

The Snares of Extremism

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Man is prone to be an extremist. Ecclesiastes 7:16–18 contains some pertinent instructions regarding this. To make this passage a little clearer, we could paraphrase it like this:

Do not be overly-righteous or overly-wise. Why should you destroy yourself? Do not be overly-wicked or foolish. Why should you die before your time? It is good to recognize and avoid [escape from] all of these extremes.

This passage presents an interesting overview of extremism. At first glance some of these extremes even seem to contradict each other. However, in reality they balance each other out. Too often in avoiding an extreme we swing to the opposite extreme. These verses help us not to do that. We will look at each of these criteria in turn.

Do Not Be “Overly-Righteous”

According to the amount of coverage that we find in the Bible on this extreme, it must be a serious threat to God's people. The Pharisees of the New Testament era had this problem and Jesus condemned them for it in no uncertain terms. He seemed to consider the Pharisees a greater danger to the truth than their more liberal counterparts, the Sadducees. We will look at four areas where the leaven of the Pharisees can make problems for us today, if we are not careful.

1. *Doing good deeds to be seen of men (Mat. 6:1–5).* None of the actions mentioned in this passage are wrong. They are encouraged in other Scriptures. The men who did these deeds were certain that God was pleased with them. However, their primary motive was not pleasing God, but impressing men. God is never pleased with our good deeds if we do them for selfish reasons, but will condemn us for them rather than commend us. If we spend a lot of time evaluating the things we do and thinking about the impression we left with them, we are in danger of this.

2. *Teaching commandments of men as doctrine (Mat. 15:7–9).* God hates it when people profess to serve Him but in reality are hypocrites. The Pharisees were carnal men, dead on the inside. To make up for this, they had much to say about their goodness. They made long lists of rules regulating many details in the daily lives of God's people. They considered these rules to be a sign of their spirituality, but God did not look at it that way. Instead, He said that their hearts were far from Him and that they worshipped Him in vain. God forbid that we should come to the place that we consider ourselves spiritual people because of our list of standards and applications.

3. *Wearing distinctive clothing to impress men (Mat. 23:5–7).* The Pharisees wore their distinctive attire as a badge of honor to impress men. They did not realize that by doing so, they were straying far from the principle of God's law. They took pride in making the distinctive features of their dress more distinctive by going beyond the requirements of the Law. Because we can be tempted to do the same, we have not only minimum dress standards in our churches, but also maximum ones. When coverings need to get bigger and bigger, and dresses get longer and longer, we can easily

become guilty of the sin of the Pharisees in this area. Something is wrong when we are not satisfied to blend into the local brotherhood but must be plainer than the rest.

4. *Proselytizing to boost our image (Mat. 23:15)*. The Pharisees compassed sea and land to make a convert. But they did not do it because they loved the souls of lost men, they did it to promote their image. Outreach is a very important part of the work of the church. But when we pursue outreach for the wrong reasons, it will fail. Our contacts will soon discover our hypocrisy and turn their backs on our witness. However, if we humbly seek to glorify God and reach out to the lost in genuine love, they will see it as well, and God will be able to bless our efforts.

In Mat. 5:20, Jesus warned His disciples that their righteousness would need to exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. A hypocritical over-emphasized righteousness is not righteousness at all, but a sin of which we must repent if we would gain God's favor and reach heaven.

Do Not Be “Overly-Wise”

The Sadducees were the opposite of the Pharisees in many ways. They were the elite in their society. They were polished, well dressed, educated, worldly wise, and politically astute. They were able to move on equal level with their Roman rulers and even out-wit them on occasion. The Bible does not speak as clearly against the Sadducees as it does the Pharisees, perhaps because this kind of person is not so soon a hypocrite. Many people with these problems eventually find themselves outside the church because, in the long run, the church will be beneath their dignity. But we do see some in the church with these tendencies on occasion. The following principles are important for us to keep in mind and may help us to avoid this extreme.

1. *Worldly wisdom is opposed to godliness (1 Cor. 1:26–31)*. Christianity found its most productive seedbed amongst the humble and despised. When we become too proud to remain the despised of this world, we will find it hard to be a genuine Christian. Few of the wise of this world see the light, and when we try to emulate them we will soon lose the light we have. Very few of the Sadducees seem to have found their way into the New Testament church. We should take a warning from that fact.

2. *Partiality is condemned by God (James 2:1–9)*. Most people who fall into this extreme find themselves looking down on the humble, “lower-class” members in the congregation. They tend to form cliques with other “polished” Christians who appreciate their cultured life style. Such people will find themselves outside if they do not repent. Few ever return.

This extreme is just as much an expression of pride as the leaven of the Pharisees is. Image conscious Christians are in immediate danger. They need to repent, and get their eyes off themselves and on to Christ. Then they will find the importance of their image fading away and being replaced by the glory of God in their lives.

