

March 18, 2018

“The Danger of Stubborn Unbelief”

Matthew 16:1-12

FCF: The failure to recognize the danger of certain teachings

PROPOSITION: (magnet) Because of the danger of stubborn unbelief,
(anchor) Jesus urges us to beware of it.

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:

The older your children get, the longer their toys linger in the house. And the longer the toys linger, the more prone they are to needing repair. So many need batteries - laser guns, remote-controlled robots, handheld games. They get old, start to leak, and leave residue on the contacts inside. So it's time to bring out the vinegar and Q-tips. Which is just normal, part of it.

But some things are corrosive in themselves. Even if hidden away from sight, they are still destructive and dangerous. This includes certain teaching. And we need to recognize that.

SCRIPTURE READING: [Matthew 16:1-12](#)

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON INTRODUCTION:

Stephen Hawking passed away last week. He was a theoretical physicist. Also a cultural icon. His book, A Brief History of Time, was a global hit and sold 10 million copies. Hawking made several appearances on TV shows and had an award-winning movie made on his life.

He was the “Albert Einstein” for our time. Einstein was, of course, the German-born theoretical physicist who developed the theory of relativity, one of the pillars of modern physics. Though he died in 1955, Einstein was in the news just last year when a sheet of paper bearing a 13-word sentence in his original handwriting went on sale at an auction house. It was inscribed in 1922 on the stationery of the Imperial Hotel in Tokyo. Experts predicted it would fetch between \$5,000 and \$8,000. Bidding started at \$2,000. It finished at \$1.56 million. How could this be? He was a respected figure, a man whose words many feel bear a certain weight.

How much more so Jesus of Nazareth? The Bible shows He is the Creator and Sustainer of the very cosmos Hawking and Einstein studied. He is God-in-the-flesh, the One whose time on Earth was every bit as historical as theirs. And, in terms of weight, infinitely more so. The point being His words matter. If we are wise, we will then heed His teachings, stories, promises, assurances, and warnings. And through this account we just read, we hear a warning - one regarding stubborn unbelief. And because of the danger it poses, Jesus urges us to beware of it.

The danger of stubborn unbelief is made clear in at least three ways here. First, by an unholy alliance. Second, by this vivid imagery. And, third, by the strong warning Jesus gives.

I. UNHOLY ALLIANCE

First, there is this unholy alliance and what we learn from it ([READ Matthew 16:1-4](#)).

A) *Opposing Sides*

We need to understand that these are two opposing sides here.

1. Positions staked

Just in terms of their positions, the Pharisees and Sadducees were at odds with each other. The Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection and held only the books of Moses as authoritative. The Pharisees accepted the Law as well as the Prophets and believed in the resurrection.

2. Popular struggle

Beyond that, they were each engaged in a struggle amidst the people. The Pharisees represented a “back to the Bible” movement. The Sadducees were committed to wealth and political power.

B) Common Cause

So these were opposing sides that were somehow now together in a common cause.

1. Threatened and united

What could be so significant, so threatening as to unite them? Their common hatred of Jesus.

2. Shocking implication

Which has a shocking implication to it. However different they appeared to be, essentially they were the same. They wouldn't have seen it. And would surely have denied it. But it was true.

This unholy alliance shows us something of the danger of stubborn unbelief.

Illustration:

It's like certain factions today - extreme political groups on the far Right or the far Left who are willing to do whatever it takes to get what they want. Burn it all down, if need be. They are essentially, at their core, the same. They are a rule unto themselves, rejecting any other.

Application:

What does this show us? The possibility of profound blindness. Think with me. These men ask for more signs. The irony being that they are skilled at reading the weather but unable at reading the most obvious sign of all, Jesus Himself. They are so blind to the signs already given that they want more. It's not lack of evidence. It's rejection of the evidence before them.

This shows us what we are capable of. And what's going on around us all the time.

And so, because of the danger of stubborn unbelief, Jesus urges us to beware of it.

II. VIVID IMAGERY

This alliance shows the danger. As does the vivid imagery (**READ Matthew 16:5-11**).

A) The Metaphor

Let's talk about this metaphor of yeast or leaven. What does Jesus mean here?

1. Not positive

It's not meant to be positive. Not as with the Parable of the Leaven back in Matthew 13.

2. But negative

It's a negative image and one Jesus' hearers knew well. Before they would commemorate the exodus in the annual celebration of Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread, they were to remove from their homes all baked goods with leaven. This was an image of that which defiles.

B) Its Meaning

So that's the metaphor. What is its meaning? Where is Jesus pressing here?

1. The teaching

(**READ Matthew 16:12**) The danger was in their teaching, in their positions. "It doesn't matter what Jesus is able to do. Listen to what He says. We can't trust him. He can't be the Messiah."

2. The effect

This was a terrible position to take, one sure to spread like leaven. Into their positions on other issues. And, as leaders, into the hearts and minds of the people who looked to them for wisdom.

That's what's behind this vivid imagery, this idea of their teaching being like leaven.

Application:

I mentioned the possibility of blindness a moment ago. This brings us to the certainty of damage. It's not a matter of if the damage will come but when. That's how it is with stubborn unbelief and false teaching. And history is filled with the grave markers and epitaphs to prove it - great ministries, denominations, seminaries, gifted individuals compromised and destroyed.

