

Dead Yeast

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Text: Matt 16:1-12

A retired pastor, who is a social media contact, expresses concern from time to time about the “signs of the times.” In our troubled political climate, that seems to be his “go to” in dealing with the confusion and controversy. That’s actually the way a lot of people deal with confusion and with all that is going on in the world. Whether is it politics, war in Israel, a volcano somewhere, or climate change, they start talking about prophecy and the signs of the times. Recently, my friend posted something about an increase in earthquake frequency, and how that is a sign of the times.

That one, by the way, is a long-standing concern for certain elements in the church. When I was a teenager, we were inundated with end-times preaching, literature, and movies. People like Hal Lindsey, Jack Van Impe, Harold Camping, Tim LaHaye, and dozens like them published books on the Second Coming, Rapture, Tribulation, and all the rest. You may be aware that such groups as the Seventh Day Adventists and Jehovah’s Witnesses are obsessed with end times prophecy. Increasing earthquake frequency has always been one of their hot topics. But, at that time, my father was receiving regular updates from the USGS - US Geodetic Survey - on earthquake activity around the world. A card or letter came weekly with a list of all the recorded earthquakes, their location and their strength. There are dozens of earthquakes all over the world virtually every day. The only thing that has really changed is our awareness of them. Modern communications means that we get news of major earthquakes more quickly than ever. In fact, over the past few months there have been several minor earthquakes in the Pacific Northwest, but few have been strong enough to be felt. And where my youngest brother lives in Southern California, earthquakes are frequent and come in swarms. They will have a major shake of say 5.7, followed by dozens of echoes of 2.5, 3.5, 1.2, etc., going on for several days. Earthquakes are not more frequent; we’re just more aware of them.

The topic arises because of our text. The Pharisees and Sadducees come to Jesus to test him. They’re trying to do one of two things: either discredit him or find a cause for prosecuting him. They want to prove that he is a false messiah and that he is a blasphemer. We will see that increase as Matthew continues his story. And they’ve done this before. We noted back in chapter 12, that the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus for a sign. That was after Matthew had recounted those three series of miracles demonstrating Jesus identity, authority, and power. Having seen all of that, they still asked for a sign. Now they come again with the same request, only this time the Pharisees are in league with their political rivals, the Sadducees.

I’m going to suggest that this time, the attitude is more ominous. I say that because Jesus replies and leaves. He doesn’t engage. He scolds them and walks away. And he does it with a well-known weather forecast: *“When evening comes, you say, ‘It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.’”* I grew up hearing, “Red at night; sailor’s delight. Red in the morning; sailor take warning.” I don’t

know if this is always true at sea, but the point is that we predict the weather by looking at the sky. I lived in a place where the weather almost always came from the southeast. I would look up at the clouds and know whether to carry an umbrella, wear a jacket, or expect a nice day. We know what kind of clouds there are. Some portend thunder storms. When I was a child in southern Idaho, summer days were interesting. The sky would be clear, cloudless blue, and the weather nearing 100 degrees. But about 4:00 pm, the thunderheads would form and there would be a 15-20 minute rainstorm to cool the air. That happened so frequently during the summer that we came to expect that every hot day would end with a rainstorm, leaving us with a cool, pleasant evening. Now, with satellite imaging and weather balloons, we rely more on technology, perhaps than we ought, and have lost some of that ability. But sailors still watch the sky for signs of a storm.

But here's Jesus' point: We know how to predict tomorrow's weather. Jesus said, "*You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times.*" The interesting thing is that these two groups were so intent on preserving the balance of power, so intent on their own agendas, that they could not see what God would do right in front of them. Jesus has been walking and talking, preaching and teaching, healing the blind, deaf, and lame right and left. Huge crowds have been following him, hanging on every word. The Pharisees and their spies have been watching without understanding. They see it. They don't comprehend it. The world is changing under their feet and they can't feel it.

The same thing happens today. The world is changing. Rapidly, in some ways. But most people are concerned with little things, with the balance of power, with what's right in front of them. They just can't put it together to see that bigger things are happening. It doesn't take a prophet to see impending consequences to certain behaviors. It just means that you have to keep your eyes open and understand what is going on around you. And yet, instead of paying attention to our surroundings, there are people who are continually asking for a sign. Ironically, asking for a sign is an indication of a lack of faith. They don't believe what they've seen or what they've been told, so they continually ask for affirmation. But no matter what signs they see, they still don't believe. They want God to do something miraculous to prove himself. We talked about that in chapter 12. And Jesus again refers to the sign of Jonah, with no explanation. God has already give us a sign, a great big, flashing neon sign. The resurrection of Jesus. That's for us. For them, though, it was yet to come. Tragically, though, we know they even missed that. God gave them a sign and they missed it. And dismissed it. And Jesus *left them and went away*.

They cross Galilee back to Capernaum. Now, here we have a bit of a conundrum. Matthew says *the disciples forgot to take bread*. When they notice their lack of food, Jesus cautions them, "*Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees.*" As seems to be usual with this bunch, they don't understand and think Jesus is scolding them for not bringing food with them. Jesus hears their murmuring.

