



The King's Ransom

Matthew 20:28

Text

Matthew 16:1-12

Topic

Jesus warns His disciples that the Pharisees and Sadducees are like yeast corrupting the pure Word of God

Title

"The Yeastie Boys"

Introduction

What do you do if you don't want to pay for a \$1.40 pack of Jell-O pudding powder?

If you're like Alexander and Christine Clement, a couple in their sixties from Long Island, you buy the pudding, replace the powder with a mixture of sand and salt, and return the package to the grocery store for a refund.

The couple struck four stores in 2010, purchasing and returning about 50 packages of pudding. The tampering was discovered when a customer who bought one of the fraudulent pudding packages complained to the grocery store, and surveillance video led police to the Clements.

The couple was indicted on multiple counts of petty larceny and tampering. Police believe that they weren't out to harm anyone, they just wanted free pudding, and likely acted under the influence of age-related mental issues.

Package tampering can be a lot more serious. The most infamous case of product tampering is the Tylenol crisis of 1982, in which seven people in the Chicago area died after taking what they thought was extra-strength Tylenol but was in fact potassium cyanide. The case is still unsolved.

Tamper-resistant and tamper-proof packaging are helpful, but some things just cannot be kept totally free from tampering.

We're going to see in our text that people like to tamper with God's Word, the Bible. They like to do things like add to it, or to subtract from it.

Word-tampering, as we will call it, is a serious spiritual health issue, so we will do well to pay close attention as Jesus deals with the teachers and their teachings.

I'll organize my thoughts around two points: #1 You Are Tempted By Word-Tampering Teachers, and #2 You Are Threatened By Word-Tampering Teachings.

#1 You Are Tempted By Word-Tampering Teachers

(v1-4)

Listen to this description of word-tampering teachers:

Some want to add to the [Bible], and some want to take away from it. Some would bury it, and some would pare it down to nothing. Some would stifle it by heaping on additions, and some would bleed it to death by subtraction from its truth.

The poster-boys for going to extremes in tampering with the Word of God are the first century Pharisees and Sadducees.

Pharisees and Sadducees occupied opposite ends of the spiritual spectrum:

- Pharisees believed in the resurrection of the dead; Sadducees did not.
- Pharisees believed in an afterlife; Sadducees did not.
- Pharisees believed in the existence of angels and demons; Sadducees did not.

The Pharisees accepted the entire Jewish canon we call the Old Testament as the Word of God. The Sadducees only accepted the first five Books of Moses as God's Word.

Pharisees can rightfully be called legalists because they added much to the Word of God in terms of the traditions of men. In fact, as we've seen in previous studies in Matthew, they elevated the traditions of men to a place above the Word of God.

Sadducees can rightfully be called liberals because they subtracted much from the Word of God in terms of denying most of God's revelation to man.

(Though they were also liberals in their politics, we are using the word to describe their theology).

Commentaries make much of the fact that these two groups rarely agreed on anything except their rejection of Jesus.

While it's true they came together to reject The Lord, they were rivals but not enemies.

This is the first time we meet the Sadducees in Matthew's Gospel.

Mat 16:1 Then the Pharisees and Sadducees came, and testing Him asked that He would show them a sign from heaven.

Sadducees didn't very often stray far from their power-base in and around Jerusalem. Their appearance here in the boonies, and with Pharisees, tells us that this was an official delegation.

They had been sent "testing Jesus." The word is "tempt," not test. They weren't trying to determine if He was, in fact, their Messiah. They were trying to prove He wasn't.

The Pharisees had seen, and the Sadducees had heard of, plenty of "signs." They tempted Him to "show them a sign **from heaven**," or we might say, "a sign in the celestial heavens."

The Pharisees believed that demons could work signs and miracles on earth as counterfeits to God's power. Earlier they had accused Jesus of working His miracles through the power of the devil. It was their excuse for why Jesus could do what He did in the supernatural realm.

They were therefore wanting a sign strictly from the sky, e.g., Elijah's calling down fire from Heaven upon the prophets of Baal. Because they were already convinced Jesus couldn't do it, it was a temptation - an evil, insincere solicitation.

The Sadducees didn't believe in miracles at all. I'm not sure what their response was to the many miracles Jesus had already performed; they probably dismissed them the same way people still do today. They had no thoughts Jesus could show a sign from Heaven, so they were acting like all those who set out to debunk the supernatural.

Again, it was a temptation because it was an insincere request.

If it were me, I'd have called down fire from Heaven to consume them. *Bam!* How's that for a sign?

Mat 16:2 He answered and said to them, "When it is evening you say, 'It will be fair weather, for the sky is red';

Mat 16:3 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.

Jesus called them "hypocrites." What was their hypocrisy? They were only acting like they would believe Him if He performed a celestial miracle. They would not believe Him. He knew they were merely tempting Him.

