

How Much Leaven Can God Take?

Coming Out of Sin is an Individual Responsibility

John W. Ritenbaugh

Given 09-Apr-07; Tape #823B

I gave the central theme of this sermon before in Columbia, South Carolina immediately after the Days of Unleavened Bread in 1978. It just dawned on me a couple of hours ago that was 29 years ago, almost to the day, and according to E. W. Bullinger, "29" indicates "departure," and departure from bondage and sin is the theme of these Days of Unleavened Bread. To me it is just another tiny piece of evidence that "somebody" is looking over my shoulder every once in a while, and bringing something like this to pass.

At that time in 1979, the Worldwide Church of God was experiencing a period of relative peace following Garner Ted Armstrong's disfellowshipping, and Herbert Armstrong's heart failure in August of 1977.

But little did anyone realize that the State of California's judicial system would launch a major unconstitutional attack against the church in early January of 1979, igniting a year-long battle that did not end until the California legislature acted to stop what was gradually developing into a major public relations black eye for the State.

Accusations, primarily aimed against Mr. Armstrong's character, were made, claiming thievery of massive amounts of money contributed to unsuspecting contributors by people worldwide. A court-appointed judge, called a Receiver, was actually made head of the church, and he stood to make a great deal of money if the State won its case.

Auditors were brought in to examine the accounting procedures, and really anything connected to the administration of the church's handling of its money. The investigation seemingly went on and on, with none of the accusers finding anything of any substance amiss in the business affairs of the church. Actually, the charges just more or less fizzled out, without, as far as I know, any apologies being made for the smearing of anybody's reputation or any monetary satisfaction ever given for the destruction that the State had caused the church to endure.

The effect of this unjust attack lingered in the minds of members and non-members alike. The accusations made the church appear, in the minds of casual observers, as though it was filled with sin, as though the whole operation was nothing more than a scam. The collection of doctrines appeared strange to most casual observers in the public, but outright wrong and deceptive to those of a serious religious bent.

Now within the church there were two general views as well. One was that the church was indeed filled with sin and that the State's attack was a justified wakeup call. The second was that though there was undoubtedly some sin, because that is the way human nature is, the attack was an unjustified one by a powerful foe.

I know that I fell in the latter group. I knew enough about religious and secular history to know in regard to religion—*any* religion, but most especially the Christian religion—the violence of the

attacks was almost completely unjustified. The attack against the Branch Davidians of Waco, Texas is to me a case in point.

Several months after the attack began it became well-known that the attack was actually instigated by disgruntled members from within the church. Now disgruntled members are not at all unusual, as we have clearly seen from Richard's sermon in I Corinthians, but especially those people with a party spirit.

At the same time I was also aware that just because the church was persecuted, it does not necessarily mean that the church was filled with sin. Was the first century church filled with sin when the Jews, led by Saul of Tarsus, viciously attacked *it*?

I want you to turn to Acts 8: 3. This occurred right on the heels of Stephen's stoning.

Acts 8:3 As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering into every house, and haling men and women committed them to prison.

Actually the language there in the *King James* kind of softens things a bit, because it more literally says he began to *destroy*, and they were *dragging* people off to jail.

Acts 9:1-2 And Saul, yet breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord, went unto the high priest, And desired of him letters to Damascus to the synagogues that if he found any of this way, whether they were men or women, he might bring them bound unto Jerusalem.

Again, that is softened a bit from what it literally says. It says that Saul was breathing out murderous threats. It is not that he ever murdered anybody, but I guess the energy and the passion and the words he used to command those who were under his authority were pretty strong. Now it says he went to Damascus. Do you know that it is a 150-mile walk from Jerusalem to Damascus? That guy was really serious! He really believed the religion he was practicing at the time, which was Pharisaism

Now was the new-born young child Jesus and His parents filled with sin when they had to escape persecution from Herod by fleeing to Egypt? Not in the least. Just because somebody is persecuted does not necessarily mean that the person has been sinning.

Thus the motivation for me in that sermon in 1978 was the question, "How far would God allow sin to develop in the church before He would step in with a very serious intervention? How much leaven can God take before He blows up, or does something that is pretty disastrous?"

As we are already beginning to see, just because there is persecution does not mean that God is angry. But on the other hand, we also know that persecution *can* indicate sin as well, so proper judgment is necessary, and it is good that we are patient in making the judgment.

We are going to go back to the very roots of how God shows sin's destructive powers. We are going to go to Leviticus 2: 7-11.

Leviticus 2:7-11 And if your oblation [your offering] be a meal offering baked in the fryingpan, it shall be made of fine flour with oil. And you shall bring the meal offering that is made of these things unto the LORD: and when it is presented unto the priest, he shall bring it unto the altar. And the priest shall take from the meal offering a memorial thereof, and shall burn it upon the altar: it is an offering made by fire, of a sweet savor unto the LORD. And that which is left of the meal offering shall be Aaron's and his sons': it is a thing most holy of the offerings of the LORD made by fire. No meal offering, which you shall bring unto the LORD, shall be made with leaven: for you shall burn no leaven, nor any honey, in any offering of the LORD made by fire.

