

The Blindness of Unbelief

Matthew 16:1-12

The Pharisees and the Sadducees are often lumped together, as they are in our text this afternoon. But they are very, very different groups of people. The Pharisees were very religious, very scrupulous in the application of their religion. They were, of course, very proud of their religious faith and very eager to be sure that everyone else recognized them and honored them for the appearance of their religious faithfulness. But they were hypocrites, white-washed tombs as Jesus would call them, outwardly clean but inwardly full of dead men's bones.

The Sadducees, on the other hand, were the ones who proclaimed their doubts and unbelief regarding the supernatural power of God, especially the resurrection. They are ones known for their denial of the reality of the resurrection. And in that sense, both of those groups still exist today. The proud and self-righteous hypocrites who try to use their religion to make themselves look good, and the doubting, unbelieving secular unbelievers whose human pride causes them to refuse to acknowledge or worship a God of supernatural power.

But why are they so often lumped together, when they are so very different? Because the effect of both of those groups is the same. Both groups are descriptions of unbelievers. Unbelief through hypocrisy and unbelief through an intellectual rejection of the faith are both unbelief. Both groups came to Jesus in order to discredit him, to test him, as we read in verse 1. They are united in their opposition to Jesus. So in their unbelief, they came to him and asked for a sign. They demanded a sign, a sign which would prove that he was God, or at least that he had the power of God.

Now, remember a little bit of what we have already studied in

this gospel of Matthew. Jesus has already given lots and lots of signs. Healing the sick, over and over again; even raising the dead. Multiplying a few loaves of bread and several fish, twice, in order to feed thousands and thousands of people. Just thumb through the previous chapters of this gospel. Sign after sign was given, intentionally so! And those signs would become the foundation of apostolic preaching on the day of Pentecost.

Acts 2:22 "Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a Man attested by God to you by miracles, wonders, and signs which God did through Him in your midst..."

And it was a belief in those signs that marked true faith. Consider even Nicodemus as he was questioned by Jesus in, John 3:1 There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. 2 This man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, "Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him."

But here in our text this afternoon the point is simple.

I. UNBELIEVERS SEEK FOR SPECIAL SIGNS.

Nicodemus had seen those signs, and he was a "ruler of the Jews," But he didn't believe. He had remained an unbeliever, and with that example the warning is of Hebrews 2 is appropriate,

Heb. 2:1 "Therefore we must give the more earnest heed to the things we have heard, lest we drift away. 2 For if the word spoken through angels proved steadfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just reward, 3 how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation, which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed to us by those who heard Him, 4 God also bearing witness both with signs and wonders, with various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit, according to His own will?"

So there is sufficient proof of Jesus already revealed, already given. Thus the great danger of the Pharisees and the Sadducees, the danger of unbelievers, is that,

A. They are blind to spiritual realities.

The problem is not with the signs. The problem is with the heart of an unbeliever. The problem is with the eyes of the unbeliever. The unbeliever is blind.

That's why the false gospel of self-help is no gospel at all, nor the gospel of self-esteem, for they have no power, no power to change the heart of an unbeliever. That's why the false gospel of social gospel is no gospel at all, nor the gospel of moralism, for they too have no power to change the heart.

The problem of fallen man is not a problem that can be fixed by man, for man's problem is that he is blind. And that's the shared problem of both Pharisees and Sadducees, then and now, despite how different they are. It is the problem addressed by God to the church at Laodicea,

Rev. 3:17 "Because you say, I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing"—and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked— 18 I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, that you may be rich; and white garments, that you may be clothed, that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see. 19 As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent."

That's the problem with both the Pharisees and the Sadducees. They do not realize that they are blind. So what does Jesus say to them?

v.2-3

We still use those signs today, don't we? We even get a bit more sophisticated in our weather forecasts. At one point in the weather app on my phone last evening, it said, "Expect light rain in seven minutes that will last 39 minutes." Pretty specific, isn't it? I always appreciate that sort of forecast much more than the typical, "50% chance of scattered showers." So somewhere, its 50/50 whether or not its going to rain. Not very helpful at all. But we still want those signs, and it doesn't take Christian faith or belief to accept them. If the meteorological signs say it's going to rain, you bring an umbrella. Or you stay inside. Because we can interpret the appearance of the sky, trained meteorologists even more so. Unbelievers can do that, too, can't they? I suspect that most of the meteorologists giving us those forecasts were unbelievers. They are well trained to read and interpret the signs that indicate what the weather should be.

So what is Jesus' point in verses 2-3? Simply this, that the signs of God's power and glory are evident and obvious, and God doesn't have to prove himself to those who are blind in their unbelief! The problem is that they are blind, and they need eyes to see! As Jesus said to Nicodemus, they need to be born again!

Beloved, the greatest of those signs is the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and that historical reality is a proven fact of history, proven by many, many eyewitness accounts. No further sign is needed today. What is needed is the power of the gospel that is able to take a man who is blind and give him eyes to see.

