

## Preaching to a Bear

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Matthew 16:5-12

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One day, someone made the comment that preaching to people isn't really all that hard. A real challenge would be to preach to a bear. So a priest, a Pentecostal preacher and a Rabbi decide they would all go find a bear, preach to it, and attempt to convert it. Seven days later, they get together to discuss the experience.

Father Flannery, who has his arm in a sling and is on crutches says, "Well, I went into the woods and when I found a bear I began to read to him from the Catechism. Well, that bear wanted nothing to do with me and began to slap me around. So I quickly grabbed my holy water, sprinkled him and, Holy Mary Mother of God, he became as gentle a lamb. The bishop is coming out next week to give him first communion and confirmation." Reverend Billy Bob was in a wheelchair with an arm and both legs in casts. "WELL brothers", he said, "I went out and I FOUND me a bear. And then I began to read to my bear from God's HOLY WORD! But that bear wanted nothing to do with me. So I took HOLD of him and we began to wrestle. We wrestled down a hill until we came to a creek. So I quick DUNKED him and BAPTIZED his hairy soul. And just like you said, he became as gentle as a lamb. We spent the rest of the day praising Jesus." They both looked down at Rabbi Goldberg, who was lying in a hospital bed. , He was in a body cast and traction. He was in bad shape. The rabbi looks up and says, "Looking back on it, circumcision may not have been the best way to start."

It's interesting that even though all three took a different approach to preach to a bear, it all began with a single purpose; to help lead a bear to Jesus, in their own unique ways.

Jesus has assigned us, His workers, a specific task. It's found at the end of Matthew's gospel. "Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you." <sup>1</sup> (Matthew 28:19-20) However, we Christians somehow stray from that central purpose. Somehow, Christians have

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<sup>1</sup>Tyndale House Publishers. (2004). *Holy Bible, New Living Translation*. Wheaton, Ill.

a tendency to make the minor things more important than the main thing. For example, some churches practice one mode of baptism while another's is different. Some churches are concerned about whether women should wear a head covering. Christians divide over different understandings of the creation story. Our own denomination holds fast to Christ's teachings about peace while other denominations do not. There are many other issues that we Christians do not all agree upon, but most of these things are mere expressions of our faith, not what is central and true. The problem arises when these expressions become more important than the main thing. It's what causes us to argue and divide.

Consider the reminder Jesus had to give to His followers one day. <sup>5</sup> Later, after they crossed to the other side of the lake, the disciples discovered they had forgotten to bring any bread. <sup>6</sup> "Watch out!" Jesus warned them. "Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees." <sup>7</sup> At this they began to argue with each other because they hadn't brought any bread. <sup>8</sup> Jesus knew what they were saying, so he said, "You have so little faith! Why are you arguing with each other about having no bread? <sup>9</sup> Don't you understand even yet? Don't you remember the 5,000 I fed with five loaves, and the baskets of leftovers you picked up? <sup>10</sup> Or the 4,000 I fed with seven loaves, and the large baskets of leftovers you picked up? <sup>11</sup> Why can't you understand that I'm not talking about bread? So again I say, 'Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees.'" <sup>12</sup> Then at last they understood that he wasn't speaking about the yeast in bread, but about the deceptive teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees. <sup>2</sup> (Matthew 16:5-12)

What was deceptive about the teachings of the Pharisees and the Sadducees? The Pharisees were separatist. They believed the whole world was lost in the darkness of sin, and their laws were the light of the world. They were the only ones with the correct faith because they abstained or avoided certain things. The Sadducees, on the other hand, embraced just about anything. They chose to live however they saw fit. And each felt they held the right beliefs and the right faith. It's no wonder then that both these groups hated Jesus, because He comes along and shows tenderness and mercy to those the Pharisees avoided, and affirms the

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<sup>2</sup>Tyndale House Publishers. (2004). *Holy Bible, New Living Translation*. Wheaton, Ill.

Judgment, the Holy Spirit, and the resurrection (things the Sadducees did not believe).

Pointing to these two groups, Jesus reminds His followers to beware