and a man of political savvy. God knew what he planned to do, i.e., to destroy the child. During the night Joseph took Mary and the child and fled into Egypt to remain there until the death of Herod. This fulfilled the prophecy: “I loved him, and called my son out of Egypt” (Hos. 11:1). Herod was angry
when he heard what had happened. This resulted in him ordering that all of the children in and around Bethlehem, two years old and under, be slain. This fulfilled the prophesy: “Thus saith the Lord; A voice was heard in Ramah, lamentation, and bitter weeping; Rahel weeping for her children refused to be comforted for her children, because they were not” (Jer. 31:15).

Extermination of the Asmonean house, though he was related by marriage, was the first act of Herod’s reign. This was the beginning of his political activity. He slew anyone he thought might be a threat to his power. He emulated the habits and views of the Romans. He offended the Jews by introducing to them many Roman activities, such as Roman sports and temples to false gods. He had a strong influence on the younger Jews. Because of all these activities a new party arose, it was political with some religious ideas. It was called the “Herodian Party.”

The Herodian Party, Jews in outward religious forms but Gentiles in their dress and in their whole view of life. They were a bitter offence to the rest of the nation, but were associated with the Pharisees and Sadducees in their opposition to Christ (Mt. 22:16; Mk. 3:6; 12:13). In vain Herod tried to win over the Jews, by royal charity in time of famine, and by yielding, wherever possible, to their bitter prejudices. They saw in him only a usurper of the throne of David, maintained by the strong arm of the hated Roman oppressor.

In order to give gifts to the Romans he robbed his own people. Many different individuals tried to assassinate Herod but he escaped them all. Herod was a man of determination and generalship. He was a great leader of men. Some have referred to him as “a born leader.” He was a man of great talent.

Against the laws of Judaism, which he pretended to obey, he built at Jerusalem a magnificent theater and an amphitheater. The one within the city, the other outside the walls. Thus he introduced into the ascetic sphere of the Jewish life the frivolous spirit of the Greeks and the Romans. To offset this cruel infraction of all the maxims of orthodox Judaism, he tried to placate the nation by rebuilding the temple of Zerubbabel and making it more magnificent than even Solomon’s Temple had been.

Samaria was also rebuilt by Herod; however, this disgusted the Jews.
There are some good things to say about Herod’s characteristics and domestic life. He had an impressive personality. His intellectual ability was way above the ordinary. History records that he possessed great talent. On the other hand his life was filled with evil.

A tyrant, who bathed his own house and his own people in blood. The demons of Herod’s life were jealousy of power, and suspicion, its necessary companion. He was the incarnation of brute lust, which in turn became the burden of the lives of his children. History tells of a few more immoral families than the house of Herod, which by intermarriage of its members so entangled the genealogical tree as to make it a veritable puzzle. As these marriages were nearly all within the line of forbidden consanguinity, under the Jewish law, they still further embittered the people of Israel against the Herodian family.  

**Herod Antipas**

Herod Antipas was one of Herod the Great’s sons. His mother was a Samaritan, therefore, he was half Samaritan and half Idumaeon. Herod Antipas did not have any Jewish blood in him. Rome appointed him tetrarch of Galilee and Peraea. “Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judaea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of Ituraea and of the region of Trachonitis, and Lysanias the tetrarch of Abilene” (Lk. 3:1).

Herod Antipas was very superstitious and as cunning as a fox (Mt. 14:1-2; Lk. 13:31-32). His gross immorality and defiance of the laws of Moses caused John the Baptist to rebuke him. “For John said unto him, It is not lawful for thee to have her” (Mt. 14:4). He had taken Philip’s (his brother’s) wife in violation of Leviticus 18:16—“Thou shalt not uncover the nakedness of thy brother's wife: it is thy brother's nakedness.” Thus, Herod Antipas was guilty of adultery and incest. When he heard of the works of Jesus, he assumed that John the Baptist had risen from the dead.

Before hearing of Jesus, Herod had John beheaded. At the time, when John rebuked Herod, he would have had him slain, but Herod feared the multitude, because they counted John as a prophet. He put John in prison to please Herodias. She was still referred to as his brother Philip’s wife in Matthew 14:3.

Herod had a birthday. At his party, the daughter of Herodias danced before him. Herod was very pleased and vowed to give her
whatever she asked. Herodias told her daughter to ask for John’s head in a charger. He had made a foolish oath and was sorrowful for it. But he kept his promise and John’s head was brought to her in a charger (Mt. 14:3-11). This shows that Herodias totally dominated the life of Antipas.