Since they mentioned the sky, Jesus used it as a sort of parable to expose their insincerity.

They looked to the sky, saw its condition, and discerned the coming weather. They ought to therefore be able to look at "the signs of the times" and discern that Jesus was their promised Messiah.

- God the Father had spoken audibly, from Heaven, at Jesus' baptism. How's that for a celestial sign?
- John the Baptist, recognized among them as a prophet, had declared Jesus their Messiah.
- Not only did Jesus perform miracle after miracle, He exhibited total power over the devil, and spoke of binding him.
- Throughout His ministry, Jesus cited from the Jewish Scriptures how He was fulfilling them.

The "signs of the times" were everywhere evident.

No, it wasn't because Jesus hadn't performed a celestial miracle that they didn't believe. It was that, because they wouldn't believe, Jesus would not perform any celestial miracle.

He would, however, give them a sign.

Mat 16:4 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.

Jesus had said this before. He used Jonah as a type of His own death, burial, but resurrection from the dead. Jonah had been in the great fish three days; so Jesus would be in the earth, but then rise from the dead, the third day.

The trouble with this sign, for the Pharisees and Sadducees opposing Jesus, was that by the time they saw it, it would be too late for them. The time to receive Jesus as their Messiah and have Him establish the kingdom on earth would be passed. He would instead return to Heaven to await His Second Coming.

Between the two comings of Jesus, also like Jonah, the Gospel would go out to the Gentiles, and they would be saved.

These Pharisees and Sadducees were "wicked." They were tempting Him with no sincerity that they would believe should Jesus comply.

By the way, miracles will not save anyone; not by themselves, anyway. The Bible is a miracle record book. The Gospel of John ends by telling us that Jesus did so many miracles that if they could all be written down, the world would not be big enough to construct a library in which to house them.

The people you're sharing with don't need any more signs. God may graciously give them. But what they need, all they need, is the Word of God which is the power of God to salvation.

The "adultery" of the Pharisees and Sadducees was spiritual. They were not faithful to God, or else they'd recognize that He was, indeed, among them, standing right in front of them.

"He left them and departed." It was symbolic, to His disciples, of the fact that after the nation of Israel rejected Jesus, God would leave them to pursue the Gentiles.

It doesn't mean Jews cannot be saved. It means God's particular program for Israel - to establish a kingdom on earth - is postponed until Jesus' return.

If we want to oversimplify, and say that the Pharisees and Sadducees represent the spiritual extremes of legalism and liberalism, then it's easy to see these teachers among us today.

There is definitely a spirit of Phariseeism in the church at large. Men still add to the Word of God their own traditions, heaping upon you burdens not meant to be born under God's grace, and not lifting a finger to help you.

There is certainly a spirit of Sadduceeism as well. Most mainline denominations have subtracted the essential, orthodox doctrines from the Christian faith.

These teachers tempt. Think of the proverbial liberal college professor out to destroy the faith of young people. My very first day in my very first class at UC Riverside, the philosophy professor opened by stating matter-of-factly, "Christianity has failed."

While we are talking about the Sadducees, in addition to the label "liberalism," we could add "rationalism." Remember these were guys who denied all things supernatural. Rationalism has lots of definitions, but in general we're talking about considering human reasoning and intellect as being more important than anything in the supernatural realm.

Legalists tempt, too. All the religions of the world, regardless they'd argue the point, are legalistic. They all teach that there is something you must do to achieve spirituality. There are rules to follow, rituals to perform, sacraments to partake of, that they say confer a righteousness that approves you before God.

Nonsense. You cannot *achieve* righteousness with God by your own efforts; you can only *receive* the righteousness of Jesus Christ as a gift from God by believing He died in your place, for your sins.

God must declare a believing sinner righteous by grace through faith in the risen Christ.

Any addition to, or subtraction from, salvation by grace through faith, reveals a Pharisee or a Sadducee in your midst.

#2 You Are Threatened By Word-Tampering Teachings

(v5-12)

It'd be great if we were so solid in what we believe that there was no real threat to us in these teachings.

In the following verses, Jesus is going to warn His closest guys about the danger in these Word-tampering teachings.

If His disciples, who had been with Jesus going on three years, who had witnessed His miracles and sat directly under His teaching, needed to "take heed and beware," **then we do, too.**

Mat 16:5 Now when His disciples had come to the other side, they had forgotten to take bread.

Mat 16:6 Then Jesus said to them, "Take heed and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees."

One of the twelve missed his assignment as the quartermaster for the day. They were without bread, and probably in a little bit of a huff about it. I know I can get surly around mealtime.

Jesus decided to use their circumstances to get their minds on more spiritual matters.

I have to think that The Lord does that a lot - uses our circumstances to get our minds on more spiritual matters.

