**THE WAY EVERLASTING: SERMONS BY JAMES DENNEY**

**17. THE LEAVEN OF THE SADDUCEES by JAMES DENNEY**

*"Take heed and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees."*

*Matthew 16:6*

The Pharisees and the Sadducees appear at the beginning of this chapter asking Jesus to show them a sign from heaven. Their request is refused. Jesus had wrought wonders among them already which ought to have been more effective than they were." If the mighty works which were done among you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago." Instead of working more miracles gratuitously, He left them and departed, and we cannot feel too strongly that when He goes away the evidences of Christianity vanish with Him. If He is out of our sight we can have no idea either of what it is or of what it rests upon. In the silence which followed this un-genial encounter, our Lord seems to have brooded over the antipathy of the Pharisees and Sadducees. What was the cause of it? What was it in their spirit and temper that made them so unresponsive, so unsympathetic to Him? Whatever it was, He speaks of it here as a leaven, and warns His disciples against it. Leaven is a figure for something which works secretly and by way of infection. We are familiar with the idea of inoculation as a protective against disease, but there is such a thing also as being rendered proof against health-giving power. The man who is inoculated with the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees - the man who has taken into his spiritual nature the virus of their habits and temper - becomes immune in the presence of Jesus. He is not affected as a human soul ought to be affected. He is not impressed otherwise than as the Pharisees or Sadducees themselves were impressed. He unconsciously and securely defies the influence of Jesus, as one who has been vaccinated, for instance, unconsciously and securely defies the contagion of smallpox. It is the un- happiness of falling into such a condition that we are warned of in the text.

When Jesus spoke, the Pharisees were more numerous than the Sadducees and more powerful, and probably the need to beware of them was the greater. In its essence, Pharisaism is virtue which involves the sense of superiority to others, and is therefore destitute of redeeming power. The Pharisee is a person who is complacent about himself, and despises human nature. In the Church, the leaven of the Pharisees is apt to become potent when questions of doctrine and worship take precedence of life. It is the temper which indulges itself in the idea that we are the true people of God; we hold the true Catholic or the true evangelical doctrine; we believe in the incarnation and the atonement, in resurrection and judgment, in the inspiration and the infallibility of Scripture; we believe in the sanctity of the Sabbath and the obligation of worship; we cannot but look down with a pious shudder on all that is sceptical, heretical, unbelieving; we instinctively keep ourselves to ourselves in their presence. It is easy to see that goodness of this type can never help others, and that it is remote from everything we see in Jesus. It is not too much to say that it is equally hateful to God and man. But it has been exposed so often and so completely that it is discredited as soon as named. The Pharisees are not a proud and popular sect now, by whom we may easily be infected unawares; the real danger lies with the Sadducees, and it is their leaven against which we have to be on our guard. What is it, then, and what are the symptoms of its working?

In the time of Jesus, the Sadducees were the priestly aristocracy in Jerusalem. They had the temple and its vast revenues in their hands, and all their worldly interests were bound up with the maintenance of the existing religious order. They were also charged with the administration of all national affairs, and especially of all arrangements between their own and foreign nations. They professed the true religion, of course; indeed they were its official representatives; but they were in contact with a larger outside life, and they had to maintain a modus vivendi with it. In all this there were temptations to which the Sadducees succumbed; and the way in which they explained and justified their transactions and compromises - the Sadducean philosophy, or spirit, or temper - is the contagion we are to avoid. In what way, then, let us ask, did it show its working?