Antipas was like his father in building buildings and beautifying cities. But his influence on those around him was morally wrong (Mk. 8:15).

The last Gospel account shows Herod Antipas in the final tragedy in the life of Christ. Pilate had declared that he had not found any fault in Christ. The people were even fiercer in opposing Christ. Other accusations were made against the Lord. He has stirred up the people. When Pilate knew that He belonged to Herod’s jurisdiction, he sent Jesus to Herod. Herod was glad to see Jesus, because he hoped to see a miracle done by Him. When Herod questioned Jesus, Jesus did not answer. The chief priests and scribes made accusations against Christ. Herod and his men mocked the Lord and put a gorgeous robe on Him and sent Him back to Pilate. This brought about the renewal of the friendship between Pilate and Herod Antipas (Lk. 23:7-12).

**Herod Philip**

Herod Philip was the son of Herod the Great. “He was unlike the rest of the Herodian family, in that, he retired, dignified, moderate and just.”

**Herod Archelaus**

Herod Archelaus was the oldest son of Herod the Great, His mother was a Samaritan. It is said that he ruled with a hard hand. This brought unrest to both Samaria and Judaea. Though there was much animosity between them, they joined together to go to Rome and complain about Archelaus.

**Herod Agrippa I**

Herod Agrippa I was the grandson of Herod the Great. He believed in self-promotion as much as his grandfather did. He did not try to hide his hate of Christianity. He was a hateful persecutor of Christians as demonstrated by the slaying of James. Because it pleased the Jews he cast Peter into prison. Peter was freed from prison when the angel of the Lord came to Peter (Acts 12:1-7). Herod loved praise as is recorded in Acts 12:20-23. The Lord took care of that matter. The Lord’s angel
smote him and worms ate him. It all happened to him because he refused to give God the glory. This reminds us of Moses in the wilderness; the same thing caused him not to enter the Promised Land.

**Herod Agrippa II**

Herod Agrippa II was the son of Herod Agrippa I. King Agrippa and his wife Bernice came to visit Festus in Caesarea. While visiting, they discussed Paul’s situation. Festus told king Agrippa that he had responded to the chief priests and elders at Jerusalem. He told them that the Romans could not deliver one to be put to death until he had the opportunity to face his accusers. When the accusers stood up against Paul, they did not accuse him of anything that Festus had assumed they would. Their questions against him were of their own superstition. They said that Jesus is dead, but Paul says He is still alive. Festus asked Paul if he wanted to go to Jerusalem and be judged. Paul appealed to Caesar. Festus brought Paul before Agrippa the next day. He said he did not have anything to write. He thought that maybe the king would be able to give him something to write after questioning Paul. Festus did not want to send the apostle Paul to Caesar without a letter explaining his crimes. Agrippa gave Paul the opportunity to speak. When Paul completed his speech, Agrippa said: “Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian” (Acts 26:13-28).

**CHRIST’S WARNINGS CONCERNING THE HERODIANS’ DOCTRINES ARE APPLICABLE TODAY**

They were more of a political party than a religious one. It seems that many in the denominational world are more interested in political matters than they are religious matters. They have organized several political groups. The one that stands out most is the so-called “Moral Majority.” Such groups spend more time in political causes and gatherings than they do in promoting their religions. Many members of the Lord’s Church are joining in with these groups. And, like their denominationalist counterparts, they are spending more time and money on their political agendas than they do in their service to the Lord in His Church. The Herodians were referred to as secularist by some writers.

“Secularism” is defined: “skepticism in regard to religion; the ignoring or exclusion of religious duties, instruction, or consideration.”  Many Christians ignore their duties to the Lord while fulfilling their responsibilities to the political causes and groups. The Herods, for the
most part, sought after power and believed in obtaining it no matter the cost or how many people had to be murdered in the process. If one could examine some of the leaders of our nation, with unobstructed access into the secret activities in their lives, he might be amazed at the corruption and immorality in which they have been involved. In the past, some have resigned because of immorality. No doubt, others should have. Some in the house and senate have “come out of the closet” and are known practicing homosexuals. Homosexuality is condemned in Leviticus 20:13 and Romans 1:18-31. Some have ripped-off the government by not paying their taxes. We have the privilege to vote, let us use this power.

