

Beware the Leaven of the Pharisees

Scripture: Matthew 16:1-12

Sermon Series: *Matthew*

Topic: False Teaching

Introduction

Jesus is concerned about the teaching of the Pharisees and the Sadducees. He warns his disciples to watch out for it. He uses the metaphor of leaven to describe their teaching. He says, "*Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.*" The disciples misunderstood at first, but then, as Jesus explains, they do understand.



Jesus calls his followers to beware, to be on guard against certain kinds of teaching, namely false teaching. Thus, we need to understand what that is and how that applies to us today.

In the previous paragraph, Jesus had been on eastern shoreline of Sea of Galilee. After feeding the 4,000 (plus women and children), he and his disciples got into "*the boat and went to the region of Magadan.*" Magadan may be a variant spelling of *Magdala*, which is hometown of Mary Magdalene.



If so, then Jesus moved from the eastern shoreline of Sea of Galilee over to the western shoreline, where Madala is located. He left the Gentile side of the Sea of Galilee (where he had fed the 4,000) and crossed over to the Jewish side.

The Pharisees Came to Test Jesus

Upon arrival in that region, Jesus is met with opposition of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

Matthew 16:1 (ESV) And the Pharisees and Sadducees came, and to test him they asked him to show them a sign from heaven.

The Pharisees and Sadducees (v.1). This is only the second time¹ in the New Testament where we find these two groups standing together. They were widely “known for their mutual hostility.”² They were politically and theologically opposed to each other at many levels. The fact that came together to Jesus points to their only place of agreement, which is that Jesus presents a very real threat to them both and that he must be done away with.

Came... to test him (v.1). The two groups of religious leaders **came together to test Jesus**. They are seeking to cause Jesus to fail. They are not ‘testing’ him to discern if he was truly from God, but rather they are testing him in order to find an occasion to entrap him.

As we have been reading this gospel, we have seen that the opposition to Jesus has begun to mount higher and higher. It appears that things are getting worse, as we discover two mutual enemies who have banded together to come against Jesus. The situation is truly desperate when enemies work together.

Show them a sign from heaven (v.1). They asked to be shown “*a sign from heaven*.” Under most circumstances asking for a sign that confirms one’s identity is not a bad request, but in this case asking this question reveals a massive problem. They are asking for “a sign from heaven” when Jesus has given sign after sign after sign from heaven.

- Jesus has just now come from the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee (Mt 15:29) in the Gentile “region of the Decapolis”³ where he took “seven [loaves of bread] and a few small fish”⁴ and with it he fed **4,000** men (in addition to their wives and children). The Pharisees and Sadducees were not uninformed. They knew this.
- Immediately before feeding thousands he spent a couple of days healing the *lame*, opening the eyes of the *blind*, restoring the *crippled*, and giving voice to the *mute*. The scene was so wonderfully amazing that the Gentile crowds started “*glorifying the God of Israel*” (Mt 15:31). The Pharisees and Sadducees were not uninformed. They knew this.
- And just a short time before this, on the western side of the Sea of Galilee, a short distance from Nazareth, among the Jewish population, Jesus had fed **5,000** men (not counting the women and children) by multiplying five loaves of bread and two fish (Mt 14:17). The Pharisees and Sadducees were not uninformed. They knew this.

There was abundant evidence before the Pharisees and Sadducees. There were numerous and irrefutable “signs from heaven” staring them in the face and yet they refused to accept them.

¹ See Matthew 3:7.

² R. T. France, *Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 1, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 97.

³ See parallel account in Mark 7:31.

⁴ Matthew 15:34.

They were not seeking confirmation, but rather a means of *condemnation*. Their testing of Jesus was not so that they could *discover* evidence to confirm that he was truly sent by God, but rather to discover evidence to condemn him as definitely NOT sent by God.

The signs of the times (v.3). Jesus essentially said to them that they were able to rightly interpret the weather, but not rightly able to interpret whether he had come from God. They were able to read the signs of the coming of a storm, but not the signs of the coming of the Savior.

Notice that this phrase, '*the signs of the times*.' This is the only time this phrase appears in the NT. Note that it refers to the signs that point to who Jesus is, not to future apocalyptic events. The 'signs of the times' refer to the signs that point to the true identity of Jesus, not to future clues about the end of time.

An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign (v.4). Such "sign seeking" is evil. When you have obvious signs before you, to ask for more signs is evil. When you refuse to receive the abundant signs that have already been given, to demand more is evil. To ask for "signs" from God so that you can use them to affirm your own selfish will, is evil.

