

THE BON AIR PULPIT

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Scripture Reading: *Matthew 16:5-11*

Message: *Some Religions Can Be Dangerous*

September 21, 1997

We all remember the story of the boy who cried, “Wolf,” and all the men in the village came running to help him, only to find that there was no wolf; the boy had just yelled “Wolf,” to see if help would come. He cried, “Wolf,” so often that when a wolf actually appeared nobody came to help. There are people in life who are alarmists. They see danger under a rock and trouble around every corner. Jesus was not an alarmist. Jesus spoke positively; He was upbeat, uplifting; but occasionally He did warn us. There are occasions, He said, when we need to be aware. So I understand that when He did speak in these terms you and I need to listen to Him very, very carefully. The passage of Scripture which we read today, which was one of those warnings that He gives us, is in the Book of Matthew. It is Chapter 16, and we will begin reading at verse 5. It says:

"When the disciples were going across the lake, they forgot to take bread."

For those of us who live in a culture that has fast food on every corner, we will miss the implications of this, but if you lived in Jesus's time and you went off without food on a trip, you were in serious trouble.

"Jesus said, 'Be careful. Be on the guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees.' They discussed among themselves and they said, 'He is concerned because we didn't bring any bread.'

Aware of their discussion, Jesus asked, 'You of little faith, why are you talking among yourselves about not having any bread? Do you still not understand? Don't you remember the five loaves for the five thousand, and how many baskets you picked up? Or the seven loaves for the four thousand, and how many baskets you gathered? How is it that you don't understand that I am not talking to you about bread, but be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees.' Then they understood that he was not telling them to guard against the yeast used in bread, but against the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees."

There is a naive opinion that all religion is good. But when you see the greed of certain gurus, when you see the immorality of certain groups, when you see nationalism and raw power mixed with religion, when you see the killing fields of the cults, and when you see the racism of the clan, than you understand that sometimes the way in which Satan destroys us is that he perverts religion. In this passage of Scripture, Jesus gave us a warning about two ways in which religion can be perverted. Now if we are going to understand about these groups of people, then we must understand the culture that produced them. Israel is a very small country, surrounded by great powers, and throughout its history it has been overrun by the great powers. About 300 years before the birth of Christ, the Greek Empire and Alexander the Great swallowed Israel up. Some of the people began to say, “If we are not careful, we are just going to be obliterated or assimilated; and we are not going to have anything left of what God has taught us.” So out of the desire to maintain their traditions and their faith, a group of people arose who were called *Pharisees*. There was another group in that country who said, “What we need to do is not always be tied to the past. We need to accept the future. We need to accept the

best of what other people have, and we need to be assimilated among the thoughts of the world. So what we need to do is move forward with all of the cultures of the world.” These people were called the *Sadducees*.

Jesus would say to us that these two groups are not to be thought of as historical, but rather as two groups who had problems, and that you and I have the same problems. The *problem that they had*—and that He was warning them about—is *hearing what other people say and just accepting it*. You see leaven, or yeast, about which he warned them, is what is put in bread. It makes the bread rise. The yeast actually infiltrates the flour until the flour is under its control. He said, “*If you are not careful you are going to listen to what other people say. You are going to take that into your life, and it is going to affect you more than what God says.*” What He is warning the disciples about, and warning us about, is to be careful that all of our religion doesn’t become nothing more than what culture around us is saying. Make sure that when you determine the values of your life you are doing it upon what God says, and not just what happens to be current in the culture. So He warns us about being manipulated, or by osmosis becoming just what everybody else is. These two groups He used really are groups who talk about two great problems that all of us confront all the time. If you have never heard of Pharisees and Sadducees, you are still wrestling with the problems. Let me help you to understand a little about what Jesus was talking about in the Scripture.

Among the *Pharisees*, their problem was that they *confused God with rules*. You recall that over in the very first of the Bible, God gave us the ten commandments. Somebody said God didn't give us ten suggestions; He gave us Ten Commandments. But you must also understand God did not give us ten rules, but ten commandments. Let me show you the difference. One of the ten commandments is that you will remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy. What that commandment simply means is that we are to take one day of our week, and we are to dedicate it to God. We remember that every breath we take, every blessing we receive, our lives, are in His

hand; and we, as Christians, come in gratitude to God for what He has done for us in Jesus Christ. One day is dedicated unto Him. But you will notice that He doesn't tell us how we are to do that. What the Pharisees said was this: we need to clearly understand what that means, so we are going to make rules. We have records of those rules. They made thousands of them. How do you keep a Sabbath Day holy? Well, they said one way in which you do so is that you don't walk too far on the Sabbath Day. In the Bible it talks about a Sabbath Day journey. If you walk too far, you may be walking for pleasure, and that's wrong. If you walk too far, that may be on a business trip. So that is wrong. So you are to be careful how far you are to walk. They even went so far as to talk about a chicken laying an egg. Chickens didn't take off for the Sabbath. So a chicken would lay an egg; and the Pharisees said that if an egg is laid in a nest and there is no danger of its breaking, then you can leave it there. But if the chicken somehow made a mistake and laid an egg on the side of a hill and it went down the hill and cracked, then the egg is in danger of spoiling, so you can go get it and you won't break the commandment. Thousands and thousands of rules.

The tremendous danger that is part of all of us is that of simply making God nothing more than following rules. We all set up our rules and our rituals and our routines, and we do them and somehow feel that we follow God. You see, it is easy to come to church, sit for an hour, sing a few hymns, and say that I have fulfilled my obligation to God. I have read a few verses in the Bible. I have fulfilled my obligation to God. So all my walk with God is nothing more than just keeping minute rules with Him. So Jesus warned us about it. As you begin to read through the New Testament, you understand how that plays out. One way in which it plays out is that if rules are all your religion is, then all your religion is on the *outside* and doesn't affect you at all on the *inside*.

Jesus one day had some people together. Some of the Pharisees, who seemed to always be the bloodhounds of orthodoxy around Him, said, “You broke one of the rules.” Let me tell you what the rule was. The rule was that before one ate one always washed his hands. Now they didn't know

anything about germs, so it was not a hygiene thing. It was a religious thing. What they were saying is, "I cleanse myself before I take the blessing of God." Jesus came, and He didn't wash His hands. They said, "You didn't wash your hands!"

Jesus sometimes failed to do things so people would ask him questions. He said, "You are right. I didn't wash my hands." But He said, "*Do you understand that a relationship with God is not in washing your hands? Your relationship with God is what comes from inside your heart. You can wash your hands, and it doesn't change the way you feel. It doesn't change the way you think. It doesn't change the way you act. You see, you can go through the ritual, and you can go through the routine, but it doesn't change you.*"

Years ago I used to play on a church softball team. The church softball team decided that we would play some fellows who worked in an office. It was a hot day. One of the fellows was playing first base. I think he was the most profane fellow I had ever been around. He couldn't talk without uttering profanity. But on first base he got so involved in the game and it got so hot he took off his shirt. Tattooed on his arms were the ten commandments. It reminded me that you can look very much like you are religious; but all you may have is tattoos on your arm, and your heart isn't changed. Jesus says that is always the problem: you can just go through the rituals of religion. You have done your business. You bowed when you were supposed to bow, and you offered a little money to God, and did a little here and there. Somehow you think, "Great. I've done it all." Jesus says, "*But what about your heart? Check your heart.*" Jesus says the problem is that we are so concerned about insignificant things that we forget the important things. Jesus said, "*You come and you bring your money to God. You think, O, my goodness, I have done what God wants. But what about justice? What about mercy? And what about love? If you are not careful, all of your relationship with God is the insignificant things, and it misses the most important things.*"

I guess one of the things that it does to us, as well, is destroy proper motivation. Proper

motivation--if you are going to keep rules--is beauty and obligation and responsibility. Sometimes I talk with people about their relationship to God. What I hear back is this, "Well, I know I ought to do that. I know I should do that." I say, "Do you understand that a walk with God is not composed of the *oughts* and the *shoulds*? It is composed of the *want tos* and *can't help buts*. It is *I love you, God, and I want to serve you, and I want to be in Your presence*. I am not going to come and lay another guilt trip on you, and I am not going to come to you with another commandment or another rule; I am going to come and ask you why don't you want to? Why don't you want to serve Him? Why don't you want to be in His house? Then you begin to understand that something is desperately wrong on the inside.

