

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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Ninth Sunday after Trinity, August 2, 2015

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 544, 283, 285, 409, 406.

Lessons: Exodus 12:1-21, 1 Corinthians 5:1-13, Mark 8:11-21.

Sermon Text: Matthew 16:5-12

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

Last week you heard how the Pharisees and Sadducees were tempting Jesus to give a sign from heaven to prove he was who he claimed to be. That encounter is the basis for a point Jesus makes for his disciples – and for us – to beware of the leaven of false doctrine, hypocrisy, and false teachers.

Jesus uses the situation where they crossed the lake and forgot to take bread – except for one small loaf, as our Gospel lesson tells us – as the basis for warning that all his followers must be on guard against false teachers and false doctrine. He is concerned how their faith would hold out against the schemes of the Pharisees.

So we too, today, must be warned

BEWARE OF FALSE PROPHETS!

- 1. The leaven of the Sadducees and Pharisees is still with us today.**
- 2. We, too, must be on our guard!**

Leaven is yeast. In biblical times, people usually used some old dough in a high state of fermentation, or mixed some sour milk with flour and allowed it to ferment for several hours or overnight in order to prepare breads made with yeast.

Today, people usually use dried commercially prepared yeast for cooking or fermenting and do not rely on air-borne yeast or some that they have saved. Yeast works quietly and invisibly yet the effects of its working are very visible.

Bread is one of the most common uses for yeast and so the disciples not having brought bread to eat is the incentive and reason Jesus uses to warn them about *“the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees.”*

In the Old Testament, the illustration of leaven, or yeast, is often used by God to teach about avoiding sin and everything that would swallow us up in the things and ideas of the world. The fermentation created by leaven is the beginning of decay or corruption, and was symbolic of corruption and sin.

There were times when God demanded that his chosen people prepare and eat unleavened bread. One reason is when they were to be ready to travel in a hurry. At other times God especially uses leaven as an illustration of the sinfulness that surrounds us, is within us, and would totally take over in our lives. This is the Biblical picture of leaven as sin.

As they prepared for the Passover, the Jews were to get rid of all leaven, all the yeast in their houses. During this sacred time Israelites were forbidden to eat yeast bread or to have any leaven in their houses. The absence of leaven symbolized several things. All God’s people are to seek to live pure lives and to fight sin in their lives. This also reminded them of the haste in which they had fled out of Egypt. It also suggested the afflictions of Egypt by the tastelessness of unleavened bread.

In our sermon text leaven is a picture for corrupt doctrine, corrupt teaching. Jesus *“was not telling them to guard against the yeast used in bread, but against the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.”*

The Pharisees took the Law of Moses very seriously and added hundreds of rules of their own to that law. They expected to earn their salvation by keeping all the rules, at least outwardly. They added their own interpretations to God's law and insisted on keeping these traditions which they then thought made them acceptable to God. But Jesus denounced them as hypocrites and called on them to repent, so they hated him.

The Sadducees took a very rationalistic attitude toward life, rejected most of the Old Testament, and denied doctrines such as the existence of angels and did not believe in any kind of resurrection, so they hated Jesus for speaking about resurrection and even because he, with his miracles, raised people from the dead. Reason and human logic dominated their "theology", much like many today.

The doctrines of those two Jewish sects were at odds with each other, but these Jews were united in their hostility toward Jesus. The corrupt principles and practices of the Pharisees and Sadducees are compared to leaven. They were souring and spreading, like the leaven Jesus' disciples were accustomed to. They fermented and corrupted men wherever they came.

It is no wonder that Paul later writes twice to his readers that a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough. Even a little false doctrine can rob a person of the Savior and of his saving gospel.

In the New Testament, leaven is used primarily as a picture for hypocrisy and false doctrine, malice and wickedness. We read in Luke: "***Meanwhile, when a crowd of many thousands had gathered, so that they were trampling on one another, Jesus began to speak first to his disciples, saying: "Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy."***" (Luke 12:1) Paul writes in our Epistle lesson: "***Don't you know that a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough? Get rid of the old yeast that you may be a new batch without yeast--as you really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Therefore let us keep the Festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and wickedness, but with bread without yeast, the bread of sincerity and truth.***" (1 Corinthians 5:6-8) Here yeast is a picture of sin and evil and how it grows and attacks.

