

# Jesus' Greatest Hits

## *The Yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees*

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Bakers have used leaven - yeast - throughout history. It's a tiny fungus that ferments the sugars in dough. This causes carbon dioxide bubbles that give the final product its light, soft texture. The ambitious little cells divide exponentially until they've permeated the entire mass.

In the parable of the yeast, Jesus talks about a similar effect that error has in the lives of those who allow it to rise within.

When they went across the lake, the disciples forgot to take bread. "Be careful," Jesus said to them. "Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees." They discussed this among themselves and said, "It is because we didn't bring any bread." Aware of their discussion, Jesus asked, "You of little faith, why are you talking among yourselves about having no bread? Do you still not understand? Don't you remember the five loaves for the five thousand, and how many basketfuls you gathered? Or the seven loaves for the four thousand, and how many basketfuls you gathered? How is it you don't understand that I was not talking to you about bread? But be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees." Then they understood that he was not telling them to guard against the yeast used in bread, but against the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees. - *Matthew 16:5-12 NIV*

Not only is this one of Jesus' shortest parables; His disciples didn't even realize what it was! They thought He was upset because they were short on bread!

It's interesting that Jesus labels these teachings as, "*yeast*". Their beliefs did tend to *puff* them up with pride. Their ideas were a *mixture* of truth and tradition. And their doctrines were *spreading* throughout Israel. But *yeast* has a deeper scriptural pedigree. The annual Feast of Unleavened Bread has its roots in the exodus from Egypt.



Celebrate the Feast of Unleavened Bread, because it was on this very day that I brought your divisions out of Egypt. ... In the first month you are to eat bread made without yeast, from the evening of the fourteenth day until the evening of the twenty-first day. For seven days no yeast is to be found in your houses. - *Exodus 12:17-19a NIV condensed*

When they were told to prepare for deliverance from Egypt, they were instructed to make bread *without* yeast. Salvation was coming quickly. No time for bread to rise! *Adding* yeast would've demonstrated disbelief that God would rescue or redeem them.

- So, the presence of yeast signified a *lack of faith*.
- From there it came to symbolize all evil influences.

That's why they celebrate by removing *every* trace of it from their homes: "For seven days no yeast is to be found in your houses"

Now, just before Jesus spoke these words to His disciples, the Pharisees and the Sadducees had come to try and trap Him:

The Pharisees and Sadducees came to Jesus and tested him by asking him to show them a sign from heaven. - *Matthew 16:1 NIV*

The key here: They came to "test", not to *trust*. They'd seen Him perform mighty miracles, yet they refused to believe.

Then the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin. "What are we accomplishing?" they asked. "Here is this man performing many miraculous signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation." - *John 11:47-48 NIV*

They've come here to plant doubt in the people's minds by asking Jesus to have God send a sign from the *sky* ("from heaven"), like an angel or an eclipse, as a validation of His claims. Jesus' quickly condemned this "yeasty", faithless, assault:

You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times. A wicked and adulterous generation looks for a miraculous sign, but none will be given it except the sign of Jonah." Jesus then left them and went away. - *Matthew 16:3b-4 NIV*



He didn't mean none would be *offered*; He'd done plenty. He meant there'd be one that would challenge even His harshest skeptics. Jonah descended into the deep for three days till God raised him from his watery grave to offer redemption to His enemies, the Ninevites. The Pharisees and the Sadducees would have their sign, when God raised Jesus (on the third day) to redeem the world.

This is when He took His disciples across the lake and warned:

"Be careful," Jesus said to them. "Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees." - *Matthew 16:9 NIV*

And this really confused the disciples, because all of Israel was divided into one of these two camps. It'd be like saying, "Be on your guard against the policies of the Republicans and the Democrats" ... what's the *third* option?



- Pharisees were the *far* right; conservative and legalistic.
- Sadducees were the *far* left; liberal and permissive.

Zealots were extreme Pharisees; often resorting to assassination of both Romans and (mostly) nontraditional Jews. Herodians were extreme Sadducees; part of King Herod's family, they were put in power by Rome, and wanted to *Romanize* the Jews.

The Pharisees added to the Word of God. They added rules and regulations and rituals and restrictions. They were *strict* observers of the Law of Moses. They even went so far as to criticize Jesus for *healing* on a Sabbath.



The Pharisees wanted to be *holy*. And they were opposed to any cooperation with Rome. In fact, their name means "one who is separated". The Pharisees reduced God to a set of rules. They were going to bring about the Kingdom of God through their own righteousness. Then God would send the Messiah (in response), to wipe out the Romans and put Israel in power.

The Sadducees subtracted from the Word of God. They rejected most of the Old Testament. And they didn't believe in reward or punishment or Heaven or Hell.



The Sadducees wanted to be comfortable. And they believed in compromise with Rome. They tried to live with one foot in the world and one foot in the Word. The Sadducees reduced God to a lucky charm. They were going to bring about the Kingdom by blending in with and accommodating Rome. They didn't care about righteousness; their singular desire was political representation.

The only thing that the Pharisees and the Sadducees ever agreed on was that Jesus was their common enemy. But these were the only two camps (the only two "parties") in Israel. And, "You can't offend *both* of them Jesus ... you'll need someone's support if you're going to ascend to power."

Q: Who do you think the disciples thought Jesus would side with?

A: The Pharisees; they even worried whenever Jesus offended 'em.

Jesus was teaching that ...

What goes into a man's mouth does not make him 'unclean,' but what comes out of his mouth, that is what makes him 'unclean.' Then the disciples came to him and asked, "Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this?" - *Matthew 15:11-12 NIV*

This happens shortly before Jesus' warning about the "yeast"; in fact, this may very well have prompted the advice. The phrase, "be on your guard" is a *command*.

It's easy to be a Pharisee: just replace a daily relationship with a set of religious rules, condemn others, and then feel like you merit God's approval for your hard-earned holiness. Problem is, it *always* eventually turns into hypocrisy.

Definition: A hypocrite is someone who complains there's too much sex and violence on their VCR!

It's easy to be a Sadducee: just live with one foot in the world and one foot in the Word. And try to blend in (at work, school, with friends) so they won't suspect what you secretly believe. Problem is, it *always* eventually forces you to choose.

Pharisees and Sadducees; two philosophies: beat 'em or join 'em. Jesus wanted His disciples to know there was a *third* option! The Kingdom won't come through a warrior-messiah or a political-messiah, but through the blood of a self-sacrificing-Messiah.

- The Kingdom must come from within.
- The Kingdom must grow in my heart.



Giving God 95% of our heart isn't enough. We must trust 100%. The nature of yeast requires it be removed *completely*; because even a small portion will eventually permeate the entire batch. A little indulgence has a big influence

**Q:** What little lumps am I harboring, and hoping they won't spread to the rest of my loaf ... I mean *life*?

God doesn't want a polluted people; He wants "pure-breads"!

Get rid of the old yeast that you may be a new batch without yeast — as you really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Therefore let us keep the Festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and wickedness, but with bread without yeast, the bread of sincerity and truth. - 1 Corinthians 5:7-8 NIV

The antidote to the "yeast" of the Pharisees and the Sadducees is the bread of life: "the bread of sincerity and truth". The point isn't that we must be sin-free (that was the error of the Pharisee), but we are to be "yeast-free". We must not harbor that which will harm our faith.

Let's see how well you've been listening; answer *true* or *false* when I ask the questions. In this passage, we've learned that:

1. Ultimately, the "yeast" was a failure to trust God.
2. A little sin has a little influence.
3. We shouldn't add to, or subtract from, God's Word.
4. If I give God 99.9% of my heart that should be enough.