Not all seeking of signs is evil.⁵

1. Moses did not believe that Israel would believe that God had sent him to deliver them from slavery, so God gave him three signs to demonstrate that he had truly come from God.⁶
2. Hezekiah asked for a sign that he would recover from his illness, and God gave him a sign (2 Kgs 20:8-11).
3. God invited king Ahaz to ask him for a sign because his faith was weak and the Lord gave him a sign (Is 7:10-11).
4. Jonathan sought a sign from God before attacking his enemies in order to know if God wanted him to begin the battle (1 Sam 4:6-12). And God answered him.

Not all sign-seeking is evil, but be careful. Some sign-seeking *is* evil. "*Do not put God to the test*" (Dt 6:16). Do not think that God owes you a sign. He owes you nothing. He is absolutely and completely trustworthy and he deserves to be trusted completely. Therefore, sign-seeking that comes from a place of disbelief and lack of faith, borders on evil. However, there are biblical examples of God using signs in order to strengthen weak faith and to confirm his will and direction to those who are seeking God's will above their own personal will.

⁵ For a fuller exposition of this notion, see my sermon "We Wish to See a Sign," from 24 March 2024 available [here](#) in audio, video, and PDF formats.

⁶ See Exodus 4:1-9.

No sign... the sign of Jonah (v.4). Back on Easter morning (31 March 2024), I preached a whole sermon explaining the sign of Jonah. You can find it [here](#).⁷ However, the sign simply is that just as Jonah was entombed in the belly of a large fish for three days and then delivered to preach a message of salvation to the people of Nineveh, so Jesus was entombed in the belly of the earth for three days and then delivered to preach a message salvation to the people of Israel (and indeed all would and will listen to him).

Jesus declined to perform some sign for the Pharisees and Sadducees. He said no. No sign would be given to them, except the sign of his resurrection from the dead, which would soon come to pass.

So he left them and departed (v.4). When people persist in stubborn unbelief, in spite of obvious evidence, sometimes Jesus departs from them. When we persist in wicked rebellion to the truth we know, then sometimes the time of grace comes to an end. The author of Hebrews cries out to those who would persist in sin by pleading with them,

“Do not harden your hearts..., do not put the Lord to the test, do not persist in willful rebellion, lest you hear God say in his anger toward your deliberate⁸ sin, ‘You shall not enter into my rest’” (Hebrews 3:8-11).

Do not be like the Pharisees and Sadducees. Do not ignore the evidence God has already given. Do not harden your heart. Do not resist the Holy Spirit. Surrender your heart, do not be stubborn of heart. Spiritual stubbornness can be spiritually fatal. Willful resistance and stubborn rebellion is, in God’s eyes, “like the sin of witchcraft” (1 Sam 15:23). If you continue unrepentantly, like the Pharisees and Sadducees, in persistent sin and willful rebellion against the grace of Jesus, then there will come a day when he depart and leave you.

Do not let that happen.

Watch and Beware the Leaven of the Pharisees

If this confrontation with the Pharisees and Sadducees began in Magdala, then the rest of the story takes place in the boat as Jesus and his disciples are crossing over to the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee.



Matthew 16:5-6 (ESV) ⁵ When the disciples reached the other side, they had forgotten to bring any bread. ⁶ Jesus said to them, “Watch and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.”

⁷ Source: <https://hopechristianchurch.org/sermons/the-sign-of-jonah/> accessed 20 July 2024.

⁸ See also Hebrews 10:26.

Reached the other side (v.5). The way Matthew writes gives the impression that Jesus did not speak until the boat "**reached the other side.**" One wonders if Jesus was silently thinking or praying during the whole crossing of the Sea of Galilee and only after arriving on the other side did he chose to say to them, "**Watch and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.**" Perhaps he was contemplating this latest encounter with those who hated him and that thinking is what prompted this warning.

We brought no bread (v.7). The word '**leaven**' makes the disciples think about bread, even though Jesus clearly says, "**the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.**" They misunderstood. Jesus corrects them and reminds them that he is not concerned about the lack of bread. If he was, he could just make some, just as he did for the Jews (by turning five loaves into enough bread to feed 5,000+) or for the Gentiles (by turning seven loaves into enough bread to feed 4,000+). Jesus is not concerned about a bread. However, he is very concerned about something else, so he repeated what he had just said.

Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees. After repeating the statement, then they understood that he was talking about "**the teaching of the Pharisees and the Sadducees.**" Jesus is using leaven as a metaphor for teaching. Jesus is wanting his disciples to "watch and beware of the teaching of Pharisees and the Sadducees."

Their teaching is like leaven. Leaven is a silent, slow spreader that over time thoroughly permeates the whole lump of dough. When it is present, it grows and expands and changes what it touches. And in this case, this has a corrupting effect. Their teaching, as Jesus just pointed out, is evil. Those who just now came seeking a sign from heaven, appear to be godly, but they are in fact evil. Jesus warns his disciples, "**watch and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.**" Jesus commands his followers to examine and beware of their teaching.

What about the teaching of the Pharisees should we be aware?

There are at least three aspects of the teaching of the Pharisees that Jesus condemned.

1. **God is more concerned with outward presentation than he is with inward disposition.**

They taught that as long as you look good on the outside God doesn't really care about what you thinking inside. No one has a perfectly clean heart, God knows this, but you can have clean hands. So long as you're hands are clean, it makes no significant difference that your heart is not. So long as you're offering [outward] sacrifices, there need not be any change of heart. Outward religious duty is more blessed than inward righteous disposition. External propriety is more important than the internal purity. To this teaching Jesus said,

"Woe to you..., Pharisees, hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, outwardly you are beautiful, but within are full of... uncleanness. ...outwardly you appear righteous, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness (Mt 23:27-28).

The Pharisees worked hard to appear religiously beautiful on the outside, while neglecting the heart work on the inside. They forgot what God said to Samuel,

"The LORD sees not as man sees; man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart" (1 Sam 16:7).

Beware of the teaching that emphasizes outward appearance but fails to call attention to the inward meditations of the heart.

2. ***Pleasing people is more important than pleasing God.*** Jesus said about the Pharisees, "they do all their deeds to be seen by others" (Mt 23:5). Their primary desire was to impress and please people more than God. If social media had existed in the first century, then every Pharisee would have had a mobile phone by which they could have broadcast their righteous deeds. Imagine the posts,

- "Late to synagogue, had to help another homeless guy."
- "Exhausted after working six hours at the soup kitchen."
- "Another late night, listening to lectures of Rabbi Shammai"



Those who do good deeds so that they will be praised by men, will be praised by men, but Jesus commands his followers to do good deeds in such a way that God gets the glory rather than the doer of the good deed.

Matthew 5:16 (ESV) In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

Pleasing God was not really a priority among the Pharisees. They primarily wanted to please each other by pretending to serve God, when in reality they were serving one another.

Beware of such doing.

3. ***Salvation comes through human effort rather than by divine mercy.*** The Pharisees taught that Righteousness comes by keeping the law. Do good deeds and God will reward you. Be disciplined and God's favor will rest upon you. Your diligent effort will pay off. Your good deeds are more weighty than your bad. Do more good deeds and heaven's gates will open wide for you. "You've can do this." Recall Jesus' description of the prayer of the Pharisee.

Luke 18:11-12 (ESV) "God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get."

The Pharisee's confidence before God was in his own doing; his refusal to commit adultery or extortion, his regular fasting, and his tithing. His faith was in his own doing, and not in God's grace at all. He didn't think he needed any grace because he was doing just fine all by himself. However, this man was not justified, but rather the tax collector was.

Luke 18:13-14 (ESV) ¹³ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' ¹⁴ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other.

Forgiveness came to man who knew he needed mercy, and not to the man who thought he was saved by his own good deeds.

Beware of the teaching that says do good and you will be saved.

We could go on and list more of the implication of the teaching of the Pharisees, however, it will likely be helpful for us to consider what "the leaven of the Pharisees" might look like today.

What is the Leaven of the Pharisees Today?

The Pharisees were the most popular and well known religious teachers of their day. They were considered by the people to be authorities on God. Thus, what they taught was significant, not because it was true, but because it was believed to be correct. It was significant because people assumed they were right. However, the problem was that they were only *partially* right. Jesus warned his disciples to "watch and beware" of their teaching because it was a teaching that mixed truth with error. The Pharisees were false teachers.

What teaching does that today? What teaching takes a little truth and mixes it with error? What sort of false teaching is popular among us today.

The Prosperity Gospel

The prosperity gospel is probably the most prevalent false teaching.

What is it?

The prosperity gospel is the teaching that all who put their faith in Jesus will presently experience physical, material, and financial prosperity. The focus is on the here and now.

Who preaches it?