Both honey and leaven, are of themselves, normally good food; however, the symbolism contained within each is what is important in the context, because both, as they are spread through the flour, have, or contribute to having a fermenting, putrefying affect; thus God is teaching us what sin does. It putrefies. It corrupts those who commit it. Maybe the definition of the *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, under the article "leaven," will have a little more force if you understand how liberal the *Interpreter's Bible* and the *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* can normally be understood. *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, under the article "leaven" defines leaven as "any substance added to dough which produces fermentation." "Any substance" is pretty conservative.

The leaven referred to here is actually a fungus that breaks down carbohydrates in the flour, and as it spreads it produces a gas that causes the doughy mixture to puff up. Honey speeds and accelerates this completely natural process, and thus they are a perfect combination for portraying what sin does to a human. Sin expresses pride, and sin promotes more sin.

It is very helpful to understand what the entire battery of sacrificial offering represents. They first and foremost succinctly describe the offerings of Jesus Christ to God and man of His life of service. His life was lived in real time as a living sacrifice that served as a model for us to follow. His life was entirely devoted, burned up, consumed, as it were, in this process, and thus God is showing us through these sacrifices the standard of what is acceptable in *our* service to Him. That is quite a high standard to live up to. This is why when we are justified the righteousness of Christ has to be imputed to us. If it were not for that, we would never be acceptable before God.

The command that no leaven and honey were to be included adds important understanding; thus it becomes clear through these instructions for the offerings that living a life in which there is hidden sin—symbolically leaven and honey and its accompanying polluting pride while supposedly dedicating our life in service to God and mankind—is unacceptable. We are talking about hypocrisy here. Such a life clearly amounts to hypocrisy, and God sees right through the lie. Perhaps the only one being deceived is the hypocrite making the offering. Others may be able to see it.

During the Days of Unleavened Bread the physical effects of honey and leaven on flour are used

to clearly portray sin's spiritual effect on a life lived.

As we read the next verses, I want you to recall the *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible's* comment regarding leaven—"any substance added to the mixture."

Mark 8:14-21 Now the disciples had forgotten to take bread, neither had they in the ship with them more than one loaf. And he charged them, saying, Take heed, beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, and of the leaven of Herod. And they reasoned among themselves, saying, It is because we have no bread. And when Jesus knew it, he said unto them, Why reason you, because you have no bread? Perceive you not yet, neither understand? Have you your heart yet hardened? Having eyes, see you not? And having ears, hear you not? And do you not remember? When I broke the five loaves among five thousand, how many baskets full of fragments took you up? They said unto him, Twelve. And when the seven among four thousand, how many baskets full of fragments took you up? And they said, Seven. And he said unto them, How is it that you do not understand?

We are going to add something to this from the book of Matthew so that this becomes clearer. In Matthew 16 is exactly the same episode.

Matthew 16:6 Then Jesus said unto them, Take heed and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees.

Matthew 16:11-12 How is it that you do not understand that I spoke it not to you concerning bread, that you should beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees? Then understood they how that he bade them not beware of the leaven of bread, but of the *doctrine* of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees.

These verses add a dimension to understanding regarding leaven. You ought to be able to see through Jesus' instruction that sin—leaven—is not limited to the actual literal breaking of one of the Ten Commandments. It is not limited to merely being something legal.

He used the general term "doctrine." Doctrine in this case can be understood as the teaching derived from the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and Herod, who is also mentioned. It can be ascribed to their verbal or written instruction, or from what one might learn from their examples and the fruit of their lives lived. In other words, Jesus is saying that false teaching is sin. It is leaven of and by itself, and no other act need be involved.

In like manner so is a bad example. This is because that what one is instructed in, as in formal teaching, or by an example, and then believed, becomes the basis for the attitudes and conduct one actually uses in life's activities. That person was leavened by the teaching, was leavened by the example. The person believed this was the right way to go, and boom! The first thing you know that person is sinning by his conduct, leavened by false teaching.

False teaching is the fertile ground that begets sin and spreads sin, and thus *is* sin. It is instruction that misses the mark of truth. Thus Jesus is teaching that anything that persuades a person to do evil is leaven, and so He begins this instruction with a very strong imperative. He said, *Watch out! Be alert for evil influences.*"

Now what kind of evil influences were there that they could be susceptible to in their culture? Well, with the Pharisees it was their traditionalism. They followed *their* traditions. They pushed aside the commandments of God in order to do their own commandments. That was traditional to them, and they would not break with them.

How about the Sadducees? There are remarks made about them. For example, they did not believe in the resurrection of the dead, but something comes through. A bad quality comes through. It was their skepticism. They did not believe anything unless it was written right in the Torah. I do not know that the Torah has anything to do with a resurrection. That is in other parts of the Bible. They did not believe in the resurrection, and so there was skepticism there.

How about Herod? It was secularism. He was the champion of the secular way of life.

