

BREADMAKING WITH JESUS

ROBERT C. NEWMAN*

“Beware! Beware the leaven of the Pharisees and the the Sadducees!”¹ said Jesus to his disciples. “Beware!”

Did Jesus intend this warning just for the twelve in the boat with him? Or was he aiming at a wider audience?

Since the day he spoke these words, Jesus’ followers have come to recognize that he is not just a prophet but also the Author of history. Did he, as Author, design this warning to function as something of a motif in the drama of Church history? Was he doing something like Shakespeare did in *Julius Caesar* with the soothsayer’s warning: “Beware the ides of March”?² Was Jesus preparing us for a major temptation the Church would face throughout history? I think he was. And I would like to explore this idea in this paper.

Certainly Scripture contains prophetic warnings. Drastic editorial theories are necessary to remove them. The Song of Moses in Deuteronomy 32 is explicitly prophetic.³ So are the blessing-and-curse passages of Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28, though at first they appear to be merely general principles (blessings for obedience, warnings for disobedience). Yet looking back over the 3500 years since they were given, we can now see an ominous portent in them. These chapters are dominated by threatened disasters, with nearly eighty percent of the Deuteronomy passage and seventy percent of the Leviticus passage giving curses for Israel’s covenant disobedience, only a few verses being allotted to the blessings promised for obedience. But this in fact is what has actually happened to the nation: The people have faced one disaster after another and still have survived.⁴

On the other hand, sometimes an apparently specific prediction may turn out to be rather general. Jesus tells the Jews: “I have come in my Father’s name, and you do not receive me; if another shall come in his own name, you will receive him.”⁵ Hearing this, we would naturally expect to see a single

* Robert Newman, professor of New Testament at Biblical Theological Seminary, Hatfield, PA 19440, delivered this presidential address at the 48th annual meeting of the ETS on November 21, 1996, in Jackson, MS.

¹ Matt 16:5–12.

² W. Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, Act 1, Scene 2.

³ See Deut 31:19 and context.

⁴ The fulfillment of these passages in Jewish history is sketched in some detail in S. H. Kellogg, *The Jews, or Prediction and Fulfillment* (2d ed.; New York: Anson D. F. Randolph, 1887), condensed as chap. 6 in *The Evidence of Prophecy* (ed. R. C. Newman; Hatfield: Interdisciplinary Biblical Research Institute, 1988) 55–66. See also K. Barfield, *The Prophet Motive* (Nashville: Gospel Advocate, 1995) chaps. 16–17.

⁵ John 5:43.

false Messiah who will be acknowledged by Israel. But there have already been at least two: Bar Kochba in the second century and Sabbatai Zvi in the seventeenth, and perhaps one of the Zealot leaders in the first-century revolt against Rome. Yet most of us expect to see an even more impressive fulfillment of this prediction at the end of the age.

I. JESUS' WARNING AS AN APHORISM

Assuming that Jesus' warning to beware the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees is prophetic, perhaps it takes the form of an aphorism,⁶ a brief concrete statement that is to be generalized by some sort of extension. This would be rather like Benjamin Franklin's proverb, "A stitch in time saves nine." Ben was not merely giving advice on clothing repair. He was telling us that corrective action taken early can prevent serious trouble later. So perhaps here. The context of our passage in Matthew 16 already indicates that the word "leaven" is to be extended beyond literal breadmaking to include the teaching of the two groups.⁷

"Beware the teaching of the Pharisees and the Sadducees." That might be all Jesus meant—a specific warning about two particular groups to those twelve men in the boat. But if so, the gospel writers do not seem to have followed up on his warning. True, there is Luke's account in Acts 15 of the Jerusalem Council rejecting the demands of Pharisees who had become Christians,⁸ and there is Paul's shouted protest against the Sadducees before the Sanhedrin.⁹ But neither of these explicitly refers to Jesus' prediction, and Paul was not one of those disciples in the boat anyway. The nearest we come to a reference to Jesus' warning are Paul's statement about a little leaven leavening the whole lump (1 Cor 5:6; Gal 5:9), which sounds more like a reference to Jesus' parable than to this aphorism. Perhaps we should consider that the terms "Pharisees" and "Sadducees" are to be generalized as well.

