

Title: Sailors Take Warning
Text: Matthew 16.1-12
Theme: The insidious danger of self-righteousness
Series: Matthew #83
Prop Stmtnt: Self-righteousness is a failed attempt to replace Jesus with my own Savior.

Read Text:

I was called for jury duty and was seated in the courtroom in Mt. Clemens along with the potential jury members who were asked questions by the different attorneys related to the case. One of their questions was, "Have you ever watched the Jerry Springer show?" One potential juror shot her hand up and began to wave it. She excitedly told the courtroom, "I was on the Jerry Springer show." She was quickly escorted out of the back row of the jury, given her \$10 for showing up and sent on her way. What happened there?

Your world assumes that you are needy and that you crave certain things. It assumes that you want to be loved, that you want to be noticed, that you want to be respected, that you want to be known, even desired. You want to be happy, successful, comfortable, beautiful and powerful. And it assumes that you will do about anything in order to get it. And to the degree that you are desperate to get any of those things, your world has power over you. So, your world is constantly making you promises because you are vulnerable. So, why would a girl go on the Jerry Springer show where her life is exploited for TV show ratings? She does it because she is so desperate for attention. People in the media know it. They appear to have what other people crave. What breaks the power of your world from controlling you? There are two things: 1) If you already have what your world offers, they cannot tempt you. 2) If you realize that the promises of the world are lies, then again, you will not be tempted.

The Pharisees and the Sadducees assumed that they had something that Jesus wanted and needed. They were both the political and religious authorities who believed that their approval was the ultimate mark of success and they had what everyone craved. They were used to getting their own way and they fought the other for control of the country. The Pharisees AND the Sadducees are mentioned in Matthew 3 where John the Baptist calls them out for their hypocrisy. But we do not hear anything from the Sadducees until this verse although we encounter the Pharisees in chapters 9, 12 and 15. Here the Sadducees are **with** the Pharisees. That is actually stunning.

Let me give you some background. The Sadducees were a religious and political group that was in power during the life of Christ. They were comprised mostly of wealthy, conservative aristocrats, many of whom were priests. Because they controlled the position of High Priest, they had a great deal of influence. This created animosity among the common Jewish people and set the stage for the rise of the Pharisees. The Pharisees were more a party of the common man and as I have told you before, they started out as a group zealous for the Jews to return to following the law. Therefore, they came up with all sorts of rules as to what following the law would look like. The Sadducees did not agree with the unwritten traditions that the Pharisees were famous for and therefore

appeared to be a bit more lax about some things. They also did not believe in the resurrection and thought that having a lot of money and power was a sign of divine blessing. They did not hesitate to use their authority and influence to destroy anyone they deemed a threat to their wealth and status, which is why they react so violently to Christ. To someone on the outside, the differences between the Pharisees and the Sadducees may not appear to be a big deal, but to someone on the inside, the differences were monumental and were the source of terrible animosity. The Sadducees and the Pharisees both occupied seats on the Sanhedrin, which functioned under the Roman law as the ruling body of the people of Israel. So, in view of how much they hated each other, it is rather amazing that they have united forces in this text. They did this because they found a common enemy in Jesus. If we had lived back then and we saw them walking together, we would be shocked by this. This is like the Tea Party and the Green Party coming together. Something is going on!

So, these two groups join forces and come “to test” Jesus. The seat of their power is in Jerusalem so it is a bit humorous to imagine what sort of conversations took place as they walked all the way to the Sea of Galilee. But, they obviously got there without having shed too much blood because they are on a mission to discredit Jesus. Of all of the short-term missions to go on, this is not one I would recommend. The idea of going on a mission in order to discredit Jesus is patently absurd. We are in a position to test him, like we can give him a grade? But that is what they thought. They were going to test him so they could exploit him and find something wrong. But, he would not play their game. He did not need their approval. They had nothing that he needed.