Do you know there is a characteristic that Christians show in the Bible? It is interesting. It is pessimism. Christians have a way of looking at the bad side of everything, and in so doing they forget about God. Everything really should be on the up and up, but pessimism, doubt, is always playing around the edge of the mind. "Is God really going to come through?" "Is He really going to provide?" I am sure that those kinds of things were the source of a great deal of Israel's murmuring, but it comes right through to the descendants of the Israelites, even to converted people.

Pharisees and Sadducees represent instruction from religious sources, and Herod from secular sources.

There is one more interesting thing in this section of Mark 8 and Matthew 16. It is kind of hidden in the English, but apparently from commentators it is very clear in the Greek. Do you know how different the Pharisees and the Sadducees were? In this Jesus linked them together as being one. They were both the same, and not only that, Herod was right in there with them. What a combination! What a trio! What a trinity—the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and Herod!

Do you know what they all had in common? They were anti-God. They were all one in Jesus' mind as being anti-God despite any façade of religion that the Pharisees and Sadducees had. All of them were united in their anti-God lifestyle, and thus in Jesus' instruction He gets right to the root of how leaven becomes a part of us. When we are young we are virtually helpless from before its onslaught, because it is coming at us from all directions. It comes from the world. It is coming from the radio, from the television, from the movies, from our friends, from school. It is impacting on us all the time. We are seeing the examples of our buddies and our older people we respect, and every one of them, unknowingly, like the Sadducees, the Pharisees, and Herod, are one in their anti-God approach.

At the time when children are most susceptible is the time that the quality of the parents' attitude and child-training is of the utmost importance, to bend them in the right direction. "As the twig is bent, so grows the tree," and parents have first crack at bending that child in the

right direction, with the right attitudes, and the right instruction, and the right kind of example.

However, as we age, the burden of responsible concern, and thus protecting ourselves from what might come into our minds, gradually falls more directly and more heavily on each individual. It sets the stage for the time when God calls us into His church in order to prepare us for His kingdom.

Let us go back to Leviticus 23: 17. Incidentally, yesterday was Wave Sheaf Day, and we are already in the second day of the count to Pentecost. You will see now why I mentioned this.

Leviticus 23:17 You shall bring out of your habitations two wave loaves of two tenth deals: they shall be of fine flour; they shall be baked with leaven; they are the firstfruits unto the LORD.

In this instruction regarding Pentecost, one finds a church illustrated by two loaves of bread, and they have leaven in them. They were puffed up. It is very likely that the one represented those in the Old Testament that were converted, and the other loaf represented those in the New Covenant who are also leavened, and so we are looking at a picture of God's very young church. In fact it specifically said "the firstfruits."

We are really getting down to being specific of what those bread loaves indicate. They are symbolically shown as having leaven. I will not go into proving this statement at this time, because I know that you know it is true. My question for the remainder of this sermon is, "How *much* leaven?"

Incidentally, those two loaves, after they were waved before God, did not go onto the altar. They were given to the priests. God did not partake of them as burning on the altar would indicate. And so they were waved. He accepted it, and said, *'Hey guys. Here, you eat this.'*

How far does God allow sin to develop in the world? How about in the church, and how about in the individual before He says, "Enough already!" and pulls the plug, so to speak. How often is He helping and intervening in behalf of the lives of those who are sinning? And yet we might hard-heartedly test His grace and His patience because we do not make the adjustments very quickly, if at all. Well, let us begin to look at some of the things it shows in God's word. I know that you will be familiar with this, but let us look at it from the point of view in Genesis 15: 16.

God is proposing a covenant with Abraham, and He is telling Abraham what is going to happen to his descendants. So He tells Abraham, in verse 15, "And you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age."

Genesis 15:16 But in the fourth generation they [Abraham's descendants] shall come hither again: for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet full.

It clearly indicates that the Amorites were already sinning, and God had their land already marked aside to become Israel's land, but He was going to time it for the time when the iniquity, the sinfulness, of the Amorites reached its peak, and then He was going to blow them

out of the way, as it were, using the Israelites as the ones who would execute His judgment.

That verse clearly gives indication that the iniquity of the Amorites was not yet to the place, within His purpose, that they needed to be dispossessed. It looks like God times things, doesn't it? He is watching. He is observing. He is evaluating. He is reaching decisions, and in many cases the decision is, "Not yet;" but the pot is simmering, making ready.

Genesis 6:5-7 And GOD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart were only evil continually. And it repented the LORD that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him at his heart. And the LORD said, I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth; both man, and beast, and the creeping thing, and the fowls of the air; for it repents me that I have made them.

Genesis 6:11-12 The earth also was corrupt before God, and the earth was filled with violence. And God looked upon the earth, and, behold, it was corrupt, for all flesh had corrupted his way upon the earth.

To begin to get a little bit clearer picture, I want you to first notice the word "great" in verse 5. That word is more synonymous with the English word "multiplied." In other words, wickedness was multiplying. It was not adding. It had reached that place where it was increasing exponentially.

Now added to that this word: "imagination" means "formation of thought," or "impulse" or "tendency." Every tendency was toward wickedness, and so the picture at this point is that mankind was wholly sensual, so much so that every thought, purpose, desire, and motive was incurably poisoned, apparently without any add mixture of good.

