

The Leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees

Matthew 15:39-16:12

No sign shall be given to this generation? How could Jesus say that with a straight face? Oh sure, when Jesus cast a demon out of a girl up near Tyre the news might not have made it back down into Judea. But as we saw last week, great multitudes of people had been bringing all kinds of sick people to Jesus, and He had healed all of them. As a result, everyone was astonished at what Jesus could do. And think about the very public miracle we saw at the end of chapter 15 – feeding 4000 families. How could the Pharisees and Sadducees not have known about that? How could they still be looking for a sign from God?

And as we have been learning over the last few weeks, it seems that these miracles were specifically designed to be demonstrations of Jesus' power, to prove that Jesus is Who He says He is – the Holy One of Israel. Back in chapter 15, verses 8 and 9 Jesus quoted Isaiah 29:13 to the Pharisees, calling them hypocrites because they were ignoring the commandments of God in their zeal for their human traditions. And how did God say He would respond to this sort of hypocrisy? "I will proceed to do a marvelous work among this people, even a marvelous work and a wonder." And what did Jesus do in the rest of Matthew chapter 15? On His own authority and by means of His own power, He proceeded to do all the marvelous works and wonders that God said He would do in Isaiah 29, and in the same order.

It's pretty obvious when you think about it: In Isaiah 29:15 and 16, God condemns those who hide the truth from God, those clay pots of God's creation who set themselves up above God. Isn't that what Jesus does in the first part of Matthew 15, condemning the Pharisees for their hypocritical arrogance? Isaiah 29:17 says that God's blessings will be poured out on Lebanon, and immediately after His dressing down of the Pharisees, Jesus heads to the area around Tyre and Sidon, which is also called Lebanon, to cleanse a girl of her demons. Next, Isaiah 29:18 says that the deaf shall hear and the blind shall see. And does Jesus do in Matthew 15:30-31? He makes the dumb to speak, the lame to walk and the blind to see. Next, Isaiah 29:19 says that the Holy One of Israel will bless the meek and the poor, and what could be a better fulfillment of that prophecy than the miraculous feeding of the 4000 at the end of Matthew chapter 15?

And Jesus continues to follow the same literary structure in the first part of today's passage, as He confronts the Pharisees and Sadducees. For whom does God condemn in Isaiah 29:20 and 21? The scorners, those who watch for iniquity, those who accuse a man for offending, those who lay snares for people who dare to reprove them. And isn't that exactly what the religious leaders were trying to do in Matthew 16:1, as they tempted Jesus, or put Him to the test? So it turns out that in their opposition to Jesus, they were participating in the fulfillment of Isaiah 29. They were actually becoming part of the sign that they craved, helping to prove Jesus' point that He is in fact the one Isaiah was talking about, the Lord, the Holy One of Israel!

And yet, none of these fulfilled prophecies, none of these miracles, none of these signs were sufficient for these skeptics. No, they wanted something more – a sign from Heaven. They wanted Jesus to do some Stephen Spielberg stuff like the parting of the Red Sea in the days of Moses, or like the fire that fell from Heaven during Elijah's confrontation with the prophets of Baal. That's the sort of sign that they craved, and that's the sort of sign that Jesus said He wouldn't do.

Okay, so why didn't Jesus satisfy their skepticism? Why didn't He display His power so publicly, so unmistakably, so clearly that no one would have any more room for doubt? Indeed, why doesn't He do that for us today? Wouldn't that sort of thing lead to a world-wide revival?

Perhaps, but then again, perhaps not. For after all, the parting of the Red Sea didn't convince Pharaoh to submit to God, did it? In spite of the wall of water on either side of him, didn't Pharaoh charge into the Red Sea after the Israelites just the same? And the embarrassment of the prophets of Baal didn't change Jezebel's mind either. No, when she heard about how fire fell from Heaven when Elijah prayed to God, she just kept on trying to kill Elijah. Pharaoh and Jezebel had hearts that were so hardened against God that they wouldn't trust Him no matter how clearly His power was demonstrated.

And come to think of it, didn't the Pharisees have exactly the same reaction to Jesus back in Matthew chapter 12? On that occasion, Jesus went into the synagogue and healed a man who had a withered hand right before their eyes. And how did they respond? Instead of worshipping Him as their Messiah, or even simply acknowledging His obvious status as a prophet of God, because Jesus did this miracle on the Sabbath they instantly began plotting to destroy Him.

That's why Jesus warns His disciples in verse 6 to beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees— the leaven of skepticism. For approaching Jesus with that kind of arrogance, insisting that He prove Himself to us by doing things in our way and according to our timetable, can only lead to that sort of profound spiritual blindness, to that sort of hardness of heart.

So, is this sort of leaven a danger for us? No, we don't doubt Jesus' identity the way the Pharisees and Sadducees did. But day in and day out are we really any more submissive to His divine authority than they were? Are we any more satisfied with the signs of God's power that He has already given us, the answers to prayer that we and our loved ones have received time and time again? Or do we always want something different, something more? Do we find ourselves putting God in a box, insisting that He meet our expectations, doing things the way we want, or the way we understand? When life throws us a curveball, are we truly willing to submit ourselves to the authority of God, praying as Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, "Not my will but Yours be done?" Or, along with the Pharisees and Sadducees do we say to Jesus, "Not thy will, but mine be done?"

But this sort of skeptical arrogance isn't the only characteristic of this dangerous kind of leaven, this sort of spiritual poison. For remember, Jesus calls this the leaven of both the Pharisees and the Sadducees. And although the Pharisees' opposition to Jesus comes to the surface many times throughout Matthew's gospel, there has been no mention of the Sadducees since way back in chapter 3. On that occasion, John the Baptist had blasted both them and the Pharisees, calling all of them a brood of vipers who stood in dire need of repentance. So, who are these Sadducees and why did both John and Jesus have such a problem with them?