**1.** In the first place, it showed itself in a tendency to secularize religion; that is, to acknowledge it simply as part of the existing order of society, to give it its place and to keep it in its place. Religion for the Sadducees was an institution, not an inspiration. It was part of an established system of social order with which all their worldly interests were bound up, and their one concern was to maintain the existing equilibrium. Living religion the Sadducees dreaded. A religious movement perturbed them, and they did not know what to make of it. When the Christian religion began to put forth its irrepressible expansive power after the Resurrection, we are told that "they doubted whereunto this would grow". They did not want growing things at all in that sphere. A religion that grew, that operated as a creative or re-creative power, that initiated new movements in the soul or in society - a religion that gave men new and infinite conceptions of duty, making them capable of self-dedication and martyrdom, so that you could never tell what mad disturbing thing they would do or try - a religion that disclosed another world, and made a power so incommensurable with all present interests as immortality a present motive in the lives of common men - such a religion the Sadducees could only regard as the enemy. They did not like it; they had no mind to it and no time for it. Their minds and their energies were absorbed in keeping up the social equilibrium which was so advantageous for them against pressures which they understood - Rome on the one hand, and fanatical nationalism on the other; and the new and incalculable force which they could not help suspecting in Jesus was too much. They were more than willing to give religion the formal acknowledgment which its place in the social order required, but a religion which for anything they could tell might explode the social order was something with which they could hold no terms. This attitude to the Christian faith - this particular working of the Sadducean leaven - is not confined to ancient times. It is the peril, in the first instance, of an established clergy, with vested interests in things as they are. Of course I do not mean by an established clergy the clergy of a state church only; the danger is real wherever the profession of Christianity has settled into the customs of a country, and vested interests of all sorts have become interwoven with it. It is real for all men who have been born and brought up in the Church, and who continue to give the Christian institution that formal recognition which decorum requires, but who find their life apart from this so engrossing, so exacting, and so rewarding, that the institution ceases to be vital, and their religion becomes the only dead and uninteresting thing about them. They may feel like the ancient Sadducees that they have no choice. It takes them all their time to maintain their position. Every atom of their mental and moral capital is invested in their worldly concerns, and they feel as if they could not keep their place if they withdrew the smallest fraction of their interest. But the result is that a man living this life may be startled some-day to discover that he has no religion. When he sees the real thing in another soul it frightens him. He hears someone pray, and feels at the same instant how true and vital it is, and how impossible for him. He cannot speak to God any more than he can speak Chinese; the leaven of the Sadducees has stupefied if it has not killed him. Beware of letting any institution, or the observances of any, even what we call sacred, custom take the place in your life of direct communion with God and Christ.

**2.** Another way in which the working of the Sadducean leaven is shown is this: it comes out as a tendency to prefer what we call experience to inspiration, the wisdom of life to the authority of the word of God. Experience is a great word, but it makes a great difference where a man makes his experience; whether it is in the world, without God, as St. Paul says of the heathen; or whether it is with God, in the world. If we get our experience in the world, without God, it will certainly betray before long an aversion to the word of God. Far back in the history of Israel, as early almost as 600 B.C., long before the Sadducean name was known, we can see clearly the workings of the Sadducean leaven. Ezekiel heard his fellow countrymen by the banks of the Chebar saying, "We will be as the heathen, as the families of the countries, to serve wood and stone" (Ezek. xx. 32). They knew in their hearts that they were not really as the heathen, or they could never so much as have formed this thought. God had revealed Himself to them, and that revelation had fixed for them the high responsibilities which the knowledge of God always brings. For the exiles by the Chebar they were only too high. It is not practicable, they said, to live at the level to which the voice of God through the prophet calls us; in the name of common-sense let us say so, and resolve to live at another level; let us be like the heathen, the families of the countries, and serve wood and stone; let us give up the irrational claim to be a people specially taught of God; let us take our chance, and sink or swim with mankind. It is quite easy to put a liberal and philosophical aspect on such thoughts, and to but tress them by appeals to the teaching of comparative religion, and so forth. The Sadducees did it constantly. They were brought into contact with foreign nations, and especially with that gifted nation the Greeks. They saw how wonderfully the Greeks had mastered life, how much they made of it, how brilliantly they reproduced it in their art, how profoundly they criticized it in their poetry and philosophy; and they almost involuntarily fell to asking, Why should we be so conceited as to claim a place apart as a people of God, with a revelation of God not made to others? yes, and to burden ourselves besides with the responsibility of living up to it? Let us lose ourselves in the race, and stand or fall with it. We cannot digest the idea of the supernatural. We can neither think out nor live out the idea that God has given a special revelation, involving special responsibilities, to us.