In your mind, connect these statements with Paul's comment in II Timothy 3:1 where he says that in the end-time, "Perilous times will come, for men shall be lovers of their own selves." You transfer that back into Genesis, and we find the root of the problem that was building here in Genesis 6, and that was every thought was about the titillation and the fulfilling of personal desires. Everyone was turned in on pleasing the self.

Did not Jesus say that the time when He comes will be as it was in the day of Noah? You connect that with II Timothy 3:1 and you can begin to see what this earth and this conduct is driving toward. We are going to reach the place where everybody is completely turned in to the satisfaction of the self—everybody, that is, except those whose hearts are right with God. It seems here in Genesis 6 as though there is no interval, no moment allowed for serious reflection on any righteous act.

The emphasis in the context as a whole is that it was so bad that only a new beginning would suffice to straighten things out, and that is what God did. I say this to remind us who think that things are bad now, that it is going to get worse before it gets better. Is that not cheerful news? It was so bad, and yet God, who had the power to intervene at any time, did not until 120 years later. He is so patient it is incredible.

The corruption kept building until, I am sure, that God was satisfied that an indelible impression had been made on the minds of those living then that there was absolutely no hope they would ever be able to solve their problems, and to the end that His intervention then would be humbly perceived, after they were resurrected, as an act of mercy, having been removed from the misery of living in such a world. They were having their minds preserved so that they were not as perverted as they could have been so that repentance would have been impossible.

God's timing is impeccable. "This much, and no more. If I let it go anymore, these people's minds are going to be perverted to the end that repentance will not be possible."

Genesis 18:16-24 And the men rose up from thence, and looked toward Sodom: and Abraham went with them to bring them on the way. And the LORD said, Shall I hide from Abraham that thing which I do; Seeing that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the LORD, to do justice and judgment; that the LORD may bring upon Abraham that which he has spoken of him. And the LORD said, Because the cry of Sodom and Gomorrah is great, and because there sin is very grievous; I will go down now, and see whether they have done altogether according to the cry of it, which is come unto me; and if not, I will know.

You know what follows after this. I think we understand that Abraham's concern was expressed in his beseeching God, which immediately preceded the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. His appeal showed that he believed in God's ability to destroy them, but he did not want to see Lot and his family destroyed with people he knew were evil to the core.

Perhaps the memory of the Flood was on Abraham's mind, but then again what troubled him is the very question that we are considering: How much sin, how much leaven, is enough to motivate God to react in this way? Maybe it was the question, "Does the faith of the righteous hinge on whether they are in the majority?" Maybe the question turned another way was, "To what limits can God's mercy be pushed?" Or then again, he might have been considering, "Exactly what's justice?"

I think one thing was certain to Abraham, as well as to us, that there is a great deal of ambiguity to mankind's recorded history. In addition, there is a great amount of ambiguity to God's reaction to sin. One of the greatest problems in understanding the total plan of God is that reward and punishment are sometimes conspicuously absent from our view.

I want you to go to the book of Ecclesiastes, where actually, in some regard, we find the central theme of the entire book of Ecclesiastes, but we are just going to pick out one section: Ecclesiastes 3, beginning in verse 16. This is the chapter that begins, "There is a time for this, and a time for that," and so forth, but the thought Solomon had as he was writing is what this chapter now continues. Remember, he was the king. He was sitting in a place where he could

judge things in a way that other people could not, and make the evaluation, but he was puzzled. There is no doubt about it.

Ecclesiastes 3:16 And moreover I saw under the sun the place of judgment, that wickedness was there; and the place of righteousness, that iniquity was there.

In places that you would expect there would be iniquity, it was there, but in places you would expect there would be righteousness, instead there was no righteousness there.

Ecclesiastes 3:17 I said in my heart, God shall judge the righteous and the wicked: for there is a time there for every purpose and for every work.

At least he knew enough that God still sits on His throne and that there would come a time when God would straighten things out. When and why God did not intervene (when Solomon thought it was *right* for Him to intervene) he did not know?

Ecclesiastes 3:18 I said in my heart concerning the estate of the sons of men, that God might manifest them, and that they might see that they themselves are beasts.

We say the same thing. "God, open up their minds. Help them to see."

Ecclesiastes 3:19-22 For that which befalls the sons of men befalls beasts; even one thing befalls them: as the one dies, so dies the other; yes, they have all one breath; so that a man has no preeminence above a beast: for all is vanity. All go unto one place; all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again. Who knows the spirit of man that goes upward, and the spirit of the beast that goes downward to the earth? Wherefore I perceive that there is nothing better than that a man should rejoice in his own works; for that is his portion: for who shall bring him to see what shall be after him?

In an overall sense then, Ecclesiastes shows clearly, from an unconverted person's point of view, the ambiguity of virtually all that is going on in the earth. To the thinking unconverted, who do not live by faith in a true knowledge of God, everything—and I mean true and everything regarding life's purpose—sin, evil, and righteousness is a frustrating puzzle. And so at best, these kinds of people tend to become agnostic; at worst, outright atheists.