As best we can tell, the Sadducees disappeared from history after the Jewish revolt ended with the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in AD 70. So any predictive reference to Sadducees that reaches beyond the first century would presumably refer to teachings like theirs.

By contrast, in a real sense the Pharisees continue to this day. They survived the fall of Jerusalem and reestablished rabbinic schools in Jamnia and later in Galilee. They condensed the oral tradition of the first-century Pharisees into the written Mishna, which later formed the basis of the Jerusalem and Babylonian Talmuds. And to this day the Babylonian Talmud is the guidebook of Orthodox Judaism. Yet the continuing influence of these literal Pharisees on the Church ended around AD 100. By that time the Jewish lead-

⁶ Aphorism: "a concise statement of a principle"; "a terse formulation of a truth or sentiment" (*Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* [Springfield: Merriam, 1975] 52).

⁷ Matt 16:12.

⁸ Acts 15, esp. v. 5.

⁹ Acts 23, esp. v. 6.

er ship had ejected messianic Jews from the synagogue, and Christianity and Judaism thereafter went their separate ways. So here, too, not long after the end of the first century, Christian contact with actual Pharisees became rather minimal.

So how far do we extend the terms “Pharisees” and “Sadducees”? If we make them broad enough, Jesus’ admonition is just a general warning to beware of false doctrine. False doctrine of course has certainly been a motif of Church history, and an admonition against it is needed by all Christians. But I cannot help thinking that Jesus may have had specific features of the Pharisees and Sadducees in mind when he gave this warning.

If so, what do we know about these two groups? Quite a lot about the Pharisees, but not so much about the Sadducees. The NT authors and Josephus, writing in the first century, speak frequently of the Pharisees. The rabbinic literature, though more than a century later, was written by the successors to the Pharisees even though they do not often use this term. Apparently “Pharisee” was not their own name for themselves¹⁰—rather like the terms “Quaker,” “Methodist” and even “Christian,” which were originally coined by opponents. These same three sources—the NT, Josephus, the rabbinic literature—also give us what information we have about the Sadducees, as it appears that no Sadducean writings have survived.¹¹

The NT nowhere defines the terms “Pharisee” or “Sadducee,” though it does provide enough material for us to make a sketch of each. We will come back to this by and by. But first let us look at Josephus and the rabbinic literature.

II. JOSEPHUS ON THE SADDUCEES AND PHARISEES

Josephus, writing for pagans with no background in Jewish affairs, describes both Pharisees and Sadducees in a couple of significant passages plus several scattered remarks. Listing these two groups with the Essenes as the three main sects of Judaism,¹² Josephus claims he personally tried out all three before deciding to live as a Pharisee.¹³

The Sadducees, he says, are a small group with great influence among upper-class Jews but none among the common people.¹⁴ The Pharisees, by contrast, seem to be a larger group, and they have enormous influence over the masses.¹⁵

¹⁰ In the rabbinic literature, the term “Pharisee” is usually found in the mouth of their opponents, especially the Sadducees; see e.g. *m. Yad.* 4.6–8.

¹¹ It has recently been suggested that the community at Qumran arose from among the Sadducees; see J. C. Vanderkam, “The People of the Dead Sea Scrolls: Essenes or Sadducees?”, *Bible Review* 7 (1991) 42–47; L. H. Schiffman, “New Halakhic Texts from Qumran,” *Hebrew Studies* 34 (1993) 21–33. But if so, the subsequent divergence among the two groups must have been considerable.

¹² Josephus *Life* 2 §10; *Ant.* 13.5.9 §171; 18.1.2 §11; *J.W.* 2.8.2 §119.

¹³ Josephus *Life* 2 §§10–12.

¹⁴ Josephus *Ant.* 13.10.6 §298.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 18.1.3 §15.

