

THE COMPASS

MYTH PERCEPTIONS: Straight From Jesus' Mouth

MYTH #3: *I can help God out by controlling others*

A Feast of Yeast

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So an elderly man in Arizona called his son in New York and said, "I hate to ruin your day, but I have to tell you that your mother and I are getting a divorce. Forty-five years of misery is enough. We're sick of one another. Call your sister in Chicago and tell her."

Frantic, the son calls his sister in Chicago, and she explodes — hangs up — calls Phoenix immediately and screams at her father: "You are not getting divorced! I'm calling my brother back, and we'll both be there by tomorrow. Don't do a single thing till I get there!"

And she hangs up.

The old man hangs up his phone and turns to his wife.

"Okay," he says, "they're coming for Christmas, and they're paying their own way."

OK, I stole that from Pastor Jack Buckley at First Presbyterian Church of Alameda, California.

Pretty good story about control and manipulation!

And we all do manipulation, at different times in different ways.

But when Jesus saw it happening, he didn't just go with the flow. He pushed back.

In **Matthew 16:1-4**,

1 The Pharisees and Sadducees came to Jesus and tested him by asking him to show them a sign from heaven.

Jesus said no.

And then, after he had taken his leave of the Pharisees and Sadducees, he commented to his disciples about the guys he's just been arguing with.

6 "Be careful," Jesus said to them. "Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees."

And over in the book of Mark (**Mark 8:15**), Mark interprets Jesus' words this way: **"Be careful," Jesus warned them. "Watch out for the yeast of the Pharisees and that of Herod."**

Now, who are these guys that Jesus is issuing this ominous warning about?

We looked at the Pharisees in our previous session.

The Pharisees were fanatical about observing all sorts of religious rituals and observing absolute ceremonial purity.

But even though they were the dominant party, weren't the majority party; in fact, the Pharisees were a tiny minority in terms of their numbers; there were only about

6,000 Pharisees total.

And yet, they were so zealous that they exercised HUGE influence over their culture. People were terrified to cross the Pharisees.

But here's something else kind of weird: the Pharisees were NOT clergymen. The Pharisees' movement grew up out of the congregations in the local synagogues. And here's the scary part:

The Pharisaic movement originated as a kind of "back to the Bible" movement on the part of the people.

In fact, at first, the Pharisees weren't even all scholars; these weren't the seminary students or even the highly educated business people.

These were common, ordinary people who had a hunger to know more of God's Word, and they began to dig in and study.

But over the years, as they focused more and more on the letter of the Law, learning and memorizing what God said, they lost track of the SPIRIT of the Law, they lost touch with what God meant.

They came to take such pride in knowing the Scriptures, in being able to quote chapter and verse, that they lost the big picture.

They lost track of how God loves people, and how the guidelines in Scripture are there for people's benefit.

They came to use their command of the Scriptures to beat up on people, to force them to comply with religious authority.

The Pharisees' intense insistence on OBEDIENCE to the rules and regulations had the side-effect of cutting them off from relationships with regular, ordinary people.

The apostle Paul says in **1 Corinthians 8:1: Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.**

If you and I become so entrenched in our knowledge and study of the Scriptures, or so fiercely committed to interpreting the Scriptures and figuring out how people should live accordingly, that we find ourselves being alienated from non-Christians around us, or even from other Christians, that's a signal that we've slipped over the boundary from a legitimate love of God's Word into Pharisaism.

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But the Pharisees weren't the only major party of Jesus' day.

There were also the Sadducees.

Sadducees were mostly clergymen; they were the ones who tended to control the local synagogues.

The Sadducees were not like the Pharisees.

They didn't tend to come from the middle class.

These were the well-to-do, the aristocrats.

They looked around at their countrymen and they said, What a bunch of country bumpkins; we really *must* get some class in this country.

So they worked to bring Greek culture into Palestine.

The Sadducees were humanists.

They didn't see things in mystical, supernatural, or even very spiritual terms.

Acts 23:8 tells us that the Sadducees didn't believe in an afterlife: When you die, that it's; it's over.

And they didn't believe in the existence of angels or spirits.
 They didn't think God exerted any influence over events whatsoever.
 Everything was up to people.
 Work hard, do good, life gets better.

I think I know some Sadducees today.
 They're my friends and neighbors.
 I would say many, if not most, of our friends, neighbors, and relatives basically share the Sadducees' perspective on the world:
 It's about people, it's not about God.
 It's about making wise choices, God doesn't really factor in.
 It's about achieving a better quality of life, certainly not about turning your life over to God.