Now Solomon was really brilliantly intellectual, and he concluded, from his point of view, that all in life is vanity, is futile. "*Why is it,*" he asks "*that terrible things seem to happen to some families of peoples, and yet others who are undoubtedly sinners, hating God too, but they seem*

to skate along, seemingly not being punished for their evil?"

It is certain that Abraham did not want to see the righteous perish with the wicked; however, no matter how we cut it, if we want to attempt to determine some sort of bottom line, or how much sin God can take before God says, "This far, and no further," we are not going to be able to do it.

It would be futile for us to attempt some kind of conclusion that we think is solid, because judgment is not at all black and white as some would like it to be. This is because we cannot see the extent of God's purpose in each case, and because all cases are not the same, and God's judgment is done individually. Thank Him for that. "All must stand before the judgment seat of Christ." This we know, that the overall picture reveals He is tremendously patient and merciful.

Let us look at another set of scriptures that insert another wrinkle—a very important wrinkle into our search here. It is in Ezekiel 16: 45-52. That will be enough to get the point across here. Ezekiel 16 is the story of Israel at being a young maiden found by God. He cleans her up. He marries her; that is, He enters into a covenant with her. And then what happened in their life? It was not a life of married bliss.

Ezekiel 16:45-52 You are your mother's daughter that loathes her husband [God] and her children; and you are the sister of your sisters which loathed their husbands and their children: your mother was a Hittite, and your father an Amorite. And your elder sister is Samaria [Israel—the Ten Northern Tribes. We know now that He is talking about Judah.] she and her daughters that dwell at your left hand: and your younger sister, that dwells at your right hand, is Sodom and her daughters. [Sodom is a sister in the way the Judah was living. Judah was living as the Sodomites.] Yet have you not walked after their ways, nor done after their abominations: but, as if that were a very little thing, you were corrupted more than they in all your ways. As I live, says the Lord GOD, Sodom your sister has not done, she nor her daughters, as you have done, you and your daughters. Behold, this was the iniquity of your sister Sodom, pride, fullness of bread, and abundance of idleness was in her and in her daughters, neither did she strengthen the hand of the poor and the needy. And they were haughty, and committed abomination before me: therefore I took them away as I saw good. Neither has Samaria committed half of your sins; but you have multiplied your abominations more than they, and have justified your sisters in all your abominations which you have done. You also, which have judged your sisters, bear your own shame for your sins that you have committed more abominable than they; they are more righteous than you: yes, be you confounded also, and bear your shame in that you have justified your sisters.

God is pronouncing this doom against Judah. They are so bad they actually succeeded in

making Israel and Sodom look good by comparison. Now perhaps this evaluation is a comparative one in the sense that God held Judah more responsible because so much more was revealed to them. I am unsure of it, but the record is written in His word, and He does not lie.

The element important to this sermon is that He did not blast them out of existence as He did Sodom, but He did scatter them as He did Israel. From this I see this factor arise, that God's reaction to the extent and depth of sin hinges upon what His purpose is for the sinners involved. Unless we know exactly what His purpose is, we are not going to be able to draw a line in the sand and confidently say, "This will get this sinful, and then God will act."

As a result of this, it is absolutely essential for us to understand that the good and the bad live side by side, and we *must not, must not, must not* allow ourselves the luxury of letting the evil determine our destruction through being lured into the same attitudes and conduct of those who do not fear God. This is why I went through this thing about the conduct, the bad examples. It is very easy to be pulled into what this world is doing, thinking, "Well, God has not condemned it yet; therefore it must be all right to do." Do not do that.

We are going to take a lesson here from a parable. Is it not interesting the way God judged Israel and Judah differently? Israel, by God's own judgment, was not as bad as Judah was, and yet He allowed the Assyrians to come in, and He dispersed the Israelites amongst the Assyrians, and Israel [Samaria] became lost in history.

Now the Jews, who were worse than Israel, He blew apart for awhile. He took them into captivity into Babylon, and then brought them back, and *they* are the ones that everybody thinks are Israel today. Interesting. Meanwhile, *real* Israel is hidden in northwest Europe, in the United States and Canada, in South Africa, in New Zealand, and in Australia. Most of them have no idea who they are, and if you tell them, they do not believe it.

Matthew 13:24-30 Another parable put he forth unto them, saying, The kingdom of heaven is likened unto a man which sowed good seed in his field: But while men slept his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat, and went his way. But when the blade was sprung up and brought forth fruit, then appeared the tares also. So the servants of the householder came and said unto him, Sir, did not you sow good seed in your field? From whence then has it tares? He said unto them, An enemy has done this. The servants said unto him, Will you then that we go and gather them up? But he said, No; lest while you gather up the tares you root up also the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest: and in the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, Gather you together first the tares, and bind them in bundles to burn them: but gather the wheat into my barn.

The wheat (the righteous) and the tares (the evil) are side by side. They live together. The ordinary procedure in a garden is for a man to get rid of the weeds as quickly as he possibly can as they appear. However, it ought to be apparent to every one of us that God is different. There are two fairly obvious reasons. The first is this: When God was working in Israel under

the Old Covenant, the separation between Israel and the surrounding nations was clearly established by the national borders of Israel. Let us say that the good guys were here, and they only went to there, and no farther. Anybody on the other side of the line was part of the Gentiles, and you see, in a covenantal sense, they were the bad guys.

