

## *Thoughts and Intentions of the Heart*

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on January 12, 2020.

And the Pharisees and Sadducees came, and to test him they asked him to show them a sign from heaven. He answered them, “When it is evening, you say, ‘It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.’ And in the morning, ‘It will be stormy today, for the sky is red and threatening.’ You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times. An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah.” So he left them and departed. When the disciples reached the other side, they had forgotten to bring any bread. Jesus said to them, “Watch and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.” And they began discussing it among themselves, saying, “We brought no bread.” But Jesus, aware of this, said, “O you of little faith, why are you discussing among yourselves the fact that you have no bread? Do you not yet perceive? 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? How is it that you fail to understand that I did not speak about bread? Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.” Then they understood that he did not tell them to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees” (Matthew 16:1-12).

Why do you do the things you do? While we may not realize it or want to admit it, there is a “why” behind what we do. We call the “why” our motive. Even those things in our lives we consider to be on autopilot, positive or even negative habits (even addictions) have a motive behind them.

I get up early every morning, a habit I developed years ago. I don’t think much about my motive; I just do it. I read my bible and pray, followed by exercise, all before breakfast. I rarely give any of it a second thought. But behind my morning routine lies a motive or motives.

Some motives are positive: a desire to accomplish more early, a desire to know God’s Word, a need to fellowship with my heavenly Father, an attempt to keep the body God has given me in relatively good shape. These are all good motives, but not all motives are good. What if my motive is worry, or performance, or vanity? What if what I do is not wrong but my motive is? In short, motives matter. They matter because they reveal the condition of my heart.

Scripture reveals that out of the heart “flow the springs of life” (Prov. 4:23). Our heart is our true self, and by nature it is “deceitful above all things, and desperately sick” (Jer. 17:9). This means that you don’t have to be necessarily thinking about or focused on sin, but the heart according to its own fleshly devices is bent toward it. The point is that we may not always be aware of our motives, but they are there and they may be sinful.

Paraphrasing Calvin, Rosaria Butterfield writes, “One very difficult aspect of sin is that sin never feels like sin to me. My sin feels like life to me, plain and simple. My heart is an idol factory, and my mind is an excuse-making factory.”<sup>1</sup> This honest statement is true of all of us, because

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<sup>1</sup> “Quote by Rosaria Champagne Butterfield,” goodreads, accessed January 9, 2020, <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/7305374-one-very-difficult-aspect-of-sin-is-that-my-sin>.

our heart can deceive us, even if truth is standing right in front of us, which is certainly the case in our passage today. Jesus' life and ministry was on full display before the Pharisees and Sadducees and yet in their hearts they did not believe, revealing a deception of unbelief. Jesus' disciples had followed Jesus and witnessed the testimony of his identity, and yet in hearing Jesus' teaching they did not understand, revealing a deception of wrong belief. Let's consider these two deceptions of the heart more closely.

### **Deception of Unbelief**

Ministering in the Galilean region, Jesus' popularity made its way to the attention of the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem, the Pharisees and Sadducees. Within the realm of first-century Judaism, these two parties represented different theological positions. That they united in their journey to "test" Jesus tells of a sinister solidarity. Serving perhaps as an official delegation, they ask Jesus to show them a "sign from heaven," proving his identity as the Messiah, the Christ. In essence, they want to watch Jesus perform a miracle. What they want, as one theologian defines it, is "an event in nature, so extraordinary in itself and so coinciding with the prophecy or command of a religious teacher or leader, as fully to warrant the conviction, on the part of those who witness it, that God has wrought it with the design of certifying that this teacher or leader has been commissioned by Him."<sup>2</sup> It is as if this delegation is saying: We represent Israel; here we are; prove to us that you are the Christ.

Consider their demand: Is it wrong? Would it not be prudent for the Messiah of Israel to reveal himself to Israel? And yet, he had. As recorded in Matthew 4:23, [Jesus] went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people." He raised a little girl from the dead (Matt. 9:18-19, 23-26). He fed over five thousand Jews with only five loaves and two fish and over four thousand Gentiles with only seven loaves and a few small fish. What further proof was needed? But the Pharisees and Sadducees wanted one more.

As a skeptic by nature, I can appreciate the request, an official representation and validation of Jesus' identity: Give us a "sign from heaven." But Jesus does not meet their demand, at least not initially. Why? Why not one more sign for the delegation from Jerusalem? Because Jesus knew their motive (Luke 11:17).

Jesus said, "When it is evening, you say, 'It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.' And in the morning, 'It will be stormy today, for the sky is red and threatening,'" which is the equivalent of our expression: "Red at morn, sailors be warned. Red at night, sailors delight." But Jesus uses the cultural practice to confront their deception of unbelief: "You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times," which is not an expression encouraging an obsession with end times deductions drawn from current events. Rather, the expression "signs of the times" plays off the Pharisees' and Sadducees' request: The sign that they seek has been given in the fullness of time (Gal. 4:4). They are deceived by their own unbelief characterizing their generation, and the generations before them, as "evil and adulterous."

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<sup>2</sup> Augustus H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Philadelphia: Judson, 1907), 118.

In the moment, no sign would be given but one ultimate sign remained, “the sign of Jonah,” who was in the belly of the whale three days. Jesus, the Messiah of Israel, the Christ, would die as the sacrifice for the sins of his people, would be buried, and would rise from the dead on the third day. The resurrection was the ultimate sign of the time and yet apart from God’s saving grace the Pharisees and Sadducees would continue in their unbelief.