There is no man living who has not been conscious of this working of the Sadducean leaven in his own veins. In the Church we have all been brought up to believe in revelation and in inspiration. We have been taught to believe that God speaks to us in the Bible, and especially in Christ, as He speaks nowhere else in the world, and that there is an authority here against the truth and supremacy of which there is no appeal. But is this all that is to be said? I venture to put it more strongly. I venture to say, speaking of those who have been brought up in the Church, that we have not only been taught, but have experienced, the inspiration of the Bible, the presence of God in it speaking by His Spirit to our hearts. We can re member the time when our conscience was subdued and quickened by the words which revealed the awful holiness of God. We can remember when the words of Jesus fell on our hearts in the glory of their grace and truth, and we knew that they were words of eternal life. Dare we ever go back upon these experiences? Dare we try to evade the responsibilities they create? It cannot be. No matter how plausible, how large-minded it may seem to say, "We will be like other people, take our chance, sink or swim with our kind"; our responsibility is fixed by these experiences of revelation, and it is a Sadducean leaven which tempts us to evade this truth. No doubt, a man is not a child, and as we know more we read our Bibles with other eyes; but the child's impression of the word of God and its authority is unchangeably right; and all that deadens our sense of responsibility in relation to it, all that tempts us to plead experience against its practicability, all that would discount its inexorable judgments or qualify its infinite grace, is Sadducean poison. There are many examples to show us to what it leads. The denial of a special presence of God in Scripture ends inevitably in the denial of a special presence of God in Christ. When the Bible is just another book, Christ is just another man. And the spirit which can show Him to His place among the other spiritual luminaries of the world is more than half prepared to ignore Him altogether. It was the Sadducees at the beginning who convinced themselves that there was no room in the same world both for Christ and them, and that is still what the Sadducean temper comes to.

One mode in which this tendency to disparage revelation comes out, even in what ought to be Christian preaching and teaching, is distrust of the great things in the Gospel as mysterious. The avowed aim of many who plead the cause of Christianity is to be bright, practical, rational, attractive; to meet people on their own ground. Under the guidance of such aims the world of New Testament truth too readily contracts; we hear nothing of the atonement, of the new life in Christ, of immortality and eternal judgment. With the narrower conception of the realities with which it has to deal, the Church soon comes to have lower ends and with them lower means; it ceases to have in the full sense of the term a Divine or Christian calling; it lapses into a more refined piece of the world, and sometimes into futile efforts to compete with the world on ground of the world's choosing. I do not say a word against the development of the social, the institutional, or the philanthropic side of Church work; but Christianity lives by the supernatural and eternal, and all that obscures this or thrusts it into the back ground is the leaven of the Sadducees against which we are here warned.