However, under the New Covenant, God is calling children from all nations to be part of Abraham's family; thus that easily-seen border—the ethnic sanctification—no longer exists.

The second reason feeds right into the first, and it is that now we can more easily understand that God is also working with the unconverted as well as the converted. He is calling Gentiles into the church. He is working with the unconverted now as well as the converted.

This "tares" parable then ought to prompt another question. How can one tell the difference between the converted and the unconverted person? Jesus Himself answers the question. In a general way He said, "You shall know them by their fruits." Even though that principle is clear, in actual practice judgment is not easy, and this is why Jesus cautions us to be very careful in our judgment [Matthew 7: 1-5].

Remember, God, as a general rule, calls the weak of the world into His church. There are many, many people in this world that put us to shame in many matters that count very heavily. Tares are a weed that very easily, like leaven, spreads of itself. In like manner, because of human nature, others—even the converted—can readily imitate sinful conduct, and as the Bible, in our own 20th century American history shows, sin is deliberately sown through leadership within a culture in order to change it to one more to the liking of those who want it changed.

In the parable, as the plants grow, tares look very much like wheat and it is difficult to tell one from another except by one trained to perceive the difference. So what farmers would generally do is wait until the harvest, because then the difference between what wheat and tares produce is clearly seen almost by anyone, because the fruit (the berries) of the tares turns yellow. The fruit is not the same as that produced by the wheat. This is the second reason why God said, "Let them alone until the fruit becomes clear."

Now, in addition, the berry of the tare is poisonous. You do not want to go that far in eating it; and thus the tares were separated away, picked usually by hand to be gentle in a way with it, and then the berries were fed to the pigs that could eat anything.

Jesus' statement in verse 30, where He says, "Let both grow together," draws the focus of this sermon to a very fine point. Now how close together? As close as your next door neighbor? Well, maybe closer still.

One time I heard Dr. Hoeh say, "If something is going on in the world, it is also going on in the church." Now why? Because those fellowshiping together in the church bring it right with them into the assembly.

Let us go back to that scripture in I Corinthians 5 that we already looked at two or three times.

I Corinthians 5:1 It is reported commonly that there is fornication among you, and such fornication as is not so much as named among the Gentiles, that one should have his father's wife.

Most modern translators say something like this: "It is as if Paul said, 'I actually hear reports,' " making it as though it is a statement of shock, or bewilderment that such a thing had occurred. But in this case the *King James* is actually a bit more precise, because in the Greek the wording has the sense of thoroughness; thus, translated plainly, it would read: "It is being told *everywhere!*" In other words, "*Hey people! This is no secret. It is being told everywhere,*" thus giving pretty much the sense of what Dr. Hoeh said in *his* sermon. "If it is happening in the world, it is happening in the church." The church has the same problems within its fellowship as the world; however, nowhere near the same degree.

Did not Paul say in I Corinthians 10:13 that our trials are common to man? It is how and why we face them that make the difference in the way they are resolved. The Corinthians' disagreement problem had reached such a high degree that its membership was suing one another, as I Corinthians 6 shows.

I Corinthians 11:18-19 For first of all, when you come together in the church, I hear that there be divisions among you; and I partly believe it. For there must be also heresies among you that they which are approved may be made manifest among you.

See that word "must." Paul was saying, "This *must* happen." Now to many this is a surprising statement because they wishfully think, even wrongly believe, that unity within the church is an accomplished fact and that everything is peaches and cream. Paul was acknowledging the fact that such an ideal is as it *should be*, but in practical reality, it is not so.

That kind of unity will not occur until after the resurrection, and so Paul uses the word "must," thus saying that factions within the church are a necessity. It *must* be this way. And since God permits these dissensions to occur, they are to some level His will in order to test those truly with the program, making them evident by their faithful adherence to the faith regardless of the temptation.

With a statement like this, it is no marvel that there is sin in the church. It is nowhere near the level that it is in the world, but it is there, and it must be confronted. Thus this verse is actually commanding members to let their light shine, because God desires that the good be seen as a contrast to the evil of others who are even within the congregation.

Another aspect of this is that this is the way God allows people to weed themselves from the body. The real center of the problem of those who weed themselves out is their lack of faith, or we might say conversion. What usually occurs is that they begin blaming the church generally—members in particular, or most frequently the ministry—for their misery. You know that is true, because that is what it shows in the book of Numbers, and all the rebellions against Moses and Aaron. They were not the cause of them. You see, what these people were really doing was providing themselves with justifications for leaving, and blaming God Himself as the cover for their lack of faith.

The lesson in these verses is that Paul is saying that it is unrealistic to think that the church will be without sin and without dissension.

Romans 3:5-6 But if our unrighteousness [That is, the sins of mankind. In using the word "our," it draws attention to the church, because this was written to the church.] commend the righteousness of God, what shall we say? Is God unrighteous who takes vengeance? (I speak as a man) God forbid: for then how shall God judge the world?

