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The Gospel According to Matthew

Recognizing the Counterfeit Kingdom of God

June 23, 2019

Sermon Text: Matt 16:1-12

Scripture Reading: 1 Cor 10:1-12

You often hear the phrase “the visible church.” We use that term to distinguish Christ’s true church, the invisible church, from that church which we can see here on this earth. The invisible church consists entirely of regenerate people, who at any given time in history are to be found both in this present world and in heaven with Christ. The visible church on the other hand is quite imperfect, consisting of true Christians and many false professors of Christ as we call them. It is very important that we specify which church we are speaking of – the

visible or the invisible. Many times that distinction is not made and it leads people to a false notion of the body of Christ.

- The church treats oppressed people cruelly
- The church is full of hypocrites
- The church has done many evil things down through history in the name of Christ

But that is not the true body of Christ. That is the visible church which at many times in history, if not all the time in history, is made up of leaders and members who are counterfeit. Who belong actually to the kingdom of darkness. Think about it. Is it not true that at this present moment the large majority of people who claim to be Christians, *are not?*

Mat 7:21-23 “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. (22) On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not

prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ (23) And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’

The visible and the invisible church, you see.

In our text this morning here in Matthew 16, we have the true and false church contrasted. Peter’s confession, which we will look at more closely next time, is the confession of the true Christian:

Mat 16:13-17 Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” (14) And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” (15) He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” (16) Simon Peter replied, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” (17) And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.

But just preceding this confession of faith we have the evil, counterfeit “church” which was led by those old

enemies of Christ, the Pharisees and the Sadducees. Listen to them again:

Mat 16:1-4 And the Pharisees and Sadducees came, and to test him they asked him to show them a sign from heaven. (2) He answered them, “When it is evening, you say, ‘It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.’ (3) And in the morning, ‘It will be stormy today, for the sky is red and threatening.’ You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times. (4) An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah.” So he left them and departed.

The false church is always characterized by *unbelief*. In our day you hear people often speaking of “the community of faith,” but only the true church is the community of faith. The false church is the community of unbelief and hardness of heart.

Consider these Pharisees and Sadducees. They were the “church” leaders of their day. The Jews regarded them as such. They were in charge. They, along with other counterfeits such as the high priest and the scribes, controlled that which everyone assumed was the true religion of Israel.

But in truth, what were they? They were children of the devil. They did not worship Christ, they hated Him and did all they could to “get some dirt” on Him. They were not believers. They had an earthly faith by which they forecast the weather, but when it came to believing the God whom they claimed to represent, they were blind guides leading the blind.

Evil and Adulterous

Jesus called them “an *evil and adulterous generation*.” What did He mean by this? Well, the phrase harkens us back to the days in the wilderness, that generation which Hebrews describes:

Heb 3:7-19 Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, “Today, if you hear his voice, (8) do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, on the day of testing in the wilderness, (9) where your fathers put me to the test and saw my works for forty years. (10) Therefore I was provoked with that generation, and said, ‘They always go astray in their heart; they have not known my ways.’ (11) As I swore in my wrath, ‘They shall not enter my rest.’” (12) Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. (13) But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you

may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. (14) For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end. (15) As it is said, “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion.” (16) For who were those who heard and yet rebelled? Was it not all those who left Egypt led by Moses? (17) And with whom was he provoked for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? (18) And to whom did he swear that they would not enter his rest, but to those who were disobedient? (19) So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief.

In other words, Jesus is announcing that these leaders of what was supposed to be the true worship of God were in fact guilty of the very same sins that that first wilderness generation was.

- Idolatry
- Unbelief
- Disobedience
- Under God’s curse

In other words, “evil and adulterous” was a loaded phrase which the Jews knew full well from the Old Testament:

Mal 3:5 “Then I will draw near to you

for judgment. I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired worker in his wages, the widow and the fatherless, against those who thrust aside the sojourner, and do not fear me, says the LORD of hosts.

Look Out for them Today

Now, Jesus really drives His meaning home to the disciples:

Mat 16:5-12 When the disciples reached the other side, they had forgotten to bring any bread. (6) Jesus said to them, “Watch and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.” (7) And they began discussing it among themselves, saying, “We brought no bread.” (8) But Jesus, aware of this, said, “O you of little faith, why are you discussing among yourselves the fact that you have no bread? (9) Do you not yet perceive? Do you not remember the five loaves for the five thousand, and how many baskets you gathered? (10) Or the seven loaves for the four thousand, and how many baskets you gathered? (11) How is it that you fail to understand that I did not speak about bread? Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.” (12) Then they understood that he did not tell them to beware of the leaven of

bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

The leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees. Watch and beware. This is a serious warning not only to the disciples, but to all of us. Most people who claim to be Christians are not heeding the warning.

