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Theology Makes a Difference; Matt 16:5-12
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Introduction – Theology has been defined as “God talk” or saying something about God. There are two commonalities between theology and every human being. We all share these two links to theology.

First, everyone is a theologian. In 2005, I began pursuing a Doctor of Philosophy in the area of systematic theology. There is a reason why doctorate degrees are called terminal degrees – they just about kill you! I graduated in 2008, so academically, and at least on paper, I’m considered to be a theologian. Practically speaking, however, and in life, we are all theologians. Everyone has thoughts and ideas and views of God. Everyone. Even if you don’t believe there is a God, that is still a theological position. Even if you don’t give much thought to God at all, when pressed, you have to land somewhere. When it comes to God and the afterlife and judgment and salvation and Christ, you have to land somewhere. You have to believe something, one way or the other, and that belief that you hold, biblical or not, true or not, is theological. Everyone is a theologian.

Second, your theology, your thoughts about God, make a tremendous impact on your life and on your eternal destiny, whether you realize it or not. The way we live is directly tied to what we truly, deeply believe about God. The way we talk, the way we view life, family, marriage, money, sexuality, gender, race, everything we choose to do and believe is directly connected to what we truly, deeply believe about God. Our view of salvation, heaven, death – everything runs in a straight line back to what we truly, deeply believe about God.

Given those two commonalities, there really is nothing in this life more important or crucial than our theology. Thus, Jesus’ dire warning to His disciples in our text today to watch and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees. What you believe matters, so make sure what you believe is ultimate truth.

- I. The Teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees
 - a. The Pharisees and Sadducees represent two different and polar opposite views of God and His Word. They are two camps, two sides of the pendulum.

- b. The Pharisees viewed God as mainly and chiefly the Lawgiver. Therefore their entire religious system revolved around lawkeeping. In their theology, the only way to please God, to have His favor, is by perfectly and rigorously keeping His law. If you don't fully follow His commands, then you are not a true child of God. So because everything hinges on keeping the law, you must do everything you can to obey, right down to the letter. Naturally then they developed an entire system of traditions and applications on how to keep the law in order to make sure it was kept. The result of their theology then is if you are not keeping their traditions, you're not keeping the law. If you don't obey in the very same way I obey, you're not right with God.
 - i. This theological error is known as legalism. Meaning law-keeping is my salvation. And it is very much alive in our own day. Pharisees still walk among us. If you don't hold the same convictions I hold, if you don't apply God's Word the way I do, you are an unbeliever, an immature believer, or a believer who needs to repent. Legalism.
 - ii. Now we're not talking about the straightforward commands of God here. Do not commit adultery means do not commit adultery. There is no wiggle room in that command.
 - iii. We're talking about the commands of God that leave room for the liberty of conscience. For example, God commands us to keep the Sabbath day holy, separate, different. The Pharisees charged Jesus with breaking the Sabbath because He healed someone. Jesus proved that doing good to someone is not breaking the Sabbath. Their charge came from legalism.
 - iv. The problem with legalism is that of addition. It makes additional demands beyond the demands of Scripture.
- c. The Sadducees erred on the opposite end of the spectrum. They rejected the objective nature of the truth and relied on their own feeling and intuition. They were the so-called freethinkers of Jesus' day. They would not be tied to established religious systems. They would rely on their own spiritual intuition. They were existentialists.
 - i. This theological error is known as antinomianism, a rejection of the law of God. The Pharisees erred by adding to the law; the Sadducees erred by subtracting from the law. There was no

need for holiness or godly living. In our day, the same error exists because after all, God is a God of love – and what is meant by these modern-day Sadducees is that since God is love, I can live my life however I choose to live it.

- d. J.C. Ryle in his commentary on Matthew, expressed these two errors in this way: Some want to add to the Gospel, and some want to take away from it; some would bury it, and some would pare it down to nothing; some would stifle it by heaping on additions, and some would bleed it to death by subtraction from its truths.
- e. The biblical gospel lies in between these polar extremes. God gives His law in order to show that we need a Savior, not to save us. However, once we are saved, true believers strive to live to the glory of God by obeying His commands.

II. Theology and Leaven

- a. Leaven is just a little thing and a theological drift may seem but just a little thing when compared to the whole of Scripture, but once it enters, once it is admitted, into the heart or into the church, it secretly works, it secretly spreads until it has changed the whole of its environment.
- b. Legalism doesn't stop with one area, it spreads to every area. It becomes a foundational way of reading the Bible and understanding God and our relation to Him. So just one addition is not enough. It continues to spread until my way of applying God's Word becomes the only way God's Word should be applied.
- c. Antinomianism doesn't stop with one demand of Scripture, it spreads to every area of Scripture. It becomes a foundational way of reading the Bible and understanding God and our relation to Him. Just one subtraction of truth is not enough. It is the slippery slope effect. If I can be lax on this truth of the Christian faith, then I can be lax on this one. If I have justification to not take this demand seriously, then I can find justification to not take that demand seriously.
- d. And so eventually legalism and antinomianism continue to drift further and further from the center, which is where the truth lies.

III. Why Theology is So Crucial

- a. As the leaven transforms the whole, as theological error continues to drift further from the truth, you eventually end up with something entirely and totally different than the truth. You end up with another gospel, which is a false gospel.
- b. The legalist adheres to a gospel of saving himself by keeping rigorous attention to law-keeping. The antinomian adheres to a gospel of self-expression and autonomy. God created me this way, so I'll never be happy, I'll never be free unless I follow my desires.
- c. Paul addresses both errors in Galatians. To the legalist he writes in ch3, "O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith?" You are saved by faith, not by the law. But then to the antinomian, he writes in 5:16ff. You are not saved by keeping the law, but if you are saved, you will pursue holiness because that's where the Spirit will lead you if He lives in you!
- d. Jesus addresses both errors. To the legalist in Matt 23 He says, you love to tie up heavy burdens and lay them on people's shoulders, but you yourselves are not willing to move them with a finger. To the antinomian, He says in John 14:15, "If you love me, keep my commandments."
- e. Your theology matters more than anything else in your life because what you believe about God and His Word and the gospel proves without question whether or not you are truly a child of God.

Conclusion – Are you trying to save yourself by being as moral as you can be? Are you following your own desires and banking on God's approval? Or have you embraced Christ as the supreme Treasure of All and found in Him life and salvation and peace and joy?