**3.** There is one other point to refer to, on which the New Testament lays particular emphasis. The Sadducees are described as people who say that there is no resurrection, and that angel and spirit are words without meaning. They not only denied immortality, they derided it. They invented the story of the woman who had had seven husbands, and asked whose wife she would be in the resurrection. It was invented to leave the laugh on the Sadducean side in their discussions with the Pharisees, but the laugh is not much to have on your side in questions about God and man and human destiny. The Sadducean objections to immortality, as raising absurdly unanswerable questions, no doubt seemed to them, as they still seem to many, truly philosophical - the inevitable refusal by acute and enlightened minds of impossible ideas; but according to Jesus they rested on a two-fold ignorance. "Ye do err, not knowing the Scriptures, nor the power of God." The Scriptures mean, of course, the Old Testament Scriptures, and according to Jesus there is a re velation of immortality there. There is a revelation of immortality because there is a revelation of God entering into a relation of friendship with men so intimate that He consents to be called their God. "I am the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob." Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob may never themselves have understood all that the friendship of God involved: they may never have suspected that life from the dead was in that word. But Jesus understood. He knew that the friendship of God was something which time could not exhaust and against which death was powerless. He lived and died believing in immortality, because in life and in death He knew the Father. The supreme utterances of Scripture - those words in which the human spirit has revealed once for all what it is capable of - illustrate the mind of Jesus here. "Nevertheless, I am continually with Thee; Thou hast holden me by my right hand. Thou shalt guide me with Thy counsel, and afterward receive me unto glory." "I am persuaded that neither death nor life shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord." "They shall never perish ... no one is able to pluck out of the Father's hand." Those who know what God is to man, and only they, are in a position to speak about immortality. But no one ever knew this as Jesus; and accordingly, for those who understand it, the word and faith of Jesus, as arguments for immortality, outweigh the scepticism of all lower minds. To be ignorant of God, the God whose relations with men are revealed in Scripture, is to be out of count when immortality is in question.

The other kind of ignorance to which scepticism is due is described by Jesus as ignorance of the power of God. The world of nature and of natural relations, in which we live at present, has evidently no room for immortality; and the Sadducees drew the inference that because we cannot be immortal in this world, or in a world which simply reproduces this, therefore we cannot be immortal at all. But this is to make the present world the measure of the power of God, and it is against this that Jesus protests. The truth is that the present world - nature as we call it - is so far from defining God's power that what it suggests to a living mind is rather its unsearchableness and infinity. This is the key to the passage in which St. Paul, in a discussion of the resurrection body, dwells on the boundless variety and wealth of nature; the God who has such resources at His disposal cannot be embarrassed in providing for the immortality of man. It is the key also to one of the most wonderful passages in Job, where, after a sublime contemplation of the greatness of God in nature, he concludes: "Lo, these are but the out skirts of His ways: And how small a whisper do we hear of Him! But the thunder of His power who can understand?" God can sustain man's life in another order or mode of being to which the Sadducean conundrums about the Resurrection do not apply; and it is such an order, not the perpetuation of the present, to which the hope of immortality refers.

The question of immortality is in some respects a very simple one. It is the question how much God can or will give to man, and how much man is willing or able to receive from God. No one can answer it decisively but one who has true thoughts both of God and man. This is what makes the answer of Jesus so important. And everything that prompts or fosters unworthy thoughts of either - everything which represents God as powerless or ungenerous, and man as insignificant or contemptible - everything which dis credits the idea of union and communion between the human and the Divine - is important too. It is important because it is the leaven of the Sadducees by which our spiritual nature is benumbed and rendered insensible to all that God means toward us in Christ and can do for us through Him. Surely we do not need to be told how many secret allies in our souls conspire with the tendency to believe that death ends all. All our natural indolence, all our reluctance to make spiritual efforts, all our unwillingness to conquer truth and goodness from nature, and to live in God always, are on this side. So is our willingness to reduce the living God to a stream of tendency, and to deny eternal judgment because we do not see how we could execute it justly, or because it is disproportionate to so worthless a being as man. All this is the leaven of the Sadducees, to be purged out by disciples of Christ. If we ask whether there is not an antidote for it, the answer can only be given in the words of Jesus, Abide in me. Jesus was no Sadducee. He believed in the living God and in a living religion which should make all things new. He believed in revelation: He heard the voice of the living Father in the Scriptures, and so may we if our ears are not dulled with sophistry or secularity or complacency. He believed in immortality. He lived and died believing in it, and He said to His own, "Because I live ye shall live also". To keep our hearts against all these debilitating, deleterious, and in the long run fatal tendencies, there is but one thing we can do: abide in Christ, and let His words abide in us.