Since the days of Paul and Peter there have been those who preach the gospel for the sake of financial gain⁹, but the popularity of this false gospel began to grow in the 1950's under the influence of Oral Roberts. Today the most popular purveyors are people Kenneth Copeland, Benny Hinn, Joel Osteen, T.D. Jakes, Creflo Dollar, Paula White, and Joyce Meyer.

⁹ Titus 1:11; 1 Timothy 6:5; 2 Peter 2:3.

What are the key beliefs?

There are four essential beliefs.

1. **Jesus purchased all benefits of salvation for this life.** Jesus died to pay all your debts and heal all your diseases (Is 53:5) so that you can have “abundant life” (Jn 10:10) now.
2. **Those benefits begin today.** Just as God gave Israel a Promised Land, so God has a “promised land” today for you to enjoy.
3. **You must give in order to get.** This is also called “seed-faith” doctrine. You must sow a seed in faith (usually in the form of money) to God’s church or a ministry (usually the one belonging to the preacher) so that he can bless you with a larger harvest of prosperity or healing. If you give in faith and expect a miracle, then you will reap a harvest a prosperity, healing, and blessing. If you give in faith, then you will receive in abundance.
4. **You must name it in order to claim it.** Prayer is the means of laying hold of God’s blessings. Many in this camp view men as “little gods” and since we were created in the image of God, we too can speak into being what we desire. Thus, we must speak out loud the blessings we desire so that we can lay hold of them. This is also called a “word of faith,” since a person says in faith what he wills to receive, especially in claiming the blessings God has already promised to give them, then God will be compelled to answer that prayer and bless that faith with the blessing of prosperity and healing. If prosperity or healing does not come, then it is because of a lack of faith on the part of the person praying.

What are the primary problems with this false gospel?

1. ***It wrongly assumes that ultimate fulfillment is found in material possessions.*** The Bible teaches us that ultimate fulfillment is found in communion with God himself through Jesus alone and the indwelling presence of his own Holy Spirit. Ultimate satisfaction of our souls is found in Christ alone and not in any created thing.
2. ***It over emphasizes the present while underemphasizing the future.*** It is true that that kingdom of heaven has come, but this false gospel ignores that fact that there is much more of the kingdom that has *not* yet come. There are temporal blessings that do come to God’s people today, but Jesus warned that obediently following him would often lead to the loss of material things and may even lead to the loss of one’s own life. Jesus said,

“Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves... Beware of men, for they will deliver you over to courts and flog you in synagogues... put to death, and you will be hated by all for my name’s sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it” (Mt 10:16-17, 21-22, 39).

This part of Jesus’ teaching is not taught in the prosperity gospel.

3. *It ignores the Bible's teaching on the normalcy and necessity of suffering.* Paul did not suffer because he had lacked faith, he suffered because it was the will of Jesus to sanctify him through suffering.¹⁰ "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect through weakness" (2 Cor 12:9). For this reason Paul explains that suffering is a very necessary and normal part of the Christian life saying,

"For you... received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, 'Abba! Father!' The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are the children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him" (Rom 8:15-17).

Jesus suffered in this life. Each and every apostle suffering in this life. Paul suffered for the name of Jesus. Faithful Christians around the world are suffering today for the sake of the name of Jesus. This message is not taught in the prosperity gospel.

Beware of this false gospel.

The Self-Autonomy Gospel

A second example of the leaven of the Pharisees that has crept into the world and even into the church is the leaven of the gospel of self-autonomy.

What is it?

The self-autonomy gospel is the teaching that the human individual is the source of salvation and God can help you be a better you. The focus is on the self.

Who preaches it?

This false gospel is preached today by cultural elites, major media, and nearly every secular educational institution.

What are the key beliefs?

Perhaps this could be expressed in the form of Ten Commandments of Self-Autonomous Gospel.

1. God created me in his image and "God don't make no junk," therefore I am like God and thus I will have no other gods before me.
2. God wonderfully created me, thus my image is great, therefore, I will share it as often as I can through all media platforms available to me.
3. God gave me a good mind, therefore I will say whatever I think.

¹⁰ Jesus said, "I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name" Acts 9:16.

4. I will remember my need for rest and recreation and will observe such days as are pleasant in my sight as often as I am able.
5. I will honor my mother and father so long as they first honor me.
6. I am the supreme standard of my life, therefore I will trust in myself and my truth will be my guide always.
7. God wants me to be happy, thus my own personal fulfillment is my highest goal, therefore I will have sex with whomever I want.
8. I have a right to a full and happy life, therefore I will at times take things from those who have more than me. This will humble them, and make me happy, thus we'll both be better off.
9. I am my own highest standard, therefore I will lie whenever it suits me.
10. My emotions are authoritative, therefore I will always follow my heart.