"*You of little faith, why are you talking about having no bread?*" And he reminds them of the two feeding miracles. He's fed 5,000 and had twelve baskets of leftovers. He's fed 4,000 and had seven baskets of leftovers. What's bread to Jesus? What matter that they don't have bread? Jesus can deal with bread, but that's not what he was talking about. The sign of their small faith is that they have already forgotten what Jesus can do with a bit of bread. They should already know.

“Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees.” If it’s not about bread, it must be something else.

Do you recall the parable of the yeast in chapter 13? It was verse 33 - *“The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into about sixty pounds of flour until it worked all through the dough.”* We talked then about the properties of yeast and what it does to bread dough. I’m not going to rehash the parable, but just remind you what yeast does. I’ll remind you, also, that yeast had become considered a contaminant, particularly at Passover. The apostle Paul, writing to Corinth, uses yeast as an image of sin contaminating the church.

In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul was dealing with sexual sin in the church, sin more perverse than even the Corinthian society tolerated. And the church was tolerating it. Paul tells them to expel the man, warning them, *Don’t you know that a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough? Get rid of the old yeast, so that you may be a new unleavened batch—as you really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Therefore let us keep the Festival, not with the old bread leavened with malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth* (1 Cor 5:6-8). In other words, the rot spreads. “One bad apple spoils the whole bunch,” the saying goes.

Jesus was referring to the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees. Again, perhaps, a quick review:

Briefly, the Pharisees believed that for the nation to be saved and freed, and for the Messiah to appear, the nation itself must be turned to righteousness and to the keeping of the Torah. They meant well, I believe, but they failed to live up to the standard they expressed. Their outer show of righteousness did not match the inner failure. It’s interesting that those who know their own failings often impose that on other people, and so the Pharisees became legalistic and harsh in their approach to other people and to public life. In other words, they spoke a good game, but they just didn’t play it well. They were quick, as self-righteous people often are, to punish misdeeds in others but find ways to excuse their own. They imposed the law strictly on others, but invented ways around it for themselves. Jesus rightly called them hypocrites because their holiness was all on the outside.

The Sadducees only accepted the Torah, and rejected the prophets and the writings. They believed that their survival depended on compromise with Rome. Their compromises sometimes brought them into conflict with the Pharisees. But many Sadducees found themselves growing wealthy and politically influential because of the compromises and they developed for themselves a comfortable religion - one in which they could feel good about themselves without having many demands. Author Gary Collins calls it “easy believism,” a faith with few demands. So, where the Pharisees were mostly afraid of the Romans and hateful toward them, the Sadducees got along well.

So, Jesus told the disciples to beware of the leaven, or yeast, of the Pharisees and Sadducees. I would suggest that we might also need to beware of the yeast of the Essenes and the Zealots, as well. The Essenes thought the nation was irretrievably lost. Their recourse was to retreat into the desert and isolate themselves from society. The Zealots thought that redemption could be had by violence and revolt, so they engaged in political assassinations and guerilla warfare. But you see, Jesus’ way is not like those.

The followers of Jesus need to beware, on guard against, the yeast of the Pharisees. We do not want a false righteousness that makes excuses for failure. Remember that Jesus told the crowds that *“unless your righteousness exceeds that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven”* (Mt 5:20). That doesn’t mean that we become better than they at keeping the law, but that our righteousness is of the heart and character, not merely of the intellect and appearance. We do not appear to be, but are transformed by grace to be. We are to be transformed by the renewing of the mind (Ro 12:2). We don’t excuse our sins and our failures; we repent of them and seek holy cleansing. John wrote, *I write this so that you will not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father - Jesus Christ the Righteous One* (1 Jn 2:1). Be on your guard against those who tell you sin doesn’t matter, and against those who try to tell you that “nobody’s perfect,” and against those who make excuse for sin. *No one who lives in him keeps on sinning, John wrote* (1 Jn 3:6). And the Apostle Paul begs, *Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We are those who have died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?* (Ro 6:1-2).

The followers of Jesus need to on guard against the yeast of the Sadducees. We do not want compromise with the world. We don’t want to just go along to get along. Jesus told Pilate, *“My kingdom is not of this world”* (Jn 18:36). We learn from Matthew that Jesus came to inaugurate the kingdom of heaven and recruit citizens to that kingdom. *No one can serve two masters*, and dual citizenship is difficult because at some point we will be forced to choose sides. I have cousins who are dual citizens, with both US and New Zealand citizenship. I know them and love them, but I know that their primary allegiance rests with one side against the other. We may be, of necessity, in this world, but if we are citizens of the kingdom of heaven, we must be on our guard against the temptation to compromise kingdom loyalty just to get along in this world.

And we must be on our guard against those who suggest that we must act violently in this world. There have been, and still are, those who tell us that we must impose kingdom values on the world, and do it by violence if necessary. We must be on our guard against those who think the way is to escape from the world, to retreat to where we can live our faith unbothered by the world and unconcerned for it. Christ called us neither to warfare nor to hermitage. He called us neither to attack nor retreat. He called us, rather, to live, to live openly and without shame, to let the light of Christ shine in, through, and from our lives. We are followers of Christ, and there is no other path to the kingdom of heaven.