The Sadducees hold only to the regulations written in Scripture, while the Pharisees, in addition, put a great deal of emphasis on oral traditions from the forefathers.¹⁶

The Sadducees assign all human actions to our own choices rather than to fate, says Josephus. The Pharisees, by contrast, assign some events entirely to fate and others to a combination of fate and human choice.¹⁷ (By “fate” Josephus apparently means God’s control of events, using a term educated pagans would understand.)

Regarding the afterlife, the Sadducees believe that “souls die with the bodies,”¹⁸ that there is no survival after this life, no judgment, no heaven or hell.¹⁹ The Pharisees on the other hand believe in the immortality of the soul, with resurrection for the righteous and eternal punishment for the wicked.²⁰

The Sadducees, says Josephus, are rude even toward fellow Sadducees and consider it a virtue to argue with their teachers.²¹ The Pharisees, he says, “are affectionate to each other and cultivate harmonious relations with the community.”²² “They show respect and deference to their elders, nor do they rashly presume to contradict their proposals.”²³

That is a quick sketch of what Josephus has to say.

III. RABBINIC STATEMENTS ABOUT PHARISEES AND SADDUCEES

In the rabbinic literature we see that the Pharisees and Sadducees differed over numerous matters relating to personal behavior and liturgical practice. The Pharisees admitted (to themselves, at least) that some of their own regulations were like “mountains hanging by a hair” of Scripture support, or even floating in the air with no support,²⁴ but still they insisted on and fought for their observances being the official ones. This fits Josephus’ picture: The Pharisees depended on oral tradition, but the Sadducees sought to have support of Scripture for any regulations to be officially observed.

The rabbinic literature also shows us something of the antagonism between the Pharisees and Sadducees. The Pharisees, who by NT times controlled the actual practices in the temple,²⁵ would go out of their way to spite the Sadducees, intentionally violating a Sadducean understanding of the law when this was not necessary. On one occasion they made the high priest ritually unclean, so that by Sadducean law he would not be able carry out a certain ceremony, but he could by Pharisaic law.²⁶ They were probably the

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 13.10.6 §297.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 13.5.9 §§171–173; see also Josephus *J.W.* 2.8.14 §164.

¹⁸ Josephus *Ant.* 18.1.4 §16.

¹⁹ Josephus *J.W.* 2.8.14 §165.

²⁰ *Ibid.* §163.

²¹ *Ibid.* §166; Josephus *Ant.* 18.1.4 §16.

²² Josephus *J.W.* 2.8.14 §166.

²³ Josephus *Ant.* 18.1.3 §12.

²⁴ *m. Hag.* 1.8.

²⁵ *b. Yoma* 19b.

²⁶ *Ibid.* 2a; *b. Hag.* 23a.

instigators of the incident over a century earlier in which the crowd at a festival pelted the high priest with fruit because he poured out a drink offering in the Sadducean manner.²⁷ The Pharisees even debated among themselves as to whether the Sadducees should be treated as Israelites, Samaritans, or Gentiles.²⁸

The rabbinic literature also suggests that the Sadducees rejected an after-life. An anecdote about the origin of the Sadducees says their founder was once a disciple of the rabbi Antigonus of Socho (c. 200 BC) but came to reject his teacher's belief in rewards in the age to come, claiming that Scripture would have been much more explicit if that was what it taught.²⁹ Another account says the Pharisees changed the ending of the temple benedictions from "forever" to "from age to age" to refute the Sadducean view that this age is all there is and that there is not another to follow it.³⁰

In general the Pharisees are treated quite favorably in the rabbinic literature. There is one passage, however, that lists seven kinds of Pharisees who were considered plagues upon their reputation.³¹ These descriptions, unfortunately, are quite brief and obscure. Apparently one kind of Pharisee receives circumcision for ulterior motives, another exaggerates his humility, a third is so preoccupied with obeying a commandment that he collides with a wall, a fourth always has his head buried in prayer, a fifth is forever looking for new commandments that he can obey, and the sixth and seventh types are Pharisees from love of reward and fear of punishment rather than from a real desire to please God.³² Clearly the Pharisees were aware of hypocrisy and self-righteousness in their group.