What are the problems with this false gospel?

The problem is that these principles that are being embraced by nearly everyone around us and they are in direct contradiction to everything that the Bible teaches.

1. ***It sees self as authoritative, rather than God.*** He and his word are authoritative, and not the human individual. The Bible is the authoritative word of God and not the corrupt writings of fallible men. Yes, the Bible was written by fallible men, such as Peter and Paul, however, these men teach us that they were infallibly helped by the infallible Holy Spirit of God in such a way that what they wrote was exactly what God intended them to write.

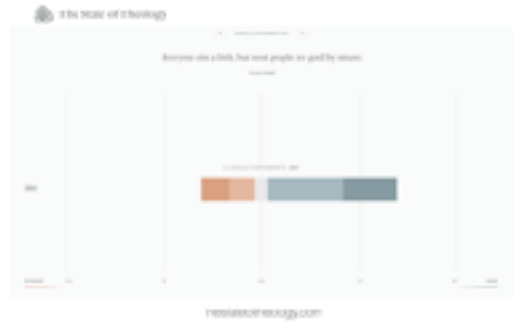
"...no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Ptr 1:20-21).

And Paul tells us that, "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim 3:16).

Self is not sovereign. God is.

2. ***It fails to fully reckon with the effects of the Fall.*** Yes, we are each wonderful creations of God, but are each sinfully flawed from birth. Because of the sin of Adam and Eve, we are born flawed, carrying within our hearts, the sinful seed of corruption and the contamination of evil. The word of God says, *"... sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned—" (Rom 5:12).*

A 2022 theological survey of the U.S. revealed that 66% of respondents believe that “people are good by nature.”¹¹



We are all born with an inherent tendency toward sin. We are born with corrupt natures. No human being is born righteous. We are each one of us born with a sinful nature.

David wrote, “I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me” (Ps 51:5).

Because of this truth he writes, “there is none righteous, no not one” (Ps 14:1-3). The false gospel overestimates human goodness and underestimates the sinfulness of sin.

3. ***This false gospel is the oldest false gospel.*** Satan has been preaching this false gospel from the beginning. He used this message to lure Eve into disobeying God. He said,

“...when you eat of [the forbidden fruit] your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God...” (Gn 2:5).

4. There is something broken within us that wants to usurp the authority of God. We want to be the greatest. We yearn to be the strongest, most well know, most recognized, most powerful person. We want to be our own authority. We want to do what we want to do and we will defy anyone who try to tell us otherwise. The leaven of the Pharisees would tell us, “You don’t need anyone else. You are beholden to no one else. You’ve got this. You can do it. You can take care of yourself.”

Conclusion

Jesus says to his followers, “Watch and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees” (16:6). These two groups taught truth mixed with error. They manipulated the truth to suit their own desires. This is evil. Jesus teach us to beware of such false teachers.

Such false teachers still exist today. There are many among us who would twist the truth for their own selfish desires. We must know the truth if we will rightly discern what is not truth. Jesus prayed, “Father, sanctify them in truth. Your word is truth” (Jn 17:17). May God open our eyes and ears to see and hear the difference between truth teaching and false teaching. May the Holy Spirit open our spiritual noses to quickly smell rotteness in the words of those whose intentions are evil.

Watch and beware of the leaven of false teachers and liars.

¹¹ Source: <https://thestateoftheology.com/data-explorer/2022/12?AGE=30&MF=14®ION=30&DENSITY=62&EDUCATION=62&INCOME=254&MARITAL=126ÐNICITY=62&RELTRAD=62&EVB=6&ATTENDANCE=254> accessed 18 July 2024.

Discussion Questions

1. What does this portion of Scripture teach about Jesus?
2. What do you think Jesus' response to the Pharisees and Sadducees? Why did he respond to them the way that he did?
3. Do you agree that their request "for a sign from heaven" revealed the evil in their hearts? Why or why not?
4. Why did Jesus use leaven as a metaphor for the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees?
5. How would you summarize the teaching of the Pharisees?
6. How might you apply to your life Jesus' command to "watch and beware of the leaven" of false teachers?
7. Did the Lord reveal anything to you through this portion of Scripture? If so, explain.