The one exception in the New Testament to that picture of yeast as an evil influence is found in Matthew 13 (v. 33) where Jesus uses the picture of yeast spreading to show the power of the Gospel and its method of working. The Gospel is the only tool and the only power God has given us for nurturing and extending his church on earth. He simply tells us to spread the yeast of the Gospel all over the world so that it can work within people and change them from the inside out.

In our text, the disciples were worried because of their bringing only the single loaf of bread in the boat. So when Jesus talked about leaven, this was connected in their minds with bread, and it was bread which they lacked. They thought that Jesus was reproaching them for not having a sufficient number of loaves with them in the boat. They are like all people: concerned primarily about earthly matters.

They didn't realize at first that Jesus' purpose was to warn them against false doctrine and ungodly living; against the outward work-righteousness of the Pharisees and against the worldly philosophies of the Sadducees.

It was necessary for Jesus to caution his disciples to have nothing to do with those kinds of things.

Because their understanding had been opened by Jesus, they were no longer at a loss as to the meaning of the word "leaven." As the yeast, or leaven, which is added to the flour, though it may be small in amount, yet exerts its power upon the whole mass, so it is with false doctrine. It may be an apparently small matter. It may start as a doubt about the validity of a Scripture-passage or a false understanding of a fundamental truth; and the entire structure of faith is in danger of being undermined. The disciples now understood that he warned them against the false doctrine of the Pharisees, including their hypocrisy, pride, envy, self-righteousness, and arrogance, and that of the Sadducees in denying the existence of the spiritual world, the immortality of the soul, the resurrection of the body, and the providence of God. He reminded them that they must hold firmly to the Word and to faith in God against the doctrine of the Pharisees and Sadducees. It's as though he would say: Why are you worried about bread for the body? Strive to be concerned for the bread of the Spirit, for the Word and faith, against false doctrine and unscriptural teaching and attitudes. Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, so that you may not, through false teachers, be misled into the kingdom of the devil and error. You must be concerned for the true bread from heaven.

We, too, must beware of false doctrine and unscriptural ideas. How many of you have encountered unchristian ideas just in the past few days? They are everywhere – from the news about what is happening in the world and even in our communities to the entertainment offered to us through television, movies and music to the Facebook posts that come to us to what acquaintances say to us!

God's Word is clear and plain in warning us. Why don't we always take heed? Jesus tells us in Matthew 7: ***"Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it. Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves."*** (Matthew 7:13-15) Paul warns us in the last chapter of Romans: ***"Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them. For they that are such serve not our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly; and by good words and fair speeches deceive the hearts of the simple."*** (Romans 16:17-18) You may have memorized that passage from Romans in this way: ***"I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them. For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people."*** (Romans 16:17-18)

Although this verse is tucked into the last chapter of Romans, it is essential, as is every word of Scripture. Everything that contradicts what God tells us is false doctrine.

Jesus makes it clear here, and in our Gospel lesson, that food for the body is not the main thing in life, and we must be extremely careful that we supply our souls with the food which causes us to grow in Christ.

Today we must beware of all sorts of unscriptural teachings and attitudes and philosophies. We find them everywhere. Any doctrine that robs us of Christ is spiritual poison. Watch out for that yeast! Avoid it!

Just as Christ does not want us to starve for lack of earthly food, so he does not want us to starve for lack of good spiritual food. God wants us to gladly get together and hear the Word of God with fellow confessors of Christ! God is clear when he encourages us: ***"Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another--and all the more as you see the Day [that is, Judgment Day!] approaching."*** Hebrews 10:25 (NIV)

We must never forget why our Savior Jesus Christ came to earth. His primary purpose, misunderstood by many people, was to bring about the forgiveness of sins so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life in heaven. He did not come to bring new laws as the Pharisees did. He did not come to throw away and disregard any of the Scriptures as the Sadducees did. He came to fulfill the scriptures so that we might live forever with him. Amen.