How? When any daylight appears between us and orthodoxy, between our ideas and the Bible, trouble and ruin is sure to follow. It is inevitable as we get out of alignment with the truth.

And so, because of the danger of stubborn unbelief, Jesus urges us to beware of it.

III. STRONG WARNING

This unholy alliance and this vivid imagery alert us to the danger. And then also the strong warning Jesus gives to both groups here - the Pharisees and Sadducees and His disciples.

A) Hardness of Heart

To the Pharisees and Sadducees, Jesus gives a warning of their hardness of heart.

1. Spiritual adultery

(**READ Matthew 16:4**) This the language of the OT prophets. The idea being that God had wed Himself to His people and they had chased after other gods. And this was what they were doing.

2. Marital betrayal

It was a marital betrayal. And the Lord is a jealous spouse, not prone to just give up His bride.

B) Dullness of Mind

But then there are His words to His disciples, warning them of their dullness of mind.

1. Fixation on the wrong thing

(**READ Matthew 16:8-11**) They were fixated on the wrong thing. Jesus mentions "leaven" and they immediately think, "Oh no. We forgot to pack lunch." And, in so doing, they show that the obvious lessons from these mass feedings they had witnessed first hand had been lost on them.

2. Unawareness of the greater thing

They were fixated on the wrong thing and unaware of the greater thing - clueless and oblivious to the danger they faced, the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees. And so Jesus tells them to "beware" of this - to guard against it, to stay alert, to consider carefully and turn their minds.

For there is the possibility of blindness, the certainty of damage, and the reality of danger.

Application:

And yet, we hear this, and wonder, “How bad can it be?” That’s worth some careful thought. Where does a rejection of Jesus and the gospel message of His finished work take us?

To the degree we do that, there are consequences. In this life, we remain in our pride, insecurity, bitterness, fear, and joylessness. And then, in the next life, it gets worse. For, with our alienation from God complete, that hell goes out for eternity. So, yes, such teaching is that bad. It brings blindness and tremendous damage. And it is temporally and eternally dangerous.

So, because of the danger of stubborn unbelief, Jesus urges us to beware of it.

CONCLUSION:

Yesterday being St. Patrick’s Day, perhaps it would appropriate to tie his story into all of this. You may not know this but behind the shamrocks, there is some history ([READ blog posts](#)):

Patrick was not Irish by birth. He was born around 390 A.D. in Roman Britain. As a teenager, he was taken captive by Irish raiders, brought to Ireland, sold to an Irish king, and set to work as a shepherd. He had been raised in a Christian home but had not believed in God. The six years of hunger, cold, fear, and loneliness in the fields were hard. Yet light began to dawn. Patrick became convinced of the reality God and began to pray. One night, he dreamed God spoke to him, “*You are going home. Look...your ship is ready.*” And with that, Patrick walked 200 miles to the coast, found a ship, and sailed back to Britain.

Yet he became restless for Ireland. He entered a monastery, became a priest and then a bishop. Then, thirty years later, Patrick returned as a missionary to the Irish, barbaric as they were at the time. Thomas Cahill notes in his [How the Irish Saved Civilization](#), “*Only this former slave had the right instincts to impart to the Irish a New Story, one that made sense of all their old stories and brought them a peace they had never known before.*” He was used in the conversion of thousands. But the story doesn’t end there.

Patrick was uniquely suited for communicating the timeless universal message of the gospel to this particular time and place. And the Irish were particularly suited for the saving of Western Civilization. Keep in mind what else was happening at this time. The Roman Empire was crumbling. External pressures were mounting. Internal rot was worsening. The barbarians were sweeping down like a plague of locusts, destroying everything in their path. By the end of the 5th century, all the great libraries had vanished.

Enter the Irish and their new found love of learning, literacy, books, and copying. And copy they did – Plato, Virgil, Cicero, and the Bible. Countless manuscripts in Greek, Hebrew, and Latin preserved on this little island the Romans never bothered to conquer. And, as the torch was passed from Patrick to his successors and as the Irish moved forth into Scotland, England, Iceland, Greenland, and on through Europe, they took this bond to the Book with them. “*These scribes,*” Cahill says, “*served as conduits through which the...Judeo-Christian cultures were transmitted to the tribes of Europe.*” They “*re-established literacy and breathed new life into the exhausted literary culture of Europe.*” “*Without this service of the scribes,*” Cahill concludes, “*our own world would never have come to be...Twelve centuries of lyric beauty, aching tragedy, intellectual inquiry...and love of Wisdom...would all have gone down the drain of history.*”

But what does this have to do with our text? Well, who was behind all that? Jesus, the One at the center of Patrick’s message, the subject of so many of those books. He stands over all history, directing all things towards His glorious and better ends. That’s an astonishing thing.

But, again, what does this have to do with our text? Think with me. It is this same Jesus who spoke in that historical moment to the Pharisees and Sadducees and then to His disciples of the danger of stubborn unbelief. And, through the Scriptures, He is speaking to us right now.

May we hear. Because of the danger of stubborn unbelief, Jesus urges us to beware of it.

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