

Jesus Explained the Leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees

In our last topic, we saw that we want to show our physical and spiritual children how to show compassion to others, by our example. Jesus had illustrated that compassion by feeding the people when they did not have a place to get food. In this topic, we will see that Jesus warned His disciples about the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

The Pharisees and Sadducees normally opposed the teachings of one another. However, both groups feared Jesus and so we will see that part of the time they began to come together in an effort to trap Jesus. Matthew 16:1-4 says, “Then the Pharisees and Sadducees came, and testing Him asked that He would show them a sign from heaven. He answered and said to them, ‘When it is evening you say, “*It will be fair weather, for the sky is red*”; and in the morning, “*It will be foul weather today, for the sky is red and threatening.*” Hypocrites! You know how to discern the face of the sky, but you cannot *discern* the signs of the times. A wicked and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign shall be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah.’ And He left them and departed.” In these verses, we see that these two groups came together to test Jesus.

Several months earlier, the scribes and Pharisees had asked Jesus for a sign from heaven. In Matthew 12:38, they said, “Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered, saying, ‘Teacher, we want to see a sign from You.’” Instead of giving them a sign from heaven at that time, Jesus reminded them of the Word of God. Here, we see an example, by Jesus, of the importance of answering questions from the Word of God, instead of our own opinions. Jesus then gave them the sign of Jonah. Matthew 12:40 says, “‘For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.’” He also reminded them of the queen of the South who came to hear the wisdom of Solomon.

This time, Jesus reminded them that God gave them signs in the sky so that they could predict what the weather would be like the next day. When the sky was red in the evening, they said that the weather would be good the next day. When the sky was red in the morning, they said that they were going to have foul weather because the sky was threatening. Jesus then said, “Hypocrites!” Then, Jesus explained why they were hypocrites. They could determine what the weather would be like just by looking at the sky. However, Jesus said that they were unable to discern the signs of the times.

Soon after Jesus began His public ministry, He had gone to the Passover in Jerusalem. While He was there, He had cleansed the temple. At that time, John 2:18-19 says, “So the Jews answered and said to Him, ‘What sign do You show to us, since You do these things?’ Jesus answered and said to them, ‘Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.’” Here, we see that from the beginning, Jesus consistently said that the only sign the Jewish religious leaders would see was His death and resurrection but they did not understand, and would not understand, until He rose from the dead. That is why Jesus said, both in Matthew 12:39, and here in these verses, that the

only sign that would be given to them was the sign of the prophet Jonah. We see that Jesus consistently said that the only sign they would receive was His death and resurrection.

Jesus also said that, “A wicked and adulterous generation seeks after a sign.” Jesus called the Pharisees and Sadducees a wicked or evil generation because He knew their hearts. Jeremiah 17:9 says, “The heart is deceitful above all *things*, and desperately wicked; who can know it?” He called them an “adulterous generation” because they did not worship God. As a result, they were committing spiritual adultery because they were serving their own traditions and were in rebellion against God. Then, Jesus left the Pharisees and Sadducees and crossed the Sea of Galilee.

We read what happened when they got to the other side. Matthew 16:5-7 says, “Now when His disciples had come to the other side, they had forgotten to take bread. Then Jesus said to them, ‘Take heed and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees.’ And they reasoned among themselves, saying, ‘*It is* because we have taken no bread.’” The disciples had forgotten to take any bread when they got into the boat. As a result, they misunderstood what Jesus said to them when they got to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus often used the things that people had said to help His disciples develop Godly understanding. However, they would often question Jesus soon after something was said. This time, Jesus waited until they reached the other side of the sea before He began to talk to them about what the religious leaders had said.

Once they were on the other side, Jesus said, “Take heed and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees.” The word translated “take heed” means *to set your mind to know*. The word translated “beware” means *to pay attention to or to devote thought to*. Used together, these words told the disciples that Jesus was saying something very important that they should hear and understand. Then, He went on to say that the thing they should pay such close attention to was the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees. Instead of understanding, the disciples began to discuss among themselves and say that Jesus must be talking about the fact that they had forgotten to bring any bread, since He mentioned the word “leaven”.

Here, we see what often happens when people have their mind focused on something that they have just realized in their lives when we start to talk to them. Jesus shows us that we need to be very aware that people may be thinking about things that are totally unrelated to the principles that we want to share with them from the Word of God. Matthew 16:8-12 says, “But Jesus, being aware of *it*, said to them, ‘O you of little faith, why do you reason among yourselves because you have brought no bread? Do you not yet understand, or remember the five loaves of the five thousand and how many baskets you took up? Nor the seven loaves of the four thousand and how many large baskets you took up? How is it you do not understand that I did not speak to you concerning bread?—*but* to beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.’ Then they understood that He did not tell *them* to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the doctrine of the Pharisees and Sadducees.” We are not like Jesus where we can know what other people are thinking, but we can ask questions and see how they answer.

Jesus was also able to help the disciples see the need to strengthen their faith. Jesus said to the disciples, “O you of little faith.” Matthew and Luke record five different times that Jesus used this

phrase. The first was in the Sermon on the Mount when Jesus was talking to His disciples as a large crowd was listening. However, the other four of these times were when He was talking just to the disciples. One of the most important things that every Christian needs to learn is to walk by faith. Hebrews 11:8-10 says, “By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he dwelt in the land of promise as *in* a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise; for he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker *is* God.” Abraham had his focus on the eternal, not on the things that happened to him day by day.

Christ wanted to help the disciples learn to walk by faith. He also wants us to have that same focus because 2 Corinthians 5:6-8 says, “So *we are* always confident, knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord. For we walk by faith, not by sight. We are confident, yes, well pleased rather to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord.” Christ wants every Christian to develop an eternal focus, instead of giving their whole attention to the problems that come in their lives day by day. Then, Jesus went on to remind the disciples of the feeding of the five thousand and the four thousand and asked them how many baskets of leftovers they gathered up after each event. He made it clear that He could provide for their daily needs.

Jesus then explained that He used the word “leaven” to talk about the doctrine of the Pharisees and the Sadducees. Leaven spreads throughout a whole lump of bread dough. In the same way, the false teachings of these two groups had spread among many of the Jews, even though most of the people did not become a Pharisee or a Sadducee. The Pharisees added their traditions and rules to the Word of God, which caused them to focus on outward actions, instead of the condition of their heart. Revelation 22:18 says, “For I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds to these things, God will add to him the plagues that are written in this book.” The doctrine of the Pharisees had added their traditions and rules to the Word of God.

In contrast, the Sadducees denied miracles, they denied the resurrection, and they denied many other things because they did not believe that the whole Word of God was true. That is why Revelation 22:19 warns, “And if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the Book of Life, from the holy city, and *from* the things which are written in this book.” The doctrine of the Sadducees denied many parts of the Word of God. Today, we have many groups who either add their traditions to the Word of God or they deny the truth of every word in the Bible. Both forms of leaven (false doctrine) keep people from coming to true faith in Christ.

We want to help our physical and spiritual children understand the danger of any teaching that adds traditions or rules to the Word of God or denies part of the Word of God. At the same time, we also want to show them, by our example, what it means to walk by faith and not by sight. May the Lord richly bless you as you help your children learn to avoid false teachings and learn to grow as they walk by faith.