What is the leaven, the teaching of these kind? It is this:

- It is an external formalistic religion
- It has no room for the vital new birth – you must be born again.
- It is a religion of the letter, not of the Spirit.
- It is an oppressive, enslaving system of doctrines that demand sacrifice from people but has no room for mercy.
- It is a religion that claims to serve the Lord and to obey His Word, but in fact it hates Him and twists His Word into human traditions
- It is an idolatrous religion
- Its leaders and teachers exalt themselves, seeking praise for themselves from men
- It oppresses the oppressed
- It uses threats and fear to control people

Think on this very carefully. Why is there so much in the Gospels and in Jesus' teaching about these spiritual wolves? Read the Gospels and you run across the Pharisees, Sadducees, and scribes all the time. Why? Is this all just for historical interest? I think not.

Jesus is telling us that the Pharisees and their kind will always, always, always be with us, working hard to lead us away from Him. And notice that his imagery for them here should make us even more cautious: LEAVEN. What does leaven do? It spreads into the whole lump of dough so that pretty soon the entire thing is infested by it. That is a good thing if the leaven is the Kingdom of God, but it is fatal if it is the leaven of the Pharisees. Once let this thing get started among us and it spreads like a wildfire plague.

The Apostle Paul and other NT authors wrote the same kinds of warnings for us:

2Ti 2:16-17 But avoid irreverent babble, for it will lead people into more and more ungodliness, (17) and their talk will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus,

Gal 5:7-10 You were running well. Who hindered you from obeying the

truth? (8) This persuasion is not from him who calls you. (9) A little leaven leavens the whole lump. (10) I have confidence in the Lord that you will take no other view, and the one who is troubling you will bear the penalty, whoever he is.

1Co 5:6-7 Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? (7) Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed.

Gal 4:9-11 But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more? (10) You observe days and months and seasons and years! (11) I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain.

Gal 4:17 They make much of you, but for no good purpose. They want to shut you out, that you may make much of them.

Gal 6:12-13 It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh who would force you to be circumcised, and only in order that they may not be

persecuted for the cross of Christ.
(13) For even those who are circumcised do not themselves keep the law, but they desire to have you circumcised that they may boast in your flesh.

And we could go on at length citing many more such Scriptures warning against what Jesus calls the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

Here is a paragraph from a blog post we published this last week about the religion of the Pharisees:

If, in fact, our churches today are infected with the leaven of the Pharisees, then we should expect to find a body of tradition which, though not the Scripture itself, still enjoys widespread authority among us. It would be a body of teachings, that purports to be proper conclusions from the written Scriptures, as interpreted by various men (theologians, pastors, teachers) over time. These traditions would then have grown to enjoy widespread, unquestioning acceptance by the majority of Christians. And, as we shall see, when these traditions are exposed as erroneous, those who hold them do not give them up without a fight.

Is that not the very thing we see and experience to day in evangelicalism

and in Roman Catholicism? Rome in fact actively teaches tradition as on par with written Scripture. Evangelical tradition is in ways more devious in that it is more covertly embraced by people who claim that the Bible is their only authority.

What is the fruit of all this leaven in the churches that we are seeing today? It is twofold:

- It can be a leaven of libertinism, which may be why Jesus included the leaven of the Sadducees in His warning.
- Or, it can be the leaven of oppressive legalism such as the Pharisees embraced.

The leaven of libertinism is what we might call liberalism today. Denial of the resurrection of Christ, denial of His deity, denial of the inspiration and inerrancy of His Word, a heretical distortion of the Cross, an embracing of every new perversion that the world comes up with, and so on. *Watch and Beware!* This is Jesus' warning to us.

The leaven of legalism on its surface claims a strict adherence to Scripture, but it's merciless handing of Scripture is a false gospel that enslaves. Its oppressive, cruel traditions burden people down and strip any joy from their lives. Gathering together on the Lord's Day in a church that is ruled by

Pharisees is an experience of oppression, of being watched and condemned, of focusing on outward rules and regulations rather than upon a heart devotion to and a love for Christ.

Watch! Beware! The leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees is always present and a very real threat to the people of Christ.

1Co 5:6-9 Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? (7) Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. (8) Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.