

The Leaven of Herod (Mark 8:14–21) 2 Aug 2026 KRCN

1. Jesus warned His disciples, "Watch out; beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod." (Mark 8:15) Matthew records the same warning a little differently. Instead of "the leaven of Herod," he writes, "the leaven of the Sadducees." Yet regardless of the wording, the key point is not whose leaven it is, but the fact that Jesus warns us about leaven itself.
2. Leaven is a kind of food ingredient. Except during Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread, every Jewish household kept it on hand. In a sense, it was like the glowing embers left beneath the ashes of an old hearth—always preserved for future use. But leaven was never the main food. It simply helped make the staple food, bread, more enjoyable to eat.
3. Jesus uses this image of leaven as a metaphor for teaching. It represents a person's doctrine, values, way of thinking, or reasoning. By comparing it to leaven, Jesus reminds us that while these things may influence what we consume, they are never meant to become our true food. They are not the bread itself.
4. Jesus warned His disciples because they had already begun treating the leaven as though it were the bread. Their anxiety about forgetting to bring bread revealed this. They had already absorbed the habits of people who constantly worry about such things. Once someone begins feeding on that kind of leaven, it becomes difficult to exercise genuine faith.
5. Suppose we call this leaven the learning of the Sadducees, the reasoning of the Pharisees, or even the political ideology and authority of Herod. In that case, leaven represents the culture and value system of Herod's world. If we were to describe it in a single word, we might simply call it sin, for sin keeps us from standing before God.
6. That is the nature of leaven. It is essential for making flour rise into attractive, appetizing bread. Yet when it comes to feeding on Jesus, the Bread of Life, it becomes a toxin. Worldly values may help a person succeed in this world, but they become obstacles to living as God's children in His kingdom.
7. The Pharisees and the Sadducees show us exactly how this leaven works. Even when overwhelming evidence stood right before their eyes, they refused to accept it. They were so convinced of their own ideas that they could no longer listen to anyone else. They were so occupied with their own religious pride that they had no room left to care for others.
8. Scripture shows us that this kind of leaven prevented the people of that generation from truly receiving Jesus, the Bread of Life, even though He had come into their very midst. Instead, they continued demanding yet another sign. That is why Jesus said, "If anyone will not receive you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet when you leave that house or town." (Matthew 10:14)
9. In his Gospel, Mark calls this "the leaven of Herod." Matthew, however, writing with Mark's account before him, refers to it as "the leaven of the Sadducees." Was he describing a different kind of leaven?

10. Surely when Jesus gave this warning, He did not mention only one group. He would have warned His disciples about every form of leaven—the leaven of the Pharisees, the leaven of the Sadducees, and the leaven of Herod. The Gospel writers simply highlighted different examples. One recorded two; another emphasized another. Yet the point remains the same.

11. I say this because, whether it was Matthew or Mark, what remained impressed upon them was not the label but the **leaven** itself. The brand name may differ—Herod, the Sadducees, or even the Pharisees—but the nature of the leaven is exactly the same. Whatever name it bears, it cannot hide its true character. Every kind of leaven works toward the same end: it keeps people from tasting the kingdom of heaven.

12. Think again about the miracle of the five loaves and two fish. As you might expect, the Pharisees and the Sadducees were present there like leaven mixed into the crowd. Some of them may even have eaten the miraculous bread and fish themselves. Yet they continued to question whether Jesus truly was the Son of God. They continued criticizing God's work. They continued demanding that He perform yet another sign.

13. What, then, is the remedy for such leaven? Jesus answered that it is **the sign of Jonah**. What does that mean? If a person can stand in the very place where thousands were fed with five loaves and two fish, and still fail to see Jesus, still refuse to acknowledge Him as the Lord of life, then what is needed is what Jonah experienced—coming out of the belly of the great fish. In other words, what is needed is **new birth**.

14. This same leaven had already begun to work its way into the hearts of the disciples, even though they had spent considerable time with Jesus. Recognizing this, Jesus warned them, just as every Jewish household was commanded to remove all leaven during the Feast of Unleavened Bread. *"Remove the leaven."* Because, like the Pharisees, the disciples were still preoccupied with whether they had remembered to bring bread.