So these are the players.
 The Pharisees and Sadducees came to Jesus together.
 These were members of opposing parties — your most conservative guys and your most liberal guys.
 And yet here (**Matthew 16**) we find that they were both so threatened by what Jesus was teaching the people that they set aside their differences and tracked Jesus down together.

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Now let's understand one more group of people who factor in to this story — because Jesus seems to use the term "Sadducees" interchangeably with the term "of Herod."

What's up with this "Herod"?



Well, during Jesus' earthly ministry, Herod Antipas  was the ruler of Israel. He was Jewish, but he was a puppet of the Roman government who controlled Palestine.

Herod Antipas was a political animal.
 He didn't care for the Jewish faith; he had no interest in righteousness.
 He was a member of the royal family that held power, and that was his whole thing: holding power.

And the people in Israel who shared that perspective were known as Herodians. They felt that civil society, political government, was the means by which Israel would be restored to independence; and the royal line of the Herod family was the key. Herodians placed their faith in Herod.

They were perfectly aligned with the Sadducees' world view:
 God's not involved, God's not interested, do whatever you can to make the best of your life; if that means seizing power politically, so be it.

The Sadducees and the Herodians were virtually identical. In fact, it's possible that the Herodians were regarded simply as a wing of the Sadducees.

So Jesus is speaking to **two distinctly human tendencies: the tendency of the**

Pharisees, which is to want to control people through the Church, through the use of religion — and the tendency of the Sadducees and the Herodians, which is to want to control people outside the Church, through the use of culture and politics.

The Pharisees said, We'll set up religious rules and make people follow them, because we'll be in charge of the religious system — and that will be *good*.

The Sadducees and Herodians said, We'll set up a political kingdom and make people obey us, because we'll be on the inside of the political government — and that will be *good*.

Now — we don't think of ourselves being in either camp, do we?

We say, Hey, we love God, we love people. We do Thing 1 and Thing 2 — what Jesus said, in **Matthew 22:37-40**.

We love God. We respect people.

Don't we?

But how did it happen?

How do I get to be a Pharisee or Sadducee?

Start small.

The Pharisees and Sadducees started in tiny, seemingly harmless ways.

Let's make a rule to help people love God better. That could only help to advance the Kingdom of God, wouldn't it?

Let's make a list of all the things that we see people struggling with in their walk with God, and let's just get people to stay away from stuff on the list.

That's just a better way, isn't it?

Hey, if we can get the laws changed to reflect godly values, then we're going to be giving people the kind of environment they need to live for God, don't you think?

Bit by bit, they placed their trust outside of God himself, and place their trust IN their own plans and procedures and policies.

Jesus called it "yeast."

The stuff you put in bread dough to make it rise when you bake it.

This term is found all through the Bible.

Yeast (or sometimes it's called leaven) almost always refers to something outside of God's design, that starts out small and sneaks in undetected and then grows big and causes big trouble.

Do you ever bake bread?

How much yeast do you use?

Not much.

Galatians 5:9 says "**A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough.**"



God actually created a Feast of Unleavened Bread for the people of Israel to observe, where they couldn't have any yeast in their bread for a whole week every year.

In fact, they had to sweep their houses to make sure there wasn't even one little speck of yeast accidentally left on the floor.

Why the big taboo on yeast? Was God against yeast?

No.

I think God actually created yeast as a picture of sin for us.

He didn't care about our bread being light and fluffy, as much as he wanted us to understand that it only takes a little departure from God's simple design, slipping into your own complicated human design, to make a mess of much larger chunks of your life.

So Jesus looked at the Pharisees, and he said, "Hey, it's not about religion, it's about relationship — with God."

Jesus looked at the Herodians, and he said, "Hey, it's not about power, it's about peace — with God."

And Jesus looked at his disciples, and he said, in effect, You don't have to carry a Pharisees membership card, or put a Herodians bumper sticker on your boat, to be influenced by these erroneous views of God.

These faulty faith systems will creep into your life, bit by bit.

The enemy isn't going to knock you over the head with something that's obviously wrong.

He's going to slip a little yeast into your dough, and wait for your life to start baking.

Jesus warned his disciples to be wary of taking on just a LITTLE of the Pharisees' thinking.

He said, it's like yeast.

It's a tiny little pinch, almost nothing at first.

How do conflicts get started in our churches?

They start small.

