

DOCTRINE AND DISCERNMENT

The Leaven Was a Teaching

On the claim that Jesus cared about hearts, not doctrine

Essay · By **Larry Herzog Jr.** · *Ordinary Means*
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The Leaven Was a Teaching

A graphic has been circulating that asks a question in two parts. What did Jesus condemn most severely? *Incorrect theology?* Or *pride, hypocrisy, hard hearts, and disobedience?*

The design does most of the arguing. Black background, block letters, the word THEOLOGY set off in gold so you can see the villain coming. You are not really being asked. You are being told, and the tone is that of a man who has finally said the obvious thing out loud.

It has the shape of a rebuke and the feel of humility. It also fails on its own evidence.

The Pharisees Had a Doctrine

Pull the thread on any one of those four vices and a teaching comes up with it.

Pride in what? The Pharisee in Luke 18 is not proud in the abstract. He is proud of something specific, and he says it out loud in the temple: he fasts twice a week, he tithes everything he gets, and he is not like other people. Underneath that prayer is a claim about God — that God accepts the man who performs. That is not a personality defect. That is an answer to the question of how a sinner stands before his Maker, and it is the wrong answer. It feeds every vice on the graphic.

Hypocrisy is the same thing one layer down. A hypocrite is not merely a man who fails to practice what he preaches; he is a man who has concluded that the outside is the currency God accepts. Clean the cup on the outside and the account is settled. That is a doctrine, and it is why Jesus attacked it with a metaphor about dishes and tombs rather than with a lecture on sincerity.

Hard hearts follow by simple arithmetic. A man who believes he has kept the law has no reason to pity the man who hasn't. Mercy looks like a subsidy for the lazy. The hardness is not a mood he could have talked himself out of. It is what his theology required of him.

Disobedience, finally, is the one the graphic can least afford. Jesus says the scribes and Pharisees nullify the word of God for the sake of their tradition — a man may withhold support from his own parents by declaring the money given to God. That is disobedience, and its engine is a rule they taught.

What He Actually Went After

The Gospels are not shy about naming the problem.

He quotes Isaiah against them: their worship is empty because they teach human commandments as doctrines (Matthew 15:9). Matthew does not record that they were insufficiently warm. He records what they taught.

He warns the disciples about the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees, and the disciples, being men, assume he is talking about lunch. Matthew stops the narrative to explain the point so no one can miss it: he was not talking about bread, but about *the teaching* of the Pharisees and Sadducees (Matthew 16:12). Leaven is the image Jesus chooses for false doctrine — a small thing that works through the whole batch and cannot be picked back out.

Someone will reach for Luke here, and they should, because Luke reports the same warning with a different word: beware the leaven of the Pharisees, *which is hypocrisy* (Luke 12:1). Take the objection seriously and it turns into the argument. Two evangelists record the same sentence from the same mouth. One says the leaven is their teaching. The other says the leaven is their hypocrisy. Neither of them imagines he is correcting the other, because in that batch of dough there is no telling the two apart. The leaven was a teaching, and what it raised was hypocrisy.

He tells the Sadducees, who have brought him a clever puzzle about the resurrection, that they are deceived because they know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God (Matthew 22:29). Whatever else that is, it is a doctrinal verdict, and it is not gentle.

He tells the scribes and Pharisees that they shut the kingdom of heaven in people's faces — they do not go in themselves, and they do not let in those who are trying to enter (Matthew 23:13). That is the woe he leads with. Notice what it describes. A bad doctrine is not a private error. It is a locked door with a crowd on the wrong side of it.

He tells men who have spent their lives in the text that they search the Scriptures thinking they have eternal life in them, and these are the very words that testify about him, and they are not willing to come to him to have life (John 5:39–40).

And the sharpest word in the Gospels is a matter of doctrine straight through: unless you believe that I am he, you will die in your sins (John 8:24). Unbelief is not a temperament. It is a position taken about who Jesus is. If the severest condemnation in the New Testament falls on a wrong answer to the question *who is this man*, then the graphic's dichotomy has collapsed before it finished being printed.

Two Kinds of Wrong

Someone will object that Jesus never damned a man over a footnote, and that is true. Not every disagreement is a hill, and the church has never said otherwise.

The Augsburg Confession draws the line where it belongs: for the true unity of the church it is enough to agree concerning the teaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments, and it is not necessary that human traditions and ceremonies be uniform everywhere. That is a confession with a category for things that do not have to match. Lutherans have never been the party of maximum precision about everything. We have

been the party that will not move on one thing, because that one thing is where the comfort lives. Luther put it about as starkly as it can be put in the Smalcald Articles: nothing in the article of justification can be conceded or given up, though heaven and earth and everything else transitory should fall (II.i).

So the graphic is refuting a position almost nobody holds. The objection is not that it defends charity toward people who differ on secondary matters. The objection is that it treats doctrine as a hobby that can be pried loose from the heart, as though a man's convictions about how God deals with sinners were stored in a different room than his pride. They are not in a different room. They are the same room. The doctrine is what furnished it.

The Card Has No Gospel On It

Look at what the graphic actually offers you, and notice that both doors open into the same hallway.

Choose the first answer and your job is to get your theology right. Choose the second and your job is to stop being proud, stop being a hypocrite, soften your heart, and obey. Whichever you pick, you leave with an assignment. There is no absolution anywhere on the card. This is the distinction between law and gospel, and the card has only one of the two. It presents itself as the humble, Christlike option while handing you a mirror instead of a Savior — which, as it happens, is precisely what the Pharisees had.

It is worth noticing when this argument tends to arrive in a conversation. Rarely at the beginning. Usually at the moment someone says that a particular teaching takes away the forgiveness of sins, and the reply moves the subject from the teaching to the character of the person who raised it. That is not an answer. It is a change of address. And for a card about humility, it is delivered rather severely.

Why It Was Worth the Fight

Doctrine matters not because God grades the exam but because doctrine is how the comfort gets to you.

Christ is delivered by words. A preacher says *your sins are forgiven*, water is poured with a name attached, bread and cup are given with *for you* spoken over them. Change what the words say and you change what arrives. A gospel that says God helps those who help themselves cannot forgive anybody, because it has nothing to say to a man who cannot help himself. And every one of us is that man eventually, usually in a hospital room, at three in the morning, with nothing left to offer.

That is the whole reason for the fight. Not scorekeeping. Not the pleasure of being right in a comment thread. The dying thief had no time to become a better man. What he had was a sentence about who Jesus was, and it was enough, because it was true.

Six Words

The graphic wants the Pharisee and the tax collector to be a story about attitude. It isn't. Both men went to the temple. Both prayed. Both believed in God, in the law, in the resurrection, in the God of Abraham. The difference between them was not that one had doctrine and one had a good heart. The difference was that one of them was right about how God deals with sinners.

God, be merciful to me, sinner that I am.

Six words in Greek, and better theology than anything else spoken in that temple. Look at what the middle one is doing. The verb is ἰλάσθητι, and it is not a request for a kindly disposition. It is the language of propitiation, the language of the mercy seat — *let the atonement cover me*. The man the graphic would hold up as its example of a warm heart over cold doctrine is, in the only sentence we ever hear him say, confessing a doctrine of the atonement.

His heart was right because his theology was. And Jesus says it was that man, not the other one, who went home justified.

So the question stands, and it deserves a straight answer. What did Jesus condemn most severely? The teaching that sent men home unjustified — and the hard hearts it manufactured on the way.

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