Herod the Great robbed his own people that he might give gifts to the Romans. He did not spare the tomb of king David. Today our government is robbing people here in America and sending it to nations who are our enemies. Working people are being robbed to give to those who will not work. My friends it is not because they are not physically able to work, it is because they are too lazy to work. They can get more given to them by not working than they can earn by working.

The Bible teaches that work is honorable. “But if any provide not for his own, and specially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel” (1 Tim. 5:8). Some think Adam was punished for his sin by a command to work. Adam was told to care for the Garden in Genesis 2. He did not sin until Genesis 3. Yes, work is an honorable thing.

Herod had his brother’s wife. The Lord, through John the Baptist, told him: “It is not lawful for thee to have her” (Mt. 14:4). He was guilty of adultery and incest. He was violating the very law he claimed to believe, the Law of Moses. Incest was condemned under the Mosaic Law (Lev. 20:11, 19-21). Incest is rampant in our society today. Many little girls are sexually abused by their fathers, stepfathers and even their grandfathers. What a shame and disgrace for this to happen in what is supposed to be a civilized nation.

Adultery was condemned under the Law of Moses (Lev. 20:10). Incest is condemned in the New Testament. Paul, writing to the Corinthians, said it had been reported that someone there was committing fornication. It was being committed by one who had his father’s wife. We understand that this sin of fornication was incest (1 Cor. 5:1ff). The church was told to withdraw from the man who had his father’s wife. Adultery is also condemned in the New Testament.
Couched in among all the sins the Corinthians had been committing is the sin of adultery (1 Cor. 6:9-10). Fornication, regardless of the form it takes, is the sin that gives the innocent partner the right to divorce and remarry (Mt. 19:9).

The Herods and their followers were known in history for their worldliness. They were a sensual people. Wisdom that is not from above is earthly, sensual, and devilish. We live in the world, but we are not to be of the world (Jn. 15:19). We are to come out of the world and be separate (2 Cor. 6:17). When it came to marriage, divorce and remarriage, Herod was not concerned with Scriptural causes or God’s authority. The Herods were an immoral family according to history. Today, it may be the case that one knows as many who have been divorced and remarried as they do those who have not been divorced. This is something that must be worked on and corrected in our society. This is something we must teach about, pray about, teach about, pray about and teach about some more and pray about some more.

Another problem in America is couples, men and women, living together without being married. This violates many passages in the New Testament. Read what the Bible has to say about it. “But that we write unto them, that they abstain from pollutions of idols, and from fornication, and from things strangled, and from blood” (Acts 15:20, emphasis added). Couples living together, as though they are married, are committing fornication. “Now the body is not for fornication, but for the Lord; and the Lord for the body” (1 Cor. 6:13). Our bodies should be used in service to God, not in sinful pleasure. “But fornication, and all uncleanness, or covetousness, let it not be once named among you, as becometh saints” (Eph. 5:3). It is very clear that God does not approve of this kind of relationship. “For this is the will of God, even your sanctification, that ye should abstain from fornication” (1 Thess. 4:3).

Drinking of intoxicating beverages is a worldly activity. Paul condemns drunkenness in Galatians 5:19-21. It is one of the works of the flesh. Strong drink has power over the one who indulges in it. It defies what the Bible has to say about our responsibility for influence in 1 Corinthians 8. The faithful Christian will abstain from the drinking beverage alcohol—even so-called “social drinking.” Intoxicating beverages cause more harm than tobacco, yet, tobacco companies have been sued for billions while the liquor industry has been left alone. I
neither approve of the use of tobacco in any form, nor the consumption of beverage alcohol. The use of either is sin.

I asked a politician, who was sitting in my house, about this. He got upset and said: “If we go after the liquor industry then there will be those wanting us to go against the dairy industry.” I responded: “Do you think that milk causes as much harm as liquor?” He would not answer. According to history, the Herodians were a partying people. We need to heed Christ’s warning and make application by avoiding such.

There were dances in the Herodians’ day. The one that was performed in Herod Antipas’ presence caused him to offer Herodias’ daughter anything she wanted. Today, the modern dance is wrong morally. When one’s interest grows in the dance, interest will lessen in spiritual matters. “Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them” (Mt. 7:20). The definition of the word “lasciviousness” describes the modern dance. Homes for fallen girls serve as a result of the modern dance. When interviewed as to the cause for being in the home, almost all the girls have said it began on the dance floor. We must understand that boys were involved as much as the girls. But, the boys were not in a home for fallen boys. Girls, you are the ones who bear the burden while the boys go their merry way. Though these confessions regarding the modern dance are so often heard, gullible people will deny its danger.