I get what I think is a good idea, a helpful idea, an idea that will build the church, it will help people grow in their walk with Christ.

But when you have a *different* good idea, I start to defend my own idea, and winning the argument comes to be more important to me than the question of whether my idea is actually better.

Pretty soon I find myself talking to people about my view, and pointing out to them, just as a matter of being helpful, how Shaun O'Neill disagrees with me, and what a mistake he's making.

"I just can't understand why Shaun would have such a narrow view."

Maybe a couple months go by, and I find myself talking about it with the people who agree with me, and avoiding the subject with the people who *disagree* with me.

We've formed political parties, right in our church!

How does it start?

It starts with a tiny speck of yeast.

A little idea, which might have been good in its own right, but which became more important to me than loving God by loving people and living according to the principles of Christ's teachings, in community with my church family.

Why does Jesus say in **Matthew 5:23-25** that even if you're in the middle of worship,

and you remember an unresolved conflict with someone, leave your worship and go make it right?

He says in **Matthew 5:25**, “**Settle matters quickly.**”

Why the big rush?

Why does Jesus urge us in **Matthew 18:15-17** to go talk directly, personally, to someone when they’ve caused an offense?

Because yeast grows.

It’s little now, but it’s not little tomorrow morning.

How much yeast does it take to puff up a whole loaf of bread?

One-and-a-half tablespoons.

And it permeates the entire loaf.

There’s no going back with a loaf of bread.

One little speck of Pharisaical thinking, one little speck of Sadducaical thinking, and the risk of spiritual damage — relational damage, spiritual damage, damage of the heart — to me, to my church family, to the impact of my church on the community around us — is enormous.

The danger of yeast is — it grows ... because I come to feel more strongly about my own view than about getting the God’s-eye view.

Jesus says I can *afford* to be suspicious of the potential of any new idea I have, I can kind of *squint* at any new idea that comes to me — I’ll do *well* to filter it carefully through the Word of God, to make sure it absolutely aligns with the *spirit* of Christ’s teachings — because it is so easy to embrace new strategies for controlling people, without even realizing it.

This is why, week after week, we return again and again to the Scriptures: to discover God’s design.

We want to ask ourselves, every step we take in our personal lives, Does what I’m saying and doing square with God’s simple, loving plan as he expresses it in his Word — Thing 1 and Thing 2?

Or is there some unbiblical yeast in here somewhere, that’s going to slowly grow up and undermine my spiritual health?

My big job isn’t judging the yeast in the other guy — but in myself.

It’s so easy to go where the Pharisees went: loving God in a way that hates people ... that doesn’t cut people the kind of slack that Jesus cut people ... that doesn’t look for ways to include people but rather looks for ways to close people out ... that doesn’t extend grace to people but rather issues ultimatums to people.

It’s easy to go where the Sadducees went: trusting ourselves instead of trusting God ... setting up rules and laws to govern people’s behaviors, and avoid the more difficult issues of the heart — how I’m doing inside, how I’m growing spiritually, from the inside out, how my walk with Christ is developing, how well I’m tuning in to the voice of his Spirit within me day by day.

These are questions that can’t be answered by printing up a religious rulebook.

These are issues that can't be dealt with by passing a series of laws. These are matters that can only be dealt with in community, in a true relationship of the heart between me and God, between me and you: one on one, or in a little group, face to face, heart to heart, with all our cards on the table, stripping away our pride, stripping away our private agendas, and agreeing before God to give ourselves to him totally, to trust him completely, for what's best in our lives, as individuals, as God's people.

It's not natural, I admit.

It's not easy, I confess.

And it's easy to forget from day to day.

Sometimes I have to be reminded: Hey, Doug, what's your motive here?

Sometimes you have to be admonished: Hey, why is this issue so important to you?

Is it about Jesus? Or is it about your feelings?

Is this something the spirit of Christ has whispered in your ear?

Or is this something that will strengthen your feeling of being in charge?

With every new idea, it's good to be a bit suspicious.

I can ask myself, Is this the good, nutritious Bread of Life?

Or is this a little yeast, and we just don't recognize it yet for what it really is?

Here's the bottom line:

Every day, every step of the way, I want to ask Jesus diligently, faithfully, to show me the difference between the bread and the yeast — not in the other guy, but in ME!

To learn more about yeast, Israel's Feast of Unleavened Bread, and Passover — and experience the Passover Seder for yourself — check out the Passover Seder DVD from TheCompassDVD.com