IV. THE NEW TESTAMENT ON PHARISEES AND SADDUCEES

In seeking to understand what Jesus meant when he said, "Beware the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees," the NT is our prime source. It reflects Jesus' own evaluation of the groups. It is inspired by the God who cannot lie, so that it conveys exactly what he wishes us to know on this subject. What does the NT have to say?

In Matthew 23, Jesus closes his ministry to Israel with a fearsome rebuke to the Pharisees. He characterizes them as those who teach truth but do not live it out (vv. 3–4). They advance themselves rather than God (vv. 5–12). They not only refuse to enter God's kingdom but also keep others out as well (v. 13). They spend the money of widows while sounding very pious (v. 14).³³

²⁷ *b. Sukk.* 48b.

²⁸ *b. Erub.* 68b–69a; *m. Nid.* 4.1–2.

²⁹ *ʿAbot* 5.

³⁰ *m. Ber.* 9.5; *b. Ber.* 54a.

³¹ *b. Soṭa* 22b.

³² *Ibid.* These interpretations are more or less in line with the Babylonian Talmud, which diverges significantly from the Jerusalem Talmud; see notes in *Babylonian Talmud* (ed. I. Epstein; London: Soncino, 1936) 16.112–113.

³³ Not in the best texts of Matthew but found in the synoptic parallels (Mark 12:40; Luke 20:47).

They are zealous evangelists, but they have the wrong gospel (v. 15). They emphasize details but miss the main point (vv. 16–24). They are righteous on the outside but not the inside (vv. 25–28). They honor the good people of previous generations but oppose the saints of today (vv. 29–36). Surely this must be part of what Jesus meant when he told us to beware the leaven of the Pharisees.

One of Jesus' most powerful parables is in Luke 18, where he sketches the behavior of a Pharisee and a tax collector who have come up to the temple to pray. Luke tells us that in this parable Jesus was targeting those who think they are all right and who look down on others (v. 9). In agreement with this, the Pharisee thanks God that he is not like others (v. 11). By his fasting and tithing he thinks he is doing more than God requires (v. 12). But Jesus says that only those who recognize their sin, humble themselves, and cast themselves upon God for mercy will find that they are acquitted at the final judgment (v. 14).

We have much less information from Jesus regarding the Sadducees. His encounter with them in Matthew 22 turns on their denial of resurrection. Josephus' comment that they believed "souls die with the bodies" helps us understand that Jesus is here responding to those who deny survival rather than to those who believe in an immortal soul. Seen in this way, it looks like Jesus' response is first to turn aside their *reductio ad absurdum* about the wife and seven husbands by revealing a simple alternative: There is no married state in the life to come (v. 30). Whether or not the Sadducees are willing to take Jesus' word for it that this is how it will be, his proposal at least shows that their objection is hardly insuperable. Jesus then moves to the attack by connecting the whole matter of resurrection to God's covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The Sadducees' concern for the levirate marriage law is really only about a secondary feature of the covenant (v. 32). But one of the primary features of the covenant, and one on which the levirate law depends, is the promise of the land. Now the patriarchs, having died before Joshua's conquest of Canaan, can never inherit the land God promised them personally³⁴ unless they still exist and will rise again—which they do not and will not on Sadducean premises. Jesus thus convicts them of understanding neither the Bible nor God's power (v. 29).

Luke's narration of Paul's encounter with the Sanhedrin in Acts 23 provides further information on the Sadducean skepticism regarding the supernatural. They deny not only resurrection but also the existence of angels and spirits (v. 8), if we properly understand Luke's account.³⁵

The harshness of one Sadducee toward another mentioned by Josephus is illustrated in an incident narrated in John 11. Hearing some in the Sanhedrin moaning that Jesus' success was going to bring in the Romans who

³⁴ Promised personally to Abraham in Gen 17:7–8 ("to you and to your descendants I will give this land"); similarly to Isaac in 26:3 and to Jacob in 28:13.