I still remember when the Lord did that to me, 50 years ago now. I was blind, and one night, in a single moment, I was able to see. For me that was one definable moment in time, I understood. I heard the gospel, I recognized my own sin. And I believed in Jesus for my salvation. I had been in church all my

life to that point, but I had been blind. So when we sing these words, I understand what they mean. “I once was blind, but now I see.”

Let me go one step deeper in describing the problem of unbelievers. Not only are they blind to spiritual realities, but they are intentionally blind, if I can put it that way. In other words, they are evil. They are blind because they are evil. Their spiritual blindness is not an excuse, for they are morally responsible for their unbelief. And Jesus cuts right to the chase.

v.4a

B. Unbelievers are blind because of their own evil hearts.

Wicked and adulterous. They commit adultery, an illustration of one of the worst forms of rebellion against God, using sexual sin as a representation of spiritual sin, the sins of the flesh representing the sins of the soul. And it is evil, wicked. That’s a moral judgment, isn’t it? Even a condemnation.

And that’s the problem with fallen man! Not that he needs more education. Not that he needs a better environment. Not that he needs a better opportunities or more affection or affirmation. No, the problem with the heart of all men is a moral problem. It is the problem of evil.

That’s why unbelievers are blind, because they love their sin. Because they are guilty of sin. Because they are blinded by their sin. Because they are dead in their sin. Sin is not neutral. And sinful men, unbelievers are not neutral. Their hearts are evil, and therefore they do not believe. So the issue isn’t the need for more signs from Jesus, for...

C. Unbelievers are blind to the signs already given.

In this case, Jesus mentions the sign of Jonah. Interesting,

isn’t it?

v.4

And what was that sign of Jonah?

Mat. 12:38 “Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered, saying, “Teacher, we want to see a sign from You.” 39 But He answered and said to them, “An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. 40 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. 41 The men of Nineveh will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and indeed a greater than Jonah is here. 42 The queen of the South will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and indeed a greater than Solomon is here.”

Here is the first-hand account,

Jonah 1:17 Now the LORD had prepared a great fish to swallow Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. 2:1 Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the fish’s belly. 2 And he said: “I cried out to the LORD because of my affliction, And He answered me. “Out of the belly of Sheol I cried, And You heard my voice. 3 For You cast me into the deep, Into the heart of the seas, And the floods surrounded me; All Your billows and Your waves passed over me. 4 Then I said, ‘I have been cast out of Your sight; Yet I will look again toward Your holy temple.’ 5 The waters surrounded me, even to my soul; The deep closed around me; Weeds were wrapped around my head. 6 I went down to the moorings of the mountains; The earth with its bars closed behind me forever; Yet You have brought up my life from the pit, O LORD, my God. 7

“When my soul fainted within me, I remembered the LORD; And my prayer went up to You, Into Your holy temple. 8 “Those who regard worthless idols Forsake their own Mercy. 9 But I will sacrifice to You With the voice of thanksgiving; I will pay what I have vowed. Salvation is of the LORD.” 10 So the LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land.”

“Salvation is of the Lord.” That’s the gospel, isn’t it? And Jonah was raised from the dead, so to speak, brought back to life, after three days. So there is the sign of the resurrection of Jesus, that Jonah was vomited out of that fish after three days. Amazing, isn’t it, that God would use such a sign. But he certainly did.

Mat. 12: 40 “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.”

I could put that in the theological words of Paul, who describes the content of our faith this way,

Rom. 4:24 “It shall be imputed to us who believe in Him who raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead, 25 who was delivered up because of our offenses, and was raised because of our justification.”

So we have the sign of Jonah! God raised Jesus up from the dead. That is the gospel which I preach to you tonight. Jesus was delivered up for our trespasses, for our sins. Jesus died for our sins, suffering the penalty and wrath of God you and I deserved. Jesus was raised for our justification. Jesus rose from the dead so by that same power, you and I might be forgiven our sins and be accepted as righteous in the sight of God! And the all important question is very simply, Do you believe this?

Believe that with all your heart, and you will be saved. Trust in

that finished work of Jesus Christ, and your sins will be forgiven. And, in that context, to you who do believe,

v.6 “Take heed and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees.”

II. UNBELIEVERS POSE GREAT DANGER TO GOD’S PEOPLE.

The danger is that unbelief can spread like leaven, like yeast, in a loaf of bread. So,

A. Beware of the leavening of unbelief.

Beware of the temptation to doubt. Beware of the danger of calling God into question, calling into question the truthfulness of his word and the supernatural nature of his power. Beware of the danger of testing God, putting him to your test, demanding that he answer to you or give you an account as if he were responsible to you. Beware of doubting his power, or ignoring his goodness!

Beware of the rebelliousness with which the Pharisees and the Sadducees approach God. Beware of the hypocrisy of the Pharisees, and the skepticism of the Sadducees, the hypocrisy to think yourselves to be good and the skepticism to think yourself smarter than God. Beware of the pride of both groups. Beware of the danger that both groups pose.