Warning #1 To those who reject Christ (to the Pharisees and the Sadducees)

- I. **Because you refuse to see, you will not be given anything to look at except judgment.** (1-4)

William Shakespeare wrote:

*“Like a red morn that ever yet betokened,
Wreck to the seaman, tempest to the field,
Sorrow to the shepherds, woe unto the birds,
Gusts and foul flaws to herdmen and to herds.”*

In our day we say, “Red sky at night, sailors delight. Red sky in the morning, sailors take warning.” Jesus said that you guys are not idiots. You can look at the sky and discern what kind of weather that you are going to have. You have signs. You have signs that you can interpret, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times. That is, you cannot see the biggest sign that you could ever witness standing in front of you! Right here is the culmination of your Scriptures. Right here is the Creator of the universe and the King of glory. Right here is the fulfillment of the promises of God. Right here is your Savior. But you cannot see that because you refuse to look at and accept the clear evidence that has already been placed before you. You refuse to see. You do not need more evidence. You have all of the evidence that you need. What you need are eyes in order to see, but you

don't have eyes to see because you refuse to believe me. So, no, I will not give you any more signs because any sign that I would give you would only add to your condemnation because you would create some reason why you do not believe. That is why Jesus calls them evil and adulterous. One who is adulterous is one who is unfaithful. It is one who has a divided heart. It is one who has promised love and loyalty but is betraying that covenant. Jesus is calling these men adulterous because even though they claim to love God, they love themselves and hate God. You cannot love God and reject Christ. But, there is a sign that you are going to get. It is the sign of Jonah.

Here, either Jesus does not explain what he means by it, or if he does, Matthew does not record it because Jesus already explained this comment in chapter 12 in a previous encounter with the scribes and Pharisees. He told them that Jonah's experience in the belly of the fish was a preview of the death, burial and resurrection of himself. The Sadducees and Pharisees knew exactly what he was talking about because after the death of Christ, the chief priests (Sadducees) and the Pharisees went to Pilate (chap. 27) and asked for a company of soldiers to guard the tomb of Christ. The resurrection of Christ was the greatest joy for the disciples, and the worst nightmare for the Sadducees and Pharisees. I will say it again. Seeing is not believing. Believing is seeing.

Imagine a boy sitting in a cold garage. On the other side of the door that leads into the house is a warm kitchen where his dad has prepared him a steak, baked potato, salad, soup and M&M cookies. The boy hears the food being prepared, so he puts his fingers in his ears. He smells the food getting ready so he stuffs cloth into his nostrils. When his dad comes out to the garage to call him to come in, he runs and hides in the corner and tells himself, my dad hates me, my dad hates me, my dad hates me. There is nothing to support the boy's attitude and every evidence is to the contrary, but he refuses to change his mind. What can be done for those who refuse to believe? The last phrase of v.4 is very telling. "*So he left them and departed.*" Jesus left them. People say that Jesus is always with you, not if you refuse to believe.

Warning #2 To those who accept Christ (to the Disciples)

Jesus and the disciples reach the other side of the Sea of Galilee and discover that they had forgotten to bring any bread. That is all that Matthew says about it. Perhaps Thaddeus was supposed to get bread and he thought that it was Bartholomew's turn and Bartholomew is quick to defend himself so that everyone knows that "it wasn't me." It was Thaddeus. Now the other guys are asking what's that about and the news spreads. Thaddeus forgot to get bread. Thaddeus forgot to get bread. Are you kidding me? Thaddeus! C'mon man! I'm hungry. So, since everyone is thinking about bread, Jesus uses the conversation as an opportunity to make a point. "*Watch and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.*" The disciples apparently discuss this among themselves and wrongfully conclude that Jesus said this because they forgot to bring some bread and that this was some kind of warning about the leaven in bread. After all Jews were supposed to eat unleavened bread at the Passover. Maybe this was a new rule that Jesus was making that you could not eat leavened bread anytime. Jesus then calls them out on two things: 1) Their lack of perception and 2) their lack of faith. He addresses the faith

issue first. The problem of not having enough bread is obviously not an obstacle for Jesus. He reminded them of his miracles and of their involvement in them by asking them questions. Do you not remember the five loaves for the five thousand [and] how many baskets you gathered? Or the seven loaves for the four thousand and how many baskets you gathered? Then Jesus asks the most penetrating question. “How is it that you fail to understand that I did not speak about bread?”