³⁵ It has been suggested that the reference to angels and spirits is to be understood in the context of survival and resurrection rather than as a claim that the Sadducees denied the existence of angels and spirits altogether; see D. Daube, "On Acts 23: Sadducees and Angels," *JBL* 109 (1990) 493–497.

would destroy the Jewish state, the high priest Caiaphas responds: "You don't know anything!" (v. 49). The plan he proposes ("It is expedient that one should die rather than the whole nation perish") surely illustrates a major feature of the Sadducean policy by which they got and kept their power.

V. POLARITIES BETWEEN THE PHARISEES AND SADDUCEES

That was a quick tour of our ancient sources on the Pharisees and Sadducees. We can see that they were very different from one another, and yet Jesus lumps them together as "leaven" he wants his followers to avoid. We need to think briefly about two things: (1) how they differed from one another and so represent divergent errors by which we can stray from the good path, and (2) how they resembled one another but contrasted with the example of Jesus himself. Let us look at the divergences first.

It is a commonplace today to characterize the Pharisees as the theological conservatives in Judaism and the Sadducees as the liberals. This is certainly true, given some differences between our culture and theirs. It does not, however, guarantee that we have avoided the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees if we can see liberals to the left of us and conservatives to our right.

In any case, the Pharisees and Sadducees do not represent extremes in Judaism. The Essenes and Zealots were far more conservative than the Pharisees in a number of areas. And the Sadducees did not by any means occupy the liberal end of the spectrum. They at least had not apostatized from Judaism, as Philo's nephew Tiberius Alexander did in becoming a Roman general and later a provincial governor.³⁶ And Philo speaks of some Hellenistic Jews who not only allegorized the Mosaic laws but also claimed that one no longer needed to obey them once their allegorical meaning has been deciphered.³⁷ Surely the Sadducean insistence on literal obedience to the Mosaic liturgy puts them to the conservative side of these Jews also. The fact is that the Pharisees and the Sadducees were both a part of the great mainstream of Jewish society in their day. So Jesus' warning is not just to avoid the liberal and conservative extremes.

A second polarity between Pharisee and Sadducee seems to be withdrawal versus assimilation. The Pharisees, it appears, devoted considerable effort to making distinctions that separated themselves from others. In fact, the very name "Pharisee" means "separatist." The Sadducees on the other hand were those who would compromise to fit in with others, especially with those in power. They obviously made some adjustments to get along with the Romans. They also had managed to swallow their pride sufficiently to give in to the Pharisees on how the temple liturgy would be performed, since otherwise the common people would not put up with them. The Sadducees were apparently characterized both by assimilation and expediency in their zeal to have and

³⁶ Josephus *Ant.* 20.5.2 §100; see footnote in the LCL edition of Josephus *J.W.* 2.11.6 §22; cf. also S. Sandmel, *Philo of Alexandria* (New York: Oxford, 1979) 14.

³⁷ Philo *Migr. Abr.* 89–93.

retain power. The followers of Jesus, then, are somehow to steer between withdrawal from society and assimilation to it. We are to be “in the world, but not of it” (John 17:14–18).

A third polarity between Pharisee and Sadducee might be characterized as dogmatism versus skepticism. In general the Jews of NT times were more behavior-oriented than are traditional Christians with our emphasis on doctrine. Probably we are to understand this shift from practice to doctrine as one result of the atoning work of Christ. He rescues us from the condemnation of the law, moving the emphasis from obedience to forgiveness and from Sinai to his person and work. Given this salvation-historical difference, the Pharisees clearly emphasized knowing and obeying a massive list of commandments while the Sadducees apparently tried to keep the list to a minimum. The Pharisees accepted the teachings of their elders, so the tendency among them would be for their tradition to grow. The Sadducees, by contrast, disputed with their teachers, and this doubtless tended to decrease the extent of their agreement and move them toward a minimalist stance. Perhaps this also explains their rejection of resurrection, angels and spirits. Jesus’ disciples are somehow to avoid dogmatism and skepticism, or at least be careful to use these in the right places. In any case, we are not to add to God’s Word or to subtract from it.