Pornography was a problem among the Herodians and it is a problem today. Christ’s warning about the “leaven of Herod” (Mk. 8:15) should be observed today. It defies all of the Scriptures’ teaching on the purity of mind. It displays a carnal mind. “Because the carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be” (Rom. 8:7). We need to let the mind of Christ be in us. “Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 2:5). We are to keep our hearts and mind. “And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus” (Phil. 4:7).

Still, those with corrupt minds will keep on. “Now as Jannes and Jambres withstood Moses, so do these also resist the truth: men of corrupt minds, reprobate concerning the faith” (2 Tim. 3:8). To the Romans, Paul wrote: “For they that are after the flesh do mind the things of the flesh; but they that are after the Spirit the things of the Spirit” (Rom. 8:5), The Proverb writer states the problem of thinking and becoming. “For as he thinketh in his heart, so is he” (Pro. 23:7).
History tells us that indecent dress was a problem with the Herodians. Indecent dress is a tremendous problem today. One does not have to go the movies or go to the beach to be embarrassed with nakedness. You will see nakedness if you go shopping, go to the doctor’s office and, sad to say, go to worship services. Women are wearing dresses with tops too low, hems too high and too much missing in the middle.

It is just as wrong for men to be indecently dressed as it is for women. Many preachers will harp on women dressing immodestly, but not say a word about men dressing immodestly. Could it be that they are dressing immodestly? People who parade around in attire which is unbecoming to a Christian do not respect themselves nor anyone else. People in our society of today are like those in the days of Jeremiah. “Were they ashamed when they had committed abomination? nay, they were not at all ashamed, neither could they blush” (Jer. 8:12). Neither immodest dress nor filthy language embarrasses most people today.

The vulgar, nasty language heard in movies, on television programs and in public gatherings will embarrass faithful Christians. Some think the use of lewd and obscene language proves them to be macho. It proves that they are foolish and have a very limited vocabulary. The apostle Paul speaks to this problem, saying: “But fornication, and all uncleanness, or covetousness, let it not be once named among you, as becometh saints; Neither filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor jesting, which are not convenient: but rather giving of thanks” (Eph. 5:3-4). If it is wrong for a child to say it, it is wrong for adults to say. Some parents will correct their children for their language, yet, it is the same language the parents use. In fact, the child may have learned it from the parents.

We that are older remember when members of the church had much higher standards of conduct. Years ago, the church, as a whole, was more distinct from the world than it is now. You walk into the worship of some congregations today and the people in the pews are not distinct from the religious world around us. Things previously not tolerated among members of the Lord’s church are now accepted and go unnoticed. There has been a gradual change through the years, not for the better but for the worse. A lowering of standards in the world has led to a lowering of standards in the church. All of these things have had a bad influence on the church.
I know of a shameful practice among the members of one congregation with which I am familiar. Some of the young couples would meet after services at a couples’ house that had a swimming pool. They would get their children to bed and then the couples would swim in the nude. They all repented, except one. The world looks upon church members as people who do right. When they see members of the church doing something, they assume it is okay for them to do it. Tragically, members of the church are participants in evil things with the world.

Discipline has broken down in every area of life: home, school, society and the church. Preachers and elders who refuse to teach and preach on certain things because their family members are involved in such, should not be elders and preachers. Some preachers have double standards, one for their family members and another one for the families of others.

CONCLUSION

Is the warning given in Mark 8:15 applicable today? Yes, because the doctrines of the Herodians are being practiced today by the world, and sad to say by those claiming to be members of the Lord’s church. The Scriptures were written for a purpose. “For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope” (Rom. 15:4). This generation, as all others, does not have an excuse.8

ENDNOTES

1 All Scripture references are taken from the King James Version unless otherwise noted.
3 Ibid.
4 Ibid., 1380.
5 Ibid., 1381.
6 Ibid., 1382.
8 Gleanings from *ISBE, McClintock and Strong, Commentaries on Matthew and Mark* by McGarvey, *Commentary on the Gospel According to Mark* by C.E.W. Dorris, *Pulpit Commentary* and *Barnes Notes*. 