

False Doctrine

Matthew 16:1-12

We tend to think of truth and love as opposites, or at least in tension with one another. Truth is cold, hard, and probably mean—to be truly honest is to be brutally honest. And to be loving is to be warm, soft, really nice, and non-confrontational. But in fact, truth and love go together. So we're told not be immature, tossed by every wind of doctrine, but rather "speaking the truth in love, [so that we] may grow up in all things into Him who is the head—Christ" (Eph. 4:15). We love Jesus who is the truth (Jn. 14:6), and therefore must beware and happily reject false doctrine.

Fellowship of the Grievance

The Pharisees and Sadducees come together to ask Jesus for a sign from heaven (v. 1). All the wonders He has been doing on earth—healing, teaching, feeding, restoring, forgiving, and blessing—is not convincing enough. Normally these two groups oppose each other. Pharisees believe in the resurrection of the dead, in angels, in the entire Old Testament, and in the need to get the Romans out of Israel. The Sadducees endorse only the Pentateuch, deny the resurrection and angels, and appreciate the powerful position they occupy under the protection of the stable empire. Pharisees are legalists, adding to the law, exalting their traditions, functioning as separatists and rebels against the status quo. Sadducees are antinomians (functionally against God's law), syncretistic, and worldly compromisers who hope to maintain the status quo. But when it comes to opposing Christ these enemies become friends or at least co-belligerents. False doctrine is equal opportunity, invading liberal and conservative groups and institutions. Legalists and antinomians both reject God's law. One adds to it and other ignores it, but both are equally about their ideas, ambitions, and traditions, and not God's. Traditions are inescapable, but traditionalism takes over when people put themselves and the way they do things above Christ and His word.

Testing God

When Israel went into the wilderness, there was no water to drink, so they accused Moses of leading them out there in order to kill them. Moses struck the rock and water came out: "So he called the name of the place Massah and Meribah, because of the contention of the children of Israel, and because they tempted the Lord, saying, 'Is the Lord among us or not?'" (Ex. 17:7). The Lord led Israel through the wilderness to humble and test them, feeding them with manna to see what was in their heart, whether they would keep His commandments or not (Deut. 8:2-5). Hard times prove you who are. When Jesus says and does all these things, including feeding the 5000 and 4000, the Pharisees and Sadducees fail the test. They don't believe and receive, but imitate the generation that fell in the wilderness, testing God instead of trusting Him. We either trust or test, and there is no third option. You either recognize that God exists and is good (Heb. 11:6), and therefore must trust and be faithful to Him, or you sit in the judge's seat and test to see if He measures up to what you require. C.S. Lewis pointed out how prevalent this is in our time:

The ancient man approached God (or even the gods) as the accused person approaches his judge. For the modern man the roles are reversed. He is the judge: God is in the dock. He is quite a kindly judge: if God should have a reasonable defense for being the God who permits war, poverty and disease, he is ready to listen to it. The trial may even end in God's acquittal. But the important thing is that man is on the bench and God in the dock. - God in the Dock

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Discerning the Signs of the Times

The Pharisees and Sadducees can read the sky, knowing what kind of weather will follow the evening or the morning color, but they can't discern the signs of the times (v. 3). Jesus says this is hypocrisy, and the reason they are asking him for a sign is because they are evil and adulterous (v. 4). Why does an evil and adulterous heart affect the ability to see what is going on? We have already seen what the Pharisees and Sadducees care about. Pharisees want their man-made holiness, their religious stature and self-congratulatory traditions. They want to be in charge as Israel rises against Rome. Jesus ruins this by welcoming tax collectors and sinners to come to Him as is, and by making fun of all their silliness. The Sadducees want to disregard the Scriptures and maintain their cozy government-sponsored positions. Big crowds follow Jesus and say He is a different kind of King, which is the kind of thing that will lose them their status (cf. Jn. 11:50). These are adulterous commitments because they put someone and something higher than God. It's impossible for a husband or wife to reconcile if one of them is committed to someone else outside the marriage. They can't figure out if Jesus is the messiah because they're committed to other gods. Jesus didn't come to earth on our terms, and He doesn't call us to follow Him while promising not to mess up our hair, our marriage, our family, our job, our friends, our lifestyle, our selfish desires, the way we spend money, or anything else. He comes as God Almighty. Religious leaders can't read the signs of the times if they love peace in the church, job security, friendships, or anything else more than Jesus. This is why pastors won't tell the truth about public schools, BLM, government overreach, abortion, sodomy, divorce, and a host of other issues. It's much easier to refer out to therapists. Many Christians think it's the worst to be labeled political or racist or intolerant or unkind. It takes courage to tell the truth and know your neighbor might not like you. We are at a place where many people are going to either get vaccinated or lose their jobs, and this didn't come out of nowhere. The foundation was laid generations ago. Our watchmen have not been standing on the wall sounding the alarm, but preaching smooth and nice words.

Beware of Leaven

Jesus tells the disciples to beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees (v. 7). They think it's because they have no bread, but He points them back to the five loaves feeding 5000 resulting in twelve leftover baskets, and four loaves feeding four thousand resulting in seven leftover baskets (vv. 9-10). The 5000 consisted of a Jewish crowd and 4000 a Gentile multitude for a total of 9000. If the new Israel in Christ would be 12,000, where are the other 3000? It's possible that they are represented at Pentecost where 3000 from the nations come to Christ (Act 2:41). The doctrine of the Pharisees and Sadducees is like the leaven of Egypt that had to be totally purged at Passover. Your legalistic traditions and works of self-righteousness must be thrown out. Your disregard of God's law and lust after the approval of the world and respectability needs to be despised by you. Jesus is calling the nations to Himself and He's not taking an opinion poll for how or when to do it. The sign of Jonah is the resurrection from the dead, but it's also calling the people of Nineveh—some swaggering, awful Gentiles if there ever were any—to become the people of God. Jesus is on the move, and if anything is sapping your joy or distracting you from playing your part in it, beware of it. The good news is good for all of us.