Well, we can't be completely sure, since they disappeared as an organized group at the time the Romans destroyed the Temple back in 70 AD. And that's largely because the Sadducees placed most of their religious emphasis on performing all the ceremonies prescribed by the Law of Moses. So, once the Temple was gone, their organizing principle left with it.

But there was something else that set the Sadducees apart: their willingness to assimilate into the culture of the unbelievers who had taken control of the area around Jerusalem. You see, many of

the Sadducees were wealthy and prominent members of society, so they had no interest in disturbing the political waters by criticizing the false faith of the Greeks or Romans. Instead, they were content to drift along with the prevailing cultural currents, all the while enjoying the material prosperity that sprang from currying favor with their imperial overlords.

Okay, so why did Jesus warn His disciples about the leaven of the Sadducees? After all, none of the twelve were men of means – none of them had great social standing. In fact, they had all left their families and friends and jobs behind in order to follow Jesus. Matthew, the author of this gospel, had gone so far as to abandon his lucrative job as a tax collector – something a worldly Sadducee would never have done.

But later in this chapter, when the disciples finally did realize that Jesus was in fact the Messiah the prophets had been predicting for hundreds of years, they all started acting a lot like the Sadducees, didn't they? For they began jockeying for position, arguing about who would be the most important of Jesus' courtiers when He took power in Jerusalem. They began dreaming of the worldly wealth and power that would come their way because they had been following Jesus from the very beginning.

And we can see such a materialistic focus even in this chapter, can't we? For as soon as Jesus mentions leaven, they instantly remember that they hadn't brought any bread with them on the current leg of their journey. They couldn't grasp the spiritual point Jesus was trying to make because they were so preoccupied with where their next meal would come from.

And we modern Americans can just as easily fall prey to this sort of worldly leaven, can't we? For where is the focus of our lives? What do we think is our true source of happiness and fulfillment? Are we looking to power or influence for our safety? Are we placing our confidence in our political leaders to solve the problems of our Federal Republic or our state, our county or our town?

Or do we imagine that just a little more money would be the answer to all our problems? Are we expecting our jobs or our Social Security checks or our retirement savings to provide for us? In short, is our focus on Christ and His Kingdom? Or have we tasted of the leaven of the Sadducees, placing our trust in the things of this world?

Now, the Pharisees couldn't be accused of this sort of worldliness. Sure, they may have shared their skepticism of Jesus with the Sadducees, but they were quite different where it came to their view of material things. For while the Sadducees were eager to profit from their connections with the unbelieving Greeks and Romans, the Pharisees didn't want to become ritually contaminated by contact with such unbelievers. And instead of being so concerned with keeping the ceremonial parts of the Law of Moses, the Pharisees were mainly interested in following the moral and ethical parts of the Law.

But if the leaven of both groups was dangerous because of their skepticism, and if the leaven of the Sadducees was dangerous because of their materialism, the leaven of the Pharisees was dangerous because of their legalism, their attempt to earn righteousness in the sight of God by doing certain things or leaving other things undone. And if skepticism and materialism continue to be a snare for modern Americans, legalism is no less widespread.

And this isn't just the case for Mormons or Muslims who try to follow elaborate codes of conduct in order to feel good about themselves. No, lots of people who believe all the correct things about Jesus fall into the same trap as well. Perhaps we are tempted to take pride in our church

membership or attendance, in our giving or service, in the fact that we have been baptized or that we receive the Lord's Supper on a regular basis. And it's just as easy to build up our confidence by looking down on others who don't follow all the rules that we have set for ourselves – even though, if we're truly honest, we'll admit that we all too often fail to live up even to our own expectations.

So, how can we avoid all these different kinds of worldly thinking? How can we turn away from the leaven of both the Pharisees and of the Sadducees, the dangers of skepticism, of materialism and of legalism? How can we turn away from placing our trust in our own reason, in our own things, or in our own efforts to save ourselves?

Well, what has Jesus been trying to show us all through chapter 15 of Matthew, as He has acted out all the prophecies of Isaiah 29? Simply this: He's the One that really matters, not all the material things of this world. For He is the One True God – there's nothing He has created that can possibly rival Him in power or beauty. And so it just makes sense for us to turn to Him for solutions when we are in difficulty, for truth when we have questions, for direction when we don't know which way to go, for security in times of uncertainty.

And isn't that exactly what God promises in Isaiah 29:23? For how will Jacob stop being ashamed and afraid? Not when he places his faith in the things of this world, but when he sees his children, the work of God's hands. And we know that it is only through the work of God that anyone comes to be a child of God by faith in Christ. For as we will see in the next passage in Matthew 16, Peter and the rest of the disciples only became able to see that Jesus is the Holy One of Jacob, they were only able to stand in awe of Him as the God of Israel because the Father in Heaven opened their eyes, revealing that amazing truth to them.

Moreover, it is only when we embrace Jesus as Savior and bow before Him as Lord that we turn away from what Isaiah 29:24 calls errors in spirit. It is only then that we turn away from murmuring against Him as the Pharisees did, we turn away from considering Him a threat to our worldly ways as the Sadducees did. In fact, it is only those who turn away from our own experience, our own wisdom, our own reason, it is only those who instead accept instruction from Christ and His Word who can ever know the truth about Him, or really, about anything at all.

So today, will we hear His voice? Will we believe His signs? Will we trust Him and bow before Him and follow Him? Or like the disciples, don't we yet understand?