Jesus used a lot of questions in his teaching. But, these questions were designed by Christ to cause the listener to think deeply about what Jesus was saying. He did not want them to be robots who would simply repeat verbatim what he said. He wanted them to think. He wanted them to connect the dots. He wanted them to see the entire picture. Jesus was not willing to settle for their behavior and memorized answers. He wanted their heart. The Pharisees and Sadducees then, and much, if not most of Christianity now is willing to settle for behavior and memorized answers. As long as you know the right answers and follow the rules, then you are a good Christian, right? Wrong! Here’s what is happening. The Pharisees and Sadducees have rejected Christ as the Savior because in their hearts, they do not need him. They are Pharisees. They are Sadducees. Jesus is warning his own disciples that they dare not follow the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees. He is trying to get them to connect the dots. But, no matter how much teaching he has done, they do not seem to get it. So, Jesus really pushes them. This is a strong question. *How is it that you fail to understand that I did not speak about bread?* This seems to be a particularly discouraging event for Christ. He’s withdrawn from the Pharisees and Sadducees because of their animosity. Now his disciples still do not understand what he is trying to say. This helps us understand why Christ is so excited to hear Peter’s confession which we will study next week.

Back to the question. How was it that the disciples failed to understand that Jesus was not talking about bread? They did not understand his point because they did not think like he did. He was warning them about issues of the heart and they were thinking about issues of the stomach. Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees. What is leaven? Leaven is a substance, typically yeast that is added to bread dough in order to make it ferment and rise. A little bit of leaven will eventually influence the entire loaf. So, when Jesus is talking about the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees, he is talking about their doctrine and he is saying that it is so dangerous because if you do not keep it out, it will get in and permeate everything. This is a huge warning. We know that the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees is rooted in self-righteousness. They deliberately rejected all of the proofs of his Messiah-ship because they did not believe that they needed a Savior. Therefore, what Jesus is saying is this:

II. **Because it is so insidious, you must be vigilant about the influence of self-righteousness.** (5-12)

Self-righteousness is the dangerous and deeply flawed belief that I can earn the favor and forgiveness of God through my personal morality, religious efforts and good deeds. I can earn the favor and accolades of people through my personal morality, religious efforts and good deeds. I can get awards, rewards, scholarships, titles, respect and notoriety

through personal morality, religious efforts and good deeds. Then, because I have successfully impressed people it is easy and natural to assume that I have impressed God. That is why...

A. Self-righteousness is toxic for your soul.

1. It keeps you away from the gospel.

In fact, most people will settle for impressing people and will not pursue the humbling, exposing and transforming heart-surgery of the gospel. They live deluded into thinking that they are okay because people are impressed with them, when in reality they have done nothing more than splash cologne on a pig. It is therefore shocking and offensive to discover that your personal morality is offensive to God. Your religious efforts do not count except to contribute to your condemnation and all of your good deeds on your very best day are like filthy rags contaminated with bodily fluids when compared to the righteousness of God. Self-righteousness keeps you away from the gospel because it deludes you into the thinking that you can save yourself. The Pharisees and Sadducees kept certain rules that made them appear to be more disciplined, formal, structured, and religious than others. The Sadducees had more money and assumed that this was the result of their personal superiority over others. Therefore, God had seen fit to give them more than others. For them, money was their spiritual currency. For the Pharisees, their spiritual currency was their memorization of and adherence to hundreds of laws that were supposed to protect them from the tiniest infraction of the OT law. The Pharisees appeared to be more religious and more devout than Jesus. Can you be more Christian than Christ? Can you be more devoted than He? So, what are we to say to those who add rules to the Scriptures? We are to warn them! We are not to congratulate them and be impressed with their devotion because they are acting as if they have discovered things that Jesus did not think of.

2. It erodes your growth as a believer.

Why does self-righteousness erode your growth as a believer? What does growing as a believer imply? It implies that I need to mature. It implies that I have not arrived and that I have some areas in my life that need work. The rate of my growth is going to be in direct proportion to how much I understand that I am in desperate need of growth. So, what is going to make me aware that I am in desperate need of growth? I must see my life as Jesus sees me instead of seeing my life how I think or wish others saw me.

We all naturally believe in self-righteousness. No one has to teach us this. We naturally assume that we are the center of the world and that we are superior to others. We naturally find our identity in athletic accomplishments (even if they are 50 years old), scholastic accomplishments, social labels, career and work accomplishments and even religious accomplishments. Therefore, we tend to view the world through our own jaded and colored lenses. As a result we look at ourselves and define ourselves and others in a way that is not biblical. We tend to define ourselves with false labels and we look for or even manipulate others to affirm those labels. I am tempted to pursue the label of being

wanted, being successful, being respected, being powerful, being influential, being impressive or being appealing. The truth is, I am a broken sinner who has been set free by Christ, but who is still in daily need of the rescuing, transforming, delivering and empowering grace of Christ. I am a man who is in the middle of his sanctification. I am not what I used to be, but I am not what I will be. Already I am a child of God, but not yet have I arrived. Therefore, the only thing that I can boast about is that Jesus is a bigger Savior than I am a sinner. However, when we view our world with ourselves at the center of it, we totally fail to realize how needy we really are. Therefore, we look at the failures of others without the ability to see them correctly. We tend to assume that the failures of others are much worse than ours. We also tend to assume that certain people are much more important than what they really are. The bottom line is that we cannot see straight when we have ourselves as the standard because we are assuming that we are someone whom we aren't. If I am not as needy as everyone else, then I certainly do not need what everyone else needs. I am beyond it. I am above it. I have proven it by my knowledge and by my status. That is the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees and it is toxic for every person who thinks that way and when a church thinks that way, the poison is exponential.

B. Self-righteousness is toxic for a church.

1. It replaces the glory of God with the glory of man.

Instead of advancing the fame of God, self-righteousness seeks to advance its own fame. With self-righteousness I constantly have to promote myself by making others aware of how well I keep the rules and how good my kids are, or how perfect my life is. That makes me a glory and worship thief. Instead of looking at God, we look at ourselves and try to get others to look at ourselves as well. When you are around people who are constantly informing you of just how wonderful they are, you want to throw up, don't you. Why? Only God is truly wonderful. Man's glory is like a fleeting match compared with the sun. When we think too highly of ourselves then we forget that we need the truths just as much as the people to whom we are speaking or singing. When we think too highly of ourselves we are going to be much more concerned with how people think about our appearance or performance than we are about how much they are looking like Jesus. When we think of ourselves more highly than we should and believe that we are self-righteous then we forget that everyone around us is a whole lot more like us than they are unlike us. That is why...

2. It fills people with the fear of others.

When I am focused on the righteousness of Christ then I am set free to admit the truth about myself to myself and to you. I am a man who is in constant need of God's grace. But when I am focused on promoting my own righteousness then I am fearful that you will discover the real truth about me. So, I will hide from you. I will keep you at distance. I will use my education, sophistication or sense of success to intimidate you. I will be more concerned about intimidating you or impressing you than I will be about serving you. Simply put, I am afraid that if you get too close then you will find out what is really

in my heart. And there is no joy in living like that, because no one really knows you and you end up being very, very lonely.

3. It destroys joy.

The truth is simple. I am not righteous on my own. I do not have self-righteousness. In order to have self-righteousness I have to work hard to appear that I am righteous and I have to try to convince you of that. The way I do that is to constantly complain about others and expose their faults and blame them for my anger, or obvious imperfections. I sigh about all of the pressures in my life and try to tell myself and you that I am not the problem that others are. That others have no idea of the pressure that I am under or what it is like to have the parents, spouse, family or job that I have. Instead of admitting the humbling truth about myself and throwing myself completely upon the mercy of God who already knows the truth about me, I try to save myself. I try to act as if I have the shoulders that can carry this weight. My discipline and determination do not produce joy. Joy can only come from living under and experiencing the grace of God. If someone discovers that, then to a self-righteous person that person becomes a threat.

4. It seeks to punish all those who enjoy God.

No one enjoyed the Father like the Son. Therefore, no one was more immune to the tactics and snares of the self-righteous than Jesus. They had no power over him because they had nothing that he needed. Their threats were meaningless. Their arguments were like the vanishing vapors from a morning cup of coffee. And yet, they hated Jesus. They hated him because he exposed the fact that their spiritual economy was a fraud. Their currency of self-righteousness that they valued so much and fought for so much and devoted themselves to so much was worthless. Their religious devotion was sending them to hell because they depended on it, instead of Jesus. But, instead of humbling themselves and admitting that, they tried to kill Jesus and send him to hell. Well, they couldn't send him to hell, but they were at least successful in putting him in the grave. Of course, the problem was and still is, he didn't stay there.

Take Home Truths:

1. When I think that I am better than a Pharisee, then I am a Pharisee.
2. I tend to get angry about the very things that I struggle with.
3. I need the gospel just as much as any other person in the world.
4. Only Jesus can free me from looking to myself or my world for inner peace.

When you look to yourself or to your world for inner peace, you are expecting yourself or others to be the Messiah. That, my friend, is another gospel, a false gospel that cannot calm your unsettled heart.