And watch, verse 6. Take heed. Be on guard. Be on alert, in your own soul. Don’t think that this warning is for other people and not for yourself. Jesus is now speaking to his disciples, so we must all “take heed and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees.”

Think about where that danger might threaten you. That’s the question for everyone to consider even today. Is it the danger of hypocrisy, self-righteous hypocrisy? Is it the danger of the

Pharisees? Or is it the danger of your own intellectual pride, your own desire to be autonomous, to be your own God, able to determine for yourself what is true and what is not? Is it the danger of the Sadducees? Do you doubt the truth of God's word, or question the truth of his own self-revelation? Do you ignore what he has written and revealed in his word? Are you willing to disbelieve the display of his own power, or reject the reality of supernatural power?

Beware of that leaven, for just as one little bit of yeast will permeate the whole batch of dough, so will this sort of proud hypocrisy damage the well-being of your soul.

Let's look a little more fully at this warning, as we read in, Luke 12:1 "In the meantime, when an innumerable multitude of people had gathered together, so that they trampled one another, He began to say to His disciples first of all, "Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy. 2 For there is nothing covered that will not be revealed, nor hidden that will not be known. 3 Therefore whatever you have spoken in the dark will be heard in the light, and what you have spoken in the ear in inner rooms will be proclaimed on the housetops. 4 "And I say to you, My friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do. 5 But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear Him who, after He has killed, has power to cast into hell; yes, I say to you, fear Him!"

In other words, it is a spiritual battle, and a battle of life and death. This isn't merely a religious or philosophical discussion or debate. What is at stake here is the eternal destiny of your soul. The focus on the Pharisees and the Sadducees is a warning that is a matter of life and death! The danger of hypocrisy, and pride, is ultimately the danger of the eternal fires of hell.

So beware of this leaven, which is hypocrisy. Beware of this leaven, which is deceit. Thinking, acting, believing that you can live secret lives in deceit without causing harm to your soul. "Nothing is covered up that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known." And the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees will cause you to deny that reality, to put your hypocrisy into a little compartment of your life and hide it, as if you can hide from God himself.

Beware. Be on guard. And when you find any of this leaven, get rid of it! Put it to death. Fear the dangers that threaten your soul. In a real sense, you don't need to fear those who can only harm you physically. The far greater danger is to your soul. "I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him."

There is another element of that warning here, perhaps even more appropriate for us today. Not only does unbelief act like leaven, permeating the whole batch of dough, rendering you in danger of the condemnation of hell itself, there is also a lesser danger, and because it is lesser in degree it is more of a likely possibility that every one of us would have to confront this danger in a very personal way. That danger is simply dullness.

B. Beware of the dullness of unbelief.

OK, you aren't as far gone as the white-washed tombs of the Pharisees. Perhaps you aren't as far gone as those Sadducees who would so adamantly deny the reality of the resurrection of Jesus from the death. But you can become dull! Spiritually dull. Spiritually complacent, so that you miss what Jesus really does have to say to you. That might describe any one of us!

Again, let me remind you that Jesus is speaking to his disciples alone beginning in verse 5. The Pharisees and

Sadducees were gone. And the object lesson became very clear.

v.5

Jesus used that occasion for the warning of verse 6 I have just focused upon. And then,

v.7

They didn't get it! They didn't understand that Jesus was still trying to teach them something. They could only think about dinner. They forgot to bring bread, so why would Jesus warn them about the use of leaven? They were thinking only in terms of the things of this world, and were ignoring the spiritual battle that was raging all around them.

Beloved, that is a danger you and I face every day of our lives, the spiritual dullness that is so harmful. We get wrapped up in all the issues and matters of this life, and much of that is, of course, good and appropriate. You have to go to work. You have to provide for the needs of your family. You have to take care of certain responsibilities. But life is much more than that. And life has to be lived self-consciously in the spiritual realm.

The problem the disciples of Jesus encountered was not the absence of bread for dinner. That was an easy problem to take care of. More difficult, by far, was the problem of their spiritual dullness, the danger of negligence and carelessness regarding the spiritual battles they faced in life.

The disciples were focused on their absence of bread, and forgot about the presence of Jesus. And Jesus rebuked them for that dullness of heart.

v.8-11

Then, we read, they finally understood.

v.12

Beloved, hear this same exhortation and receive this encouragement today. "Take heed and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees." Take heed and beware, lest you become dull in the presence and temptation of unbelief.

Take heed, and beware, for here is the reality of the matter, the spiritual reality of your life and mine. It is the need to be strong in the midst of spiritual dangers. In that context, Paul writes so earnestly,

Eph. 6:10 "Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might. 11 Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. 12 For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. 13 Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand."

The self-righteous Pharisees and the skeptical Sadducees were so different, but are equally dangerous. Now, just as they were in Jesus' day. So beware of the leaven of them both.

v.6 "Take heed and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees."