

Introduction

Today we are installing new members into the family of Grace Community Church. I want you to know that membership at Grace Community Church is not something we take lightly. And not just anyone can join this church. It is not because we are arrogant and do not want even more members. But rather it is because we take seriously the charge of watching over souls. The warnings of scripture are not there for no reason. Not everyone who says to Jesus, “Lord, Lord,” will enter the kingdom of heaven. There is a wide gate and an easy way by which people try to enter the kingdom but the end of that way is destruction. Watching over souls involves an obligation to warn persons of that way. We have an obligation to do our best to make sure that as far as it depends on us, our sheep are not among those thinking they are headed to the kingdom of heaven who wind up in eternal punishment. We affirm that each of Christ’s followers should become a member of a local church, and we encourage those of you who are not members to officially unite with a church. Just know that if it be here, you will be asked some questions—questions like, “what is the gospel?” And “Do you believe that the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are inspired by God and without error and that all of it bears the authority of God? Do you believe Jesus is the only way of salvation?”

Why do we ask these questions and seek solid answers? Are we trying to be snooty? Are we trying to embarrass people? Not at all. We ask these questions because truly it does matter what you believe. There is truth and there are lies. The word for the teaching that a person believes is the word doctrine. There is doctrine which is guided by and grounded in the truth and light of the gospel, and there is doctrine that is guided by and grounded in lies that proceed from darkness. The former leads to the kingdom of heaven, but the latter leads to destruction. The church of the Lord Jesus Christ is called to be the pillar and support of the truth. Correspondingly, we must do our absolute best to insure that the members of Grace Community Church of West Allis understand, believe, and submit to the truth. The importance of doctrine is highlighted in our text this morning.

[Read Scripture and Pray]

When do enemies become friends? When two people or two entities who have nothing but differences with each other, nothing but animosity toward one another—when the two suddenly come together—what can be the explanation? For instance what could possibly bring Republicans and Democrats together? The circus we have just witnessed with the impeachment trial of President Trump makes one wonder if the Democrats and Republicans could ever agree on anything. Anything goes and everything is motivated by the attempt to gain political advantage. The only thing that brings these two groups together is the boxing ring where they come together to fight—the U.S. Capitol.

Two groups in Jewish society were just this far apart. They were from completely opposite ends of the spectrum ideologically. Their differences set the two groups in irreconcilable conflict. One of these groups was the Pharisees and the other was the Sadducees.

You are probably more familiar with the Pharisees. They believed the Bible of their day, the Old Testament including the law and the prophets and the writings. But the Pharisees had equal regard for the traditions handed down by the rabbis through the years. Jesus had pointed out where they actually placed more weight on the traditions of the rabbis wherever it suited them. The Pharisees were puffed-up in their self-righteousness. They looked down their noses with disdain at those who did not share their zeal for meticulous rule and ceremony keeping. The Pharisees believed in a resurrection of the dead and they were convinced that they were going to be choice citizens in the kingdom of God because of their zeal for being Jewish and for doing works.

You may be less familiar with the Sadducees. They were the upper crust of Jewish society. Strangely enough, this group maintained the Temple. Not an insignificant contributor to their wealth was the business of money-changing and sacrifice-selling they conducted in the Temple. They claimed to believe the Scriptures but demonstrated little regard for the Scriptures as literal or authoritative. They did not have regard for the traditions of the rabbis. They were known for compromise. Whatever it would take to

preserve their power and place of prestige. The Sadducees did not believe in angels, immortality, the resurrection of the dead, or anything else supernatural. So they did not much care for righteousness either.

It is because of these stark distinctions between the Pharisees and the Sadducees that it is astonishing when Matthew indicates that, for a moment at least, they joined ranks. What could bring two groups so far apart together? An enemy emerged which threatened the stranglehold of both groups. That enemy was Jesus. So Matthew writes, "And the Pharisees and Sadducees came, and to test him they asked him to show them a sign from heaven." Their purpose in approaching Jesus together was not to see if he was credible. Their purpose was self-preservation by discrediting their common enemy.

Masterfully and wonderfully Jesus turns the tables on them both. And he teaches us of the threat of being influenced by the dangerous doctrines that proceed from hearts of darkness. It is a reminder of the facts that doctrine is not optional in following Christ and the content of that doctrine is not inconsequential. Faith in Jesus is inseparable from doctrine, and that faith stands or falls based on the content of what it believes. False teaching exists which threatens the validity of saving faith.

