

# “Beware the Leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees”

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BIG SANDY, Texas—We are all familiar with Jesus’ warning to His disciples to “beware the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees” (Matthew 16:6). Later, in verse 12, our Lord explains that the reference is not to literal yeast but to the teachings of these groups.

But the Pharisees and the Sadducees are both long gone. So how is Jesus’ warning applicable to believers today?

Within any large group or organization there is a diversity of perspectives, often crystallizing around two poles. For convenience, we could describe these two approaches as “right” and “left” or conservatism and progressivism. This may be an oversimplification of the variety of viewpoints that exist across organizations and cultures; the essence holds true nonetheless. These opposing points of view certainly occur in churches—and have done so for centuries.

So could Jesus be warning us to beware of polarization in our midst, as believers?

There is an interesting passage in the book of Ecclesiastes that seems to shed light on this possibility. Solomon warns against being either “excessively righteous” or “excessively wicked.”

Ecclesiastes 7:16-18: “So do not be excessively righteous or excessively wise, otherwise you might be disappointed. Do not be excessively wicked, and do not be a fool, otherwise you might die before your time. It is best to take hold of one warning without letting go of the other warning, for the one who fears God will follow both warnings.”

Pharisees tended to be very conservative and believed that their version of religious belief and practice was the only correct one. Sadducees, on the other hand, tended to be more secular and more involved with the Roman government and much less inclined to believe in the supernatural or in miracles such as the resurrection. Could Pharisees then be considered “excessively righteous” and Sadducees “excessively wicked”? Possibly.

Solomon warned against both moral self-righteousness and excess and moral recklessness and neglect.

Jesus used leaven as a metaphor for two opposite yet equally destructive spiritual attitudes—legalistic self-righteousness on the one hand and skeptical unbelief on the other.

In Jesus' teaching, leaven often symbolizes a subtle but pervasive influence. Just as a small amount of yeast silently works its way through an entire lump of dough, false teaching or distorted spiritual attitudes can quietly permeate a person's heart or a community's culture. The danger lies in how easy it is to absorb these attitudes without noticing.

When Jesus said, "Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees," he was alerting his disciples to how powerful—and contagious—such spiritual distortions could be.

Interestingly, we see evidence in the New Testament of Pharisees becoming believers. Nicodemus was one. So was Paul. And Gamaliel defended Christians. It would seem to make sense that believers would more likely arise from a conservative background rather than a less-religious upbringing.

In fact, we see no evidence in the New Testament of any Sadducee becoming a believer. Moreover, two prominent Sadducees, Caiaphas and Annas, were instrumental in orchestrating the plan to kill Jesus. And in Acts 5:17-42 we read that the Sadducees jailed some of the apostles and forbade them from preaching about Jesus (an early example of cancel culture?).

For modern believers, Jesus' warning calls for vigilance against falling prey to either extreme (type of leaven):

- The Pharisaical leaven of tradition, superiority and exclusion.
- The Sadducean leaven of skepticism, secularism or cultural accommodation.

So believers today would do well to avoid either the extremes of "right-wing" legalism (the Pharisees) or of "left-wing" skepticism (the Sadducees). The leaven—or teachings—of both groups not only left them both "puffed up" with the conviction that they alone were right, but also led many other potential believers astray with their false certainties.

These distortions often map onto modern ideological polarization—religious legalism versus worldly relativism—which, like yeast, can spread quickly through a community if unexamined.

Perhaps the Feast of Unleavened Bread lasts a full week to give us time to beware of the leaven of either pole. It reminds us that purging leaven—false influences and divided loyalties—is not a one-day or even one-week act but an ongoing spiritual process.

Jesus' warning, then, still applies today: True discipleship resists both the pride of rigid religiosity and the unbelief of cultural compromise.