Or at least, He *tries* to get our minds on more spiritual matters. If you're like me, we're all more like the disciples - missing the point.

Mat 16:7 And they reasoned among themselves, saying, "It is because we have taken no bread."

Jesus wanted to make application of His encounter with the Pharisees and Sadducees. He knew they were thinking about bread. So He used it as a spiritual analogy.

After Jesus spoke, I get the impression the guys knew something more was being communicated. It says "they reasoned among themselves." They had a meeting, a pow-wow, a confab.

They put their heads together in a think-tank and came up with, "It's because we have taken no bread."

Just goes to show you that twelve heads are no better than one. The things that come out of some meetings are astonishing.

While there can be wisdom in a multitude of counselors, their counsel must be spiritual, not worldly.

More importantly, we ought to assume God is constantly desiring to show us things from the ordinary experiences in our lives.

It's not a matter of stopping to smell the roses. It's a matter of creation declaring the glory of God and our Creator being able to minister to our hearts through many and various means if we are attentive.

God loves to communicate. He visited Adam and Eve every afternoon in the Garden of Eden. Think of all the direct conversations God had in the Old Testament with guys like Abraham and Moses. There are metaphors and similes and types and illustrations galore. Don't forget dreams and visions. God even spoke through enemies of His people in order to reach them.

I love the opening of the Book of Hebrews, where we read, "God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son" (1:1-2).

The only question is, "Am I listening for His voice?"

How many of you remember the old RCA logo of the dog curiously listening to a gramophone? It was from a painting called "His Master's Voice," and the idea it conveyed was that the dog could recognize the voice of his master even though it came from a strange source.

Maybe we should go through our days cocking our heads to one side, discovering more often our Master's voice.

Mat 16:8 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?"

"Little faith" is better than no faith. The Lord can say this to me anytime and I'll receive it.

Instead of "reasoning among" ourselves, maybe we should seek The Lord. If there is a spiritual component, we need to discover it through spiritual means - *not* by reasoning it out.

A Pharisee figures things out ahead of time, by making up a rule for exactly how to act and react in every possible situation. Pretty soon life is all about keeping the rules and there's no vibrant relationship with The Lord. The original intent of God's Word, what we might call the Spirit of the Law, is lost as it is subordinated to keeping the letter of the rule.

A Sadducee figures things out by reasoning, using only their intellect. They might open and close a public discussion or a personal devotion in prayer, but there's no thought of seeking and waiting for and receiving any supernatural leading. Who needs that when you've got your smarts?

The strictly rational approach makes Christianity mechanical. You're like George Banks, proud to declare, "I always know what to say," when what you need to say, with joy, "supercalifragilisticexpialidocious."

Mat 16:9 Do you not yet understand, or remember the five loaves of the five thousand and how many baskets you took up?

Mat 16:10 Nor the seven loaves of the four thousand and how many large baskets you took up?

Jesus reminded them of what they'd seen Him do in providing bread and fish in abundance for crowds of twenty thousand and sixteen thousand (if you count the women and children). He could easily provide bread for them.

If I have some need, I sometimes joke, saying that if The Lord owns the cattle on a thousand hills, why doesn't He just kill one and give me the meat?

The situation I find myself in can never be the result of any unfaithfulness on the part of God. It may be a discipline; it may be a lesson; it may be the result of living in a fallen world; it may be that our enemy has attacked us.

But it cannot reduce the love of God for me in Christ Jesus my Lord. He didn't save me to abandon me.

Mat 16:11 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."

Yeast, in bread, can be a good thing. I, for one, don't really care for unleavened bread.

It's not the yeast Jesus was talking about, but how it works.

Just as a little yeast powerfully affects the entire lump, so does a little Word-tampering go a long way.

There's an expression Christians like to use; you may or may not have heard it. When I point out to someone that the so-called 'Christian' book they're reading is full of error, they'll say, "I eat the meat and spit out the bones."

They're using the wrong food in their analogy. You'd need to be able to say, "I eat the bread but spit out the yeast." Can't do it; it's too pervasive.

Mat 16:12 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.

Kudos to them for getting it in the end - for putting it together after a bit more explanation from Jesus.

This principle certainly has immediate application to what you read and listen to that is of a spiritual nature, namely, Bible study and Christian books.

But I'd like to expand it to other things we read and listen to, because legalism and liberalism are not confined to the church.

It's really very 'yeastie' out in the world. There is a satanic conspiracy to influence you, to corrupt you.

Jesus' advice was to "take heed and beware." It assumes we have a spiritual humility and not think we are above being tempted and threatened by Word-tampering.

We become legalists when we try to "take heed and beware" for others. Examine yourself, your own life. Do a spiritual threat-assessment. The dangers are all around you.

What are **you** doing to protect your heart from corruption?