Paul was saying here that man's sinfulness actually confirms, demonstrates, and accentuates God's beauty, glory, righteousness, and mercy, making them more apparent. His sterling quality becomes so obvious when contrasted with men, that in the end no one will doubt that His judgments are justified, even within the church, brethren. The first century church had the same problems as are in the church today.

I John 2:18-19 Little children, it is the last time: and as you have heard that antichrist shall come, even now are there many antichrists; whereby we know that it is the last time. They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us they would no doubt have continued with us, but they went out, that they might be made manifest that they were not all of us.

But before they went out, they were fellowshiping with the church. The leaven was right there. How many things did they utter that caused others to be led into sin, into bad attitudes, bad habits, or whatever? See, it is there.

Those of us who have been in the church for 20, 30, or 40 years ought to be able to relate to this quite easily. Brethren, what happened to the one hundred or so thousand people who were formerly fellowshiping with the Worldwide Church of God? I do not know whether those people have lost their salvation, but the choices that they made have certainly not helped them.

III John 9-10 I wrote unto the church: but Diotrephes, who loves to have the preeminence among them, receives us not. Wherefore, if I come, I will remember his deeds which he does, prating against us with malicious words: and not content therewith, neither does he himself receive the brethren, and forbids them that would, and casts them out of the church.

Unfortunately, in many cases those who have left have become outspoken enemies, working against the very church they formerly expressed love and loyalty for. Now to provide themselves with a justification for what they have done in leaving, or for whatever they have done, they say, "Then we were deceived, but now our eyes are enlightened." But the reality is that they have gone back to the same church organizations and doctrines that have immensely help create this evil immoral world through the teachings of false doctrine.

I hope you are getting the point here. Sin is everywhere. Leaven is everywhere. The converted

and the unconverted are side by side in the world, and brethren, even in the church. It happened.

Matthew 24:9-13 Then shall they deliver you up to be afflicted, and shall kill you: and you shall be hated of all nations for my name's sake. And then shall many be offended, and shall betray one another, and shall hate one another. And many false prophets shall rise, and shall deceive many. And because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold. But he that shall endure unto the end, the same shall be saved.

This certainly gives the impression not only of difficult times ahead, but times that might be confusing, because this is written concerning people who were fellowshiping together in the church, and some who were converted, turning traitorous against those who were remaining faithful.

I think that you are aware that in America many of our liberties are being taken away as this government becomes ever more Fascist. Notice that Jesus warns of the love of many growing cold. I believe that we are seeing this fulfilled. What happened to the love of those hundred thousand people who have just about simply disappeared, as it were? Well, they are still out there, but what happened to the love? It seems to be gone.

The foundation for persecuting-times Christians have never before in our nation's history have had to face are rapidly being laid. There is general disrespect for God and His love, and that is at an all-time high, as Satan is maneuvering to trap Christians into difficult, loyalty-challenging circumstances. So the question is, will we be faithful to God and our brethren, or will the pressure that is put on cause us to break? Will we fail to hit the mark, led by one who intensifies sin right within the body of people who are commanded to love one another? Are we aware that it is through not sinning that each of us individually expresses our love for each other?

I want you to turn to I Corinthians 13. The key word in this chapter is "love." I just want to look at verses 4 through 6 just to remind us of these characteristics. This is the way the love of God acts.

I Corinthians 13:4-6 Love suffers long, and is kind; love envies not; love vaunts not itself, is not puffed up, Does not behave itself unseemly, seeks not her own, is not easily provoked, thinks no evil; Rejoices not in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth.

Brethren, these are very high standards, but it is in striving to meet these standards that the church is defended against the corrupting, enslaving and life-destroying assault of Satan and sin/leaven. This responsibility falls on each of us, and it cannot be passed off as somebody else's job to do this. You see, now it comes down to the individual and his relationship with God. That is what the persecution is going to be for, to reveal to God and to us where our loyalty lay.

The Hebrews were undergoing some persecution, and so Paul writes this to these people,

reminding them of their individual responsibility. Notice what he says.

Hebrews 12:12 Wherefore lift up hands which hang down, and feeble knees.

In times of persecution, it makes one feel weak. It makes one feel as though there is desperate times; maybe even no hope; weak to an extent never known before. So he says:

Hebrews 12:12-15 Wherefore lift up hands which hang down, and feeble knees; And make straight paths for your feet, lest that which is lame be turned out of the way, but let it rather be healed. Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord: Looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled.

It would be easier to get bitter about somebody who betrays you.

Hebrews 12:16-22 Lest there be any fornicator or profane person, as Esau, who for one morsel of meat sold his birthright. [A profane person incidentally means somebody who is far from the temple.] For you know how that afterward, when he would have inherited the blessing, he was rejected: for he found no place of repentance, though he sought it carefully with tears. For you are not come unto the mount that might be touched, and that burned with fire, nor unto blackness and darkness, and tempest, And the sound of a trumpet, and the voice of words; which voice they that heard intreated that the word should not be spoken to them any more: [They were terrified when God spoke.] (For they could not endure that which was commanded, And if so much as a beast touch the mountain, it shall be stoned or thrust through with a dart: And so terrible was the sight, that Moses said, I exceedingly fear and quake:) But you are come unto Mount Sion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels . . .

Can you just see Paul pouring his heart out to these people, saying "*Buck yourselves up. This is what you have going for you.*"

Hebrews 12:23-29 . . . To the general assembly and church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect. And to Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling, that speaks better things than that of Abel. See that you refuse not him that speaks. For if they escaped not who refused him that spoke on earth, much more

shall not we escape if we turn away from him that speaks from heaven: Whose voice then shook the earth: but now he has promised, saying, Yet once more I shake not the earth only, but also heaven. And this word, Yet once more, signifies the removing of those things that are shaken, as of things that are made, that those things which cannot be shaken may remain. [Think of that in relation to I Corinthians 10:18-19 about problems in the church. The truth of God cannot be shaken.] Wherefore we receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved, let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear: For our God is a consuming fire.

Are you aware how many times during these Days of Unleavened Bread that the word "acceptable" or "acceptably" has come up? We did not plan that, but it seems like in virtually every message some measure of that came through. I would judge that God is concerned that our witness before Him, the conduct of our life, be acceptable to Him.

This section here in Hebrews 12 emphasizes individual responsibility before God. We cannot allow ourselves the liberty to judge our progress against another church member fellowshipping with us. Giving ourselves the justification that because so-and-so did this or that does not fly with God. He is interested in *our* response.

In this area of life, responsibility toward God and each other is judged individually. On the other hand this does not mean that we should go around suspicious of one another, wondering whether this or that person is converted. We must learn to accept each other at face value, giving help that may occasionally include gentle, discreet correction as we work out our own salvation with respect and sober attention to God's standard.

I want you to turn to a very comforting scripture in Malachi 3. God never changes. In fact He says that in Malachi 3. The chapter ends with something important to this sermon. As we conclude, God begins to judge things toward the end of this age.

Malachi 3:14-18 You have said, It is vain to serve God: and what profit is it that we have kept his ordinance, and that we have walked mournfully [humbly] before the LORD of hosts? And now we call the proud happy; [Think of society out there.] yes, they that work wickedness are set up; [That is, they are raised on high on pillars as though they are the idol of the public.] yes, they that tempt God are even delivered. [That is, made free to do what they are doing.] Then they that feared the LORD spoke often one to another: and the LORD hearkened, and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before him for them that feared the LORD, and that thought upon his name. And they shall be mine, says the LORD of hosts, in that day when I make up my jewels; and I will spare them as a man spares his own son that serves him. Then shall you return, and discern between the righteous and the wicked, between him that serves God and him that

serves him not.

Remember, the wicked and the righteous are living side by side, and the righteous are getting the worst of it.

Malachi 4:1-3 For behold, the day comes that shall burn as an oven; and all the proud [those who are set up, that tempt God, are made free] yes, and all that do wickedly, shall be stubble: and the day that comes shall burn them up, says the LORD of hosts [when He judges], that it shall leave them neither root nor branch. But unto you that fear my name shall the Sun of righteousness arise with healing in his wings; and you shall go forth, and grow up as calves of the stall. And you shall tread down the wicked; for they shall be ashes under the soles of your feet in the day that I shall do this, says the LORD of hosts.

We may never have a clear picture of God's judgment in this life, but brethren we *do* have God's promise that we can exercise faith in that He always, under every circumstance, judges in both wisdom and mercy.

We are going to conclude this sermon with the example of a man who believed God when everything else looked terrible. It is in Hebrews 11:7. Here is a wonderful example for us.

Hebrews 11:7 By faith Noah, being warned of God of things not seen as yet, moved with fear, prepared an ark to the saving of his house; by the which he condemned the world, and became heir of the righteousness which is by faith.

This is a good example, I think, because Jesus said our days are building to be similar to those of Noah's. By God's mercy, Noah was warned of what was coming. We have been warned, brethren, of what is coming. His neighbors looked at the same culture, the same events, the same skies as he did, but they shrugged their shoulders, and went on. They died in the catastrophe because they judged wrongly.

What was the difference between Noah and those who died? Noah moved. He acted. He conducted his life with fear; not with terror in this case, but with a life-saving deeply-held concern, and understood with rightly directed respect and reverence for what God had warned him of.

And like Abraham, as it shows in Hebrews 11:16, he added up the things he heard from God with what he saw in the world, and strongly and unwaveringly cast his lot with God. He would not allow himself to be turned aside through what surely must have been a wearying, daunting, and puzzling situation. He, apparently, patiently did this for 120 stressful years.

He did not allow himself to turn aside, and what he did through faith played a strong role in providing escape. That is what the ark represented, and he built it. He built his way of escape.

Do you understand that? Do you get it? We may not be building a boat. We may be just building character, or faith, or patience, or kindness, or whatever good virtue, but it is the same principle. It saved him from the destruction wherein everybody else died, and gave us his witness