A fourth polarity might be legalism versus antinomianism. The Pharisees certainly were legalists, as both the NT and rabbinic literature attest. But were the Sadducees lawbreakers? Surely not on the scale of the apostates and allegorizers we mentioned previously. But several scholars have noted that the trial of Jesus, conducted by the Sadducean-dominated Sanhedrin, violated numerous regulations in the rabbinic literature for capital trials.³⁸ And even if these regulations were not in force during NT times, both Jesus (John 18:19–23) and Paul (Acts 23:13) were mistreated at their trials, and the Pharisee Gamaliel was hard put to rescue the apostles from the Sanhedrin’s desire to put them to death (6:33–40). Jesus’ disciples are to beware of both legalism and lawlessness.

On the basis of such polarities it is not hard to see Jesus’ warning to beware the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees as similar to that of Moses not to turn aside to the right or to the left (Deut 17:11). The Pharisees and Sadducees represent two sorts of attitudes and behaviors by which we may diverge from the straight path Jesus marked out for us.

VI. POLARITIES BETWEEN JESUS AND THESE GROUPS

But why does Jesus use the image of breadmaking and the figure of leaven rather than the more common OT image of journey and the figure of getting off the path? He does not tell us. Perhaps it is just a matter of variety, since both Jesus and Scripture use many figures to provide us with vivid pictures of spiritual truth. That he characterizes both errors as leaven may

³⁸ For a brief sketch of this question with bibliographic references see D. A. Carson, “Matthew,” *Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (ed. F. Gaebelin; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) 8:549–552.

suggest that these groups share some similarities that are the opposite of what we ought to be. Perhaps we can see this more easily by investigating polarities between Jesus and these groups.

Jesus was poor. After his birth, Mary and Joseph gave the poor offering of two birds (Luke 2:22–24). During his public ministry Jesus was homeless (Matt 8:20). He shared a common purse with the twelve (John 12:6; 13:29). He was buried in a borrowed tomb (Matt 27:57–60). Perhaps most revealing, after feeding the multitudes he had the disciples collect the scraps (Mark 6:43; 8:8, 19–20). The Sadducees, by contrast, were rich and planned to stay that way. The Pharisees seem to have been middle-class, but their attitude toward wealth was revealed when they scoffed at Jesus' teaching that they could not serve both God and money (Luke 16:13–14). Jesus intentionally chose to be poor.

Though Jesus enjoyed a brief period of enormous popularity, he was rejected when the crunch came and was abandoned by most of his disciples. He was "out," whereas the Pharisees and Sadducees were "in." They were successful, he was a failure. They lived on, he was killed. Jesus intentionally made choices he knew would produce these results.

The Pharisees and Sadducees chose the way of safety and security. Jesus chose the way of danger. The Sadducees put their trust in political influence and Roman power. The Pharisees put theirs in grass-roots support and in-group approval. Jesus put his trust in God alone, seeking to do God's will regardless of the consequences.

Perhaps these polarities point up the significance of the leaven figure. As we see here (and also in Jesus' temptation in the wilderness), he did not take the easy way. He rejected physical comfort to serve God. He turned aside from the spectacular, though he knew that was the way to get a following. He would not bow to Satan, though that was the way to gain the whole world. In a word, Jesus humbled himself (Phil 2:7–8).

And that, perhaps, is the point of the leaven. If you belong to a congregation that uses unleavened bread in the Lord's supper you know that it is flat and heavy compared to regular bread, which is much thicker and lighter. To bring out the imagery: Unleavened bread is low, leavened bread is puffed up. Jesus is meek and lowly. He comes humbly and riding on a donkey. He is despised and rejected. The Pharisees and Sadducees were proud and powerful. They looked for a leader of the same sort and so would have none of Jesus. Beware the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees!

VII. CONCLUSIONS

Throughout the centuries the Church has faced these twin temptations: to follow the Sadducees in assimilating to the power structures of society, or to follow the Pharisees in withdrawing into a Christian ghetto. In either case the gospel is obscured, and people who might otherwise have been saved have died in their sins.

So how are we evangelicals doing at the end of the twentieth century? I have entitled this paper "Breadmaking with Jesus." As believers, we are

being made by Jesus into the kind of bread he can use: unleavened bread. As members of the Evangelical Theological Society, most of us are pastors or teachers. We are helping Jesus make bread. I hope we are not by our attitudes, teaching, or example adding leaven to the dough that we are or to the batches we are helping Jesus make.