15. If you read Mark Ch.8 carefully, you will notice where Jesus' attention is focused. In v.2 He says, *"I have compassion on the crowd."* Some of them had come from far away, and He did not want to send them home hungry. One would expect the disciples, who had spent so much time with Jesus, to understand His heart. Yet instead they replied, v.4, *"How can one feed these people with bread here in this desolate place?"*

16. These words do not mean that the disciples were sincerely searching for a solution. Rather, they reveal that the leaven had already taken hold of them.

17. In this scene, the disciples represent those who had already crossed their own Red Sea. As we saw in Mark chapter 6, they were the very ones who gathered the twelve baskets of leftovers after the miracle. They had personally witnessed the Lord's overflowing abundance and generosity. Yet if even they were still worried about bread?

18. Our church is currently installing air conditioning. It is an expensive project, and the permit process has been quite complicated. But think about who we are. Last year we were graciously

given this church building. And yet we still find ourselves asking, *"Where will the bread come from?"*

19. What is it that blinds the eyes of the disciples—and our own? Leaven. What dulls our hearts, even while we stand in the presence of the living Christ? Is it simply forgetfulness? Is it spiritual weakness? No. It is leaven. It is unbelief itself disguised as ignorance—an unbelief that leads us away from trusting Christ. This is what Jesus calls **the leaven of the Pharisees**.

20. From a worldly perspective, such concerns seem perfectly reasonable. How are we going to feed four thousand people? Do we have the budget? Who will purchase the food? Who will organize the distribution? Who will oversee the entire operation? Those are sensible questions.

21. But in the place where Jesus is at work performing His miracles, such calculations are nothing more than leaven that produces anxiety. They keep us from entrusting even this matter to Him. They prevent us from expecting that the One who commands us to feed the people will also provide everything needed to accomplish His command. John's Gospel tells us that Philip was precisely such a disciple.

22. There is another example of this leaven. In Matthew 14:17 the disciples say, *"We have here only five loaves and two fish."* John's account adds one more sentence: *"But what are they for so many?"* (John 6:9) Those words were spoken by Andrew, Peter's brother.

23. The leaven had already found its place in Andrew's heart. Even if five loaves and two fish could somehow be divided among five thousand people, what difference could they possibly make? Perhaps this was simple pessimism. Perhaps it was even cynical resignation—*They're only a few barley loaves*. This, too, may rightly be called **the leaven of the Sadducees**.

24. Yet the grace of God breaks through human calculation and cynical unbelief. In spite of everything, His grace is given upon this world. It is shared with those upon whom He has compassion. He satisfies their hearts so completely that they no longer feel the need to demand another sign.

25. Yet even when such miracles take place, the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees does not simply disappear. Nor does the fullness that comes through witnessing miracles remain forever. Faith that depends upon miracles alone never truly matures. Soon enough, they become hungry again.

26. Think about Israel. For forty years they were guided by the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire. Every day they ate the manna that God Himself provided. Yet in the end, they died without truly trusting Him. The Pharisees, the Sadducees, and Herod all represent this same condition. Though they lived in the midst of miracles, they continued waiting for an even greater miracle that would finally convince them.

27. The disciples were no different. When Jesus warned them about the leaven, their minds immediately turned to the fact that they had forgotten to bring bread. Hunger had swallowed up the miracle. Although they were Jesus' disciples, they were still captivated by the pride of

life and the desires of this present world. Though they had begun following Christ, they still had a long way to go.

28. Return once more to the story of the feeding of the five thousand. This miracle is recorded in all four Gospels. As we read Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John together, we should ask ourselves: What has captured our attention all these years? Have we been preoccupied with how many people were fed? Or with what Jesus used to feed them? Are you interested in why only the number of men was recorded, excluding the women and children?

29. If those are still the questions that occupy us, then even today, while reading about the sign through which Jesus reveals Himself, we are showing that we have not yet learned to live in the reality of the new heaven and the new earth He brings. Even while eating the manna now, we still long for the meat and leeks of Egypt. How long will it be before we are finally set free from the dominion and the addiction of the leaven of Herod?