The interesting thing about Pharisees is that they seem to have a religion so small that they can accomplish it. Then they seem to get on the mountain and look down at all the folks who are not with them. They become very supercritical, and they begin to blame others because they are not doing what they ought to be doing. You need to understand that one of the reasons Jesus died is that the Pharisees put Him to death because He did not keep their rules. Whenever you take religion and you form rules with it, you have just violated the basic tenets of the faith. Anytime you make God nothing more than keeping some rules and rituals in religion, you have come a Pharisee.

Sadducees. If I came to you and said, "Do you think we ought to be modern and update? Do you think that we ought to accept the newest of things?", you would say to me, "Sure!" But, you see, there is a problem. There is a problem in that sometimes we *can't tell the difference between traditions and truth*. Sometimes we want to become so acceptable and so modern and so up to date that we throw the baby out with the bath water. We become what I call politically-correct Christians. So we don't want to offend you in any way. We don't want to set standards that somehow are difficult to keep. We don't want to tell you that there are some truths that are eternal and that can't be changed. We certainly don't want to make you feel uncomfortable as you come in the presence of God. We want to lower the bars to so easy a level

that everybody can feel comfortable.

Much of this was started a few years ago by an English bishop by the name of Bishop Robinson. He wrote a best-selling book back in the 50s. It is called *Honest to God*. What he simply said was this: what the church needs to do is throw off a lot of its old traditions and a lot of its old baggage, and we need to get up to date. One of the things we need to do, for example, is just pitch the virgin birth out, since nobody believes in the virgin birth any more. People are not practicing chastity before marriage, so we need to stop telling people you are not supposed to have sex before marriage. We'll just throw that out. Nobody believes anymore that same sex marriage is wrong, so we'll pitch that out. A lot of people don't believe in the resurrection anymore, so we'll pitch that out, too. So, in an effort to become acceptable to everybody, we just throw everything out. What many of us cannot seem to understand is that there are some things that need to change that always are optional in the Christian faith. But there are some things that are not up for vote, whether we like it or not. It is still wrong to be immoral before marriage. Jesus was born of a virgin. Jesus did die and was resurrected again. We are to live a life that is not dominated by immorality and materialism. Even if we don't like it, *we are not in the business of making God in our image. He is in the business of making us in His*. Somehow or other we just want to be acceptable to everybody. So we have become Sadducees.

I find it interesting where the Sadducees ended up. They ended up as the leaders of religion and economics. So they said "We need to put Jesus to death because He is going to take over our positions of power." Sometimes in an effort to please everyone we say, "Well, you know, we've got all these buildings here. We've got all these expenses. We can't offend anybody by telling them what the Bible says." Or we become leaders in business, and we say that what we've got to do is just go along with what everybody says because we've got to make a few dollars. Then you understand the spirit of Sadducees.

There is a passage of Scripture that continues to haunt me. It says: "*Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.*" My job is not

to make Jesus Christ relevant to you. My job is to preach Jesus Christ, and you will find out that He is relevant to every need in your life. My job is to present to you a Christ who stands above all of time, Who cannot be condensed to a few little rules and a few little rituals, but Who is so awesome and majestic and mighty He demands of me more than I can ever dream or ever hope, and offers me more than I am ever worthy of. So He says, "*Be careful. Be careful that you don't take God and make Him into just a few rituals. Be careful you don't throw out eternal truths, but rather uphold Him who is forever.*"