With the determined intention to test Jesus, the Pharisees and Sadducees show themselves to be his enemies. In response Jesus makes a declaration and provides a warning. This is our focus this morning.

In verses 1-4,

I. Jesus declares the darkness of his enemies' hearts.

In response to the test, Jesus explains to the Pharisees and Sadducees that the reason they ask for a sign is because they are darkened in their hearts. Let's see how he does this.

A. First, Jesus makes note of the fact that they have ways of telling the weather. They have figured out that if the sky is red in the evening that the coming weather will be fair. They have also figured out that if the sky is red in the morning then the weather on the way is stormy. It is a common and

age-old recognition and has meteorological explanation. "Red sky at night, sailors delight. Red sky in the morning, sailors take warning."

The point Jesus is making is that these men have the capacity for thinking and observing and concluding and even being correct in their recognition. It is not as though they lack a mind to observe, recognize, and make accurate conclusions.

B. Second, Jesus points out that while they have used their ability in order to rightly predict the weather, they have missed the indication of the signs of the times. They were more sensitive to the signs of weather than to the signs of the kingdom of God. Signs were going on all around. Their request for a sign from heaven indicates they have failed to recognize everything that has been going on since the appearance of John the Baptist.

The sign of the time to which they were quite oblivious is that a sign from heaven was standing right in front of them. God made flesh come from heaven was walking among them and talking to them. But they were blind to it.

C. Third, Jesus declares that they are an evil and adulterous generation. Ah, here is the reason they can tell the weather but come with resistant testing hearts toward him. They are evil; they have sin-darkened hearts. They are adulterous. They are far from God. These groups have both shown their hardness of heart to God by what they believe. The liberals—the Sadducees—have denied the word of God by their rationalistic interpretations and the conservatives—the Pharisees—have added to the word of God by their man-made ritualistic traditions. A sign is not what they need. They need repentance. They need new hearts.

D. Finally, Jesus states there will be a consummate sign, a sign of all signs, the sign of Jonah. You and I know he was speaking of his resurrection. The resurrection of Jesus is the sign of all signs that vindicates Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the Living God. It vindicates all he said and all he did. It is a sign to the world that God will judge the world in righteousness. It is a sign of the trustworthiness of the gospel that Christ Jesus lived a holy life and died a sin-atonement death as a substitute in the place of sinners so that

each one who turns from sin and trusts in him will be forgiven, justified, reconciled with Holy God.

Every year people all over the world celebrate what they call Easter. Although all kinds of pagan attachments have been made to the holiday, the heart of the celebration is the resurrection of Christ. But for most, the celebration has no real impact. It is more about bunny rabbits, chicks, and chocolate, and toys for kids. I heard about a family who thought they had the best Easter ever last year in Milwaukee. They prepared homemade chocolate candy and went to the church and passed it out when the parishioners came out of the service! Are you kidding me? Does it seem someone is missing something? Why because it is an evil and adulterous generation. They stare truth in the face but they are more concerned with chocolate candy. The truth means nothing to them.

By nature human beings possess hearts that are darkened in their understanding and which resist the truth, and no sign would ever be big enough by itself to change the hostile disposition of those hearts. Jesus told a parable of a rich man who died and went to the place of torment. Looking off in the distance he saw the poor man who used to lay in front of his house begging in the bosom of Abraham. And he begged that the poor man be sent to warn his brothers lest they also come to the place of torment. Abraham replied, they have Moses and the prophets, and if they do not hear them, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.

People's hearts are hardened so that they exhibit a determined unbelief, a disposition against trusting in Jesus. Some will choose being a Sadducee; others will go the route of a Pharisee; some will be atheists or agnostics; some will choose one false religion or another; others will choose various mutations of the truth. The thing that will bring them all together is a shared hatred for the light of the true gospel of the glory of Christ Jesus.

In the end they are not really interested in the truth or in proof. They believe a lie and will be faithful to that lie though it take them to the deepest darkness. The French existentialist Voltaire confessed, "Even if a miracle should be wrought in the open marketplace before a thousand sober

witnesses, I would rather mistrust my senses than admit a miracle.” It was not because of an absence of miracles that these Pharisees and Sadducees were enemies of Jesus; it was because they had hearts of unbelief. And unbelief will always find an excuse to reject the truth, even denying what is as clear as a red sky in the evening.