Do Not Be “Overly-Wicked”

How can this extreme apply to Christian people? Yet we can make some important Scriptural applications which are sometimes forgotten. This extreme is often taken by those who are reacting to the extremes of the “overly-righteous.”

1. *Expecting the Grace of God to overlook sin in our lives (Rom. 5:20–6:18).* Many today consider us to be practicing a work’s religion because we believe that a Christian should live in victory over sin. These would say that we expect to be saved because of our perfection rather than by the grace of God. We know this is not true, since outside of the Grace of God no one can hope to live in Christian victory. But this extreme can come closer home. When we tolerate habitual sin in our lives and expect to be saved anyway, we have fallen into this extreme. We need to realize that the Grace of God gives victory over sin rather than overlooking sin, and not be satisfied until we attain to it.

2. *Glorying in toleration of sin in the congregation (1 Cor 5:1–6).* The Corinthians thought it was a sign of their great spirituality that they could overlook sin that even the heathen frowned on. Sometimes congregations today are tempted to feel somewhat the same way. They look at legalistic groups and feel good that they are more tolerant and reasonable. But this thinking can quickly become a snare that takes a congregation downhill into apostasy. We need to avoid the extreme of legalism, but we must never swing to the extreme of toleration to do so.

Satan loves to trick God’s children into forgetting the seriousness of allowing sin in their lives and in their congregations. If he can get us accustomed to smaller inconsistencies, soon larger ones will not seem so bad. This kind of trail leads in only one direction—downhill.

Do Not Be Foolish

Note that the extreme in this case is not just being overly-foolish, but being foolish at all. God’s people should shun all foolishness and seek God’s wisdom. But in the desire to swing away from the extreme of being “overly-wise” we have at times glorified forms of foolishness and considered them to be signs of godliness. If we read the Bible carefully, we will soon understand that God is no more pleased with this extreme than He is with any of the other extremes. Foolishness can take various forms, but the following are probably the most common.

1. *Ignorance (2 Peter 2:15).* This verse equates foolishness with ignorance. The apostle Paul said various times, “I would not have you ignorant....” The extreme of being “overly-wise” that we described earlier is never successfully countered by promoting ignorance. Rather it is best countered by genuine knowledge and true wisdom. Too often those who promote ignorance as being a sign of godliness look down at spiritual brethren who are seeking godly wisdom as being “overly-wise.” But God views deliberate ignorance just as seriously as any other extreme.

This extreme sometimes surfaces amongst us in anti-education feelings. We do not promote higher education, but our children should be well enough educated that they can study on their own. They should be interested in furthering their knowledge through their own reading. Not everyone has the same aptitude to read and study, but it is a danger sign if most of the people in a congregation lack interest in such things.

2. *Speculation (2 Tim. 2:23)*. Too often wild imaginings and speculations are mistaken for deep thinking and broad knowledge. This extreme may surface in spectacular Bible prophecy “studies” or in scare stories about medical or political conspiracies. The Y2K scare stories that were widely promoted by professing Christians several years ago gave one more cause for unbelievers to mock the church. Those who promoted a quiet faith in God were vindicated by the circumstances.

People who are infected with this brand of foolishness spend much time in reading books about subjects like the Bermuda Triangle, the lost continent of Atlantis, the Great Pyramid, and UFO's. They have lengthy discussions about subjects such as the dividing of the world in the days of Peleg. They try to figure out if Saddam Hussein might be the Anti-Christ. But they often have a hard time studying their Sunday school lessons and may be easily bored by their personal devotions. This kind of foolishness can quickly become deadly.

3. *Shallow minded noisiness (Prov. 9:13)*. This verse points at a woman, but can be just as true of men. Who laughs the loudest after church? Or has the most funny stories to tell after a sobering sermon? The devil loves to use this kind of foolishness to destroy serious and sober thinking.

4. *A search for extra-Biblical spiritual knowledge (Gal. 3:1–3)*. The person who adds to the Gospel message is the most foolish of all. Apparently the Galatians had fallen for the idea that salvation was too simple. They felt their salvation could be made more secure by also practicing the Old Testament Law of Moses. The Gnostics promoted a secret knowledge that Jesus was said to have imparted to a few of the disciples. But the Bible is Truth, and we need nothing more to save our souls. Extra-Biblical spiritual knowledge invariably draws people away from truth.

Look Out for Reactions

Most often we take extreme positions because we are reacting to other extremes. Satan can find a way to use any extreme position. Genuine Christianity is always radical from a worldly perspective. But from the Christian perspective extremism and radicalism are always destructive to the church. Many congregational difficulties are caused by extremism, because people refuse to compromise strong personal ideals in order to blend in with a spiritual congregation. Normally the damage done by taking an extreme position on Truth is just as serious as false doctrine.

God's blessing is on those who stand for truth in quiet humility and are willing to blend into Scriptural, spiritual congregations who have learned how to avoid the dangers of radicalism and extremism.

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