Believing on the Lord Jesus Christ is a gift of grace from God. Signs and wonders and spiritual experiences do not awaken an unbelieving heart. Only the Holy Spirit gives life to the dead and gives belief to the unbelieving. Until then, the heart continues in the deception of unbelief. But what about those who do believe? Can the believing heart be deceived? Sadly, yes, as Jesus’ disciples reveal, they were affected by a deception of wrong belief.

### **Deception of Wrong Belief**

Following the confrontation with the Pharisees and Sadducees, Jesus and his disciples depart by boat arriving on the other side of the Sea of Galilee. Whether negligent or following earlier instruction, the disciples are presumably hungry and certainly without bread. Simultaneous with this discovery, Jesus begins to teach his disciples: “Watch and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.” Is there anything unclear about Jesus’ statement? Is it fairly obvious that Jesus is employing metaphor when he uses the word “leaven”? Do Jesus’ disciples have ears to hear Jesus’ teaching? They do not. Their hearts were deceived by a wrong belief about Jesus, a belief fixated on the urgent need of their stomachs rather than the spiritual need of their hearts.

This is not only a first century problem; it is a human heart problem, a malady which affects even the most faithful among us. The disciples heard Jesus’ words through the fleshly filter of their circumstance. Their immediate physical need had consumed their attention, and so they did not hear the truth but what *they* perceived to be the truth: Jesus said, “Watch and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.”

The disciples heard the word “leaven” and translated it into their immediate dilemma: “And they began discussing it among themselves, saying, ‘We brought no bread’” (Matt. 16:7). The problem is not merely a lack of careful listening. It’s deeper than that, at the heart-level. Yet, in his mercy, Jesus will not leave his disciples in error, but instead graciously confronts their wrong belief, giving them his revelation of truth.

### **Revelation of Truth**

How does Jesus’ respond to his disciples? “O you of little faith, why are you discussing among yourselves the fact that you have no bread? Do you not yet perceive? 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? How is it that you fail to understand that I did not speak about bread? Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.” As far as we know, he does not raise his voice or slow down his pronunciation, as if they are deaf or children who do not listen.

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No, first, Jesus reveals that it is a spiritual matter *of faith*: “O you of little faith.” Why does he start with faith? Because all of sin is ultimately a lack of faith. The apostle of Hebrews writes, “Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today,’ that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin” (Hebrews 3:12–13). So, Jesus starts with faith. Do you believe on the Lord Jesus Christ? Do you trust that he is good? Do you believe that he cares for your every need, both great and small? Do you trust that he will provide your daily bread and keep you from the leaven of false teachers? O you of little faith, trust the Lord.

Second, he *confronts* their error: “why are you discussing among yourselves the fact that you have no bread?” Why were they? They were so fixated on their immediate problem that they were ignoring their provider. How often do we do the same thing? Have you made your temporal problem so urgent, so loud that you can’t hear the truth of Christ? Has your immediate dilemma grown so big, so consuming that it blocks out the Word of Christ?

By the grace of the Spirit of Christ, submit yourself to the Word of Christ! Let him confront your error, just as he did his disciples. “For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Heb. 4:12). Be in the Word daily and pray that the Holy Spirit would use it to confront the wrong beliefs of your heart and mind.

Third, Jesus reminds his disciples of his *provision*, in this case literally feeding them miraculously twice: “Do you not remember the five loaves for the five thousand . . . Or the seven loaves for the four thousand . . .” The disciples who were fixated on their immediate need of bread had forgotten that Christ had miraculously multiplied bread until they had baskets full of leftovers. Was his provision limited to two meals? Certainly not, but they were so consumed with their need they had forgotten Christ’s provision.

Have you, like the disciples, made your problem bigger than Christ’s provision? Is it just too urgent? Too big? Or, are you too proud to look to your provider? “Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you” (1 Pet. 5:6–7).

Ultimately, Jesus provides for his disciples as the living bread of life. We look back, not to the miraculous feeding of four or five thousand, but to the provision of himself in his death and resurrection. Jesus said, “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst. . . . All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. . . . For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day” (John 6:35–40).

Fourth and finally, Jesus *teaches* his disciples the truth (again): “Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees,” meaning beware of the sin, deception, and false teaching of the Jewish leaders. You and I, like the disciples, do not always have ears to hear. From day to day,

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our faith and obedience is fickle. Yet, he who is compassionate and merciful continues to teach us and lead us in truth, by the Spirit of truth.

Because the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick, our motives, the thoughts and intentions of the heart, are easily swayed. You and like the disciples, because of our flesh, will not always have ears to hear. Therefore, let us beware of the leaven of our heart. Let us know that we are prone to elevate our problems above the sufficiency of our provider. And let us be quick to cry out to God:

LORD, Thou has searched me;  
Thou hast known  
My rising and my sitting down;  
And from afar Thou knowest well  
The very thoughts that in  
Me dwell.

Thou knowest all the ways I plan,  
My path and lying down  
Dost scan;  
For in my tongue no word can be,  
But, lo, O LORD, 'tis known  
To Thee.

Search me, O God;  
My heart discern;  
And try me, every thought  
To learn,  
And see if any sin holds sway.  
Lean in the everlasting way (Ps. 139:1-4, 23-24).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *Trinity Psalter* (Pittsburgh: Covenant & Crown Publications, 1994), 118.