John MacArthur states it well. “The liberal theologian does not prefer the speculations of philosophy or psychology because these are more provable or persuasive than the truths of Scripture but because he prefers man’s wisdom to God’s. And contrary to his claim, the agnostic does not refuse to believe because he CANNOT know about God but because he WILL NOT know about him. The person who turns to rationalism, evolution, skepticism, or simply to himself for meaning and purpose does not do so because of lack of evidence about God and Christ but in spite of it. The person who turns to man-made religion does not do so because no light about the true God is available but because he despises that light and that God.

“Men turn to acts of penance, to self-affliction, to confessionals, and to every other human resource to try to expiate particular sins; but they refuse to deal with the root of their hearts, their basic sinful nature with which they do not want to part.” (5)

So first, we hear Jesus declare the darkness of his enemies’ hearts. In verses 4-12,

II. Jesus warns of the danger of his enemies’ doctrine.

With nothing more to say to the Pharisees and Sadducees, Jesus departed from there and went by boat with his disciples to the other side of the sea.

A. He made use of the opportunity to instruct his followers. He told them to beware and to watch out for the impactful influence of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees. He made his point by use of the figure of leaven. The way that people in those times caused their bread to rise was to use a pinch of remaining dough from the last batch of bread that they made. They would take that pinch and put in the new batch of dough, and it would permeate the whole.

Having discredited the Sadducees and Pharisees, Jesus is now telling his disciples that they must exercise extreme caution against their teaching because it has a permeating influence. A little bit can negatively impact the whole.

B. The disciples who had forgotten to bring bread along, were certain that Jesus was talking about bread. And Jesus reproves them. They should have understood what he was talking about but they were so earthly minded. They had their mind set more on food than on the doctrinal instruction Jesus was giving to them.

How often we miss the beauty and depth of the things of God because we are so consumed with everyday things. Fear and anxiety over basic daily matters become our main concern instead of growing deep the things that are unseen but eternal. In the sermon on the mount Jesus had said, "But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these basic things of life he will take care of." And how could they have been worried, having seen how Christ had multiplied the bread the fishes two times now for thousands of people?

C. The point that comes across to the disciples and to us is that it is far more important for Christ's people to be concerned about the danger of the impact of false doctrine than the food we eat.

False teaching is like leaven. It spreads and brings impact wherever it goes. There are two action words in this part of the text: watch and beware. The warning to beware tells you that danger is lurking around. Watch means to look out, to see clearly." You know how to spot false teaching? Know the truth. You watch because it is out there. False teaching abounds. Be on the lookout to make sure it does not impact you. False teaching can confuse the clear instruction of God's word so that the disciple is frustrated on how to deal with the sin in his life. False teaching can also deceive persons so that they miss the kingdom.

D. After Paul ministered in Galatia, false teachers came in from the Pharisee side of things. They came saying that a Gentile could not be saved without becoming a Jew. This tells a lot about the misunderstanding of the

Pharisees. But it also represents a works salvation. It is no gospel at all. People who trust in their works for right standing before God cannot be saved. For salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone for the glory of God alone. Recognizing the impact of this false teaching, Paul says, "There is not another gospel but there are people who make trouble and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed." He repeated this riveting statement. It corresponds to what Jesus insinuated. Don't worry about your bread, rather watch out for your doctrine. Bread may keep you alive physically for a day, but doctrine has to do with life for all eternity.

Conclusion

From time to time I hear people say things like, I don't need all that doctrinal stuff, just give me Jesus. Well, just stop for a minute. Exactly does it mean to say "Give me Jesus?" Who is Jesus and what has Jesus done? There are no answers to these questions except doctrinal ones. You can't have Jesus without an understanding of who he is and what he has done.

In the very earliest days of the ancient church, lines were drawn and battles were fought over statements about who Jesus is and what he actually accomplished. It is that important. And I want you to know that the lines still have to be drawn and battles still have to be fought, because there remain people who are darkened in their hearts whose doctrines are dangerous.

We must rightly divide the word of truth. We must be careful of the impact of false teachings. We must be convinced that protection of a right understanding of God is more important than the very food we eat.