It looks like avoiding the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees is not simply a matter of balance. We cannot take comfort in the belief that we are okay if we are not extreme. Jesus wants us to be like himself.

Being conservative is not good enough, though it is certainly better than being theologically liberal. After all, Jesus told the crowds to do what the Pharisees taught (Matt 23:2), but he never told them to do what the Sadducees taught. But even so, Jesus certainly warns us not to be like the Pharisees.

Nor should we be like the Sadducees. Do we really understand God's Word, or do we explain away some passages of Scripture because we do not know how to harmonize them with other passages? What takes precedence in our exposition, the data of Scripture or our group's creed? If the latter, how can we ever be corrected where it is wrong?

Do we understand God's power? As Christians in a secular society such as ours, we face great temptations to downplay the miraculous. And of course none of us can help underestimating God. We need his grace every moment to keep us from making him and his kingdom look bad.

Do we treat others, even our enemies, with respect? If not, we only show that we lack the humility that characterized Jesus. And how can we draw all people to him if we look so different from him?

Is expediency our guide in life? Then how can those who watch us ever conclude that we really do believe there is a God in heaven who will one day bring all our thoughts and actions into judgment?

Back to the Pharisees. Do we teach the truth? Good. But do we live it out? How can unbelievers see what the Christian life really looks like if no one is living it? When we labor as Christians, are we really seeking to advance God or ourselves? If we cannot serve God and Mammon, we cannot serve God and self either. Are we seeking to enter God's kingdom? Good. But are we helping others enter too, or are we more of a hindrance to them?

How do we spend the money we raise from widows? After all, most of us are living off of money that was donated, and some of it at great sacrifice. Do we handle it as if it were a precious trust from our Lord, or as if it were our entitlement? Do we keep in mind that one day we will have to give an account for every cent?

Are we zealous evangelists? Good. Do we have the right gospel, or are our converts being taught to make the same mistakes we do? Do we consider ourselves righteous? Do we look down on others? Or do we recognize our own sin and cast ourselves upon God for his mercy?

Are we righteous on the inside or just on the outside? Do we honor the saints of today, or just those who are safely dead? How do we relate to the living saints of Christian traditions other than our own?

In a word, are we followers of Jesus or followers of the Pharisees and Sadducees? Do we, like Jesus, somehow draw sinners to ourselves? Or do we, like the Pharisees, isolate ourselves from sinners in our pride and self-righteousness, making the gospel alien and unattractive to them? Or, like the Sadducees, do we so resemble the sinners around us that they can see no difference between us and them and therefore no need for God or Jesus?

Speaking of the Sadducees, the so-called Jesus Seminar is surely some sort of modern manifestation of their leaven. It has done much evil in obscuring the real Jesus³⁹—though we orthodox Christians (in a more Pharisaic way) have been guilty of this as well.⁴⁰ Yet the Jesus Seminar's translation has a few racy passages that capture something of the urgency of Jesus' message. The one I am going to quote only got printed in gray ink in their recent book *The Five Gospels*, so they do not think it likely that Jesus said it. But we do, and we need to take it to heart: "You scholars . . . , you impostors! Damn you! You slam the door of Heaven's domain in people's faces. You yourselves don't enter, and you block the way of those trying to enter."⁴¹

May God grant that Jesus will never one day have to say that to us. Beware the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees!

³⁹ Two helpful responses to the Jesus Seminar by evangelicals are *Jesus Under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents the Historical Jesus* (ed. M. J. Wilkins and J. P. Moreland; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995); G. A. Boyd, *Cynic Sage or Son of God? Rediscovering the Real Jesus in an Age of Revisionist Replies* (Wheaton: Bridgepoint, 1995).

⁴⁰ See P. Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), for an attempt to correct this problem.

⁴¹ Matt 23:13 in R. W. Funk, R. W. Hoover and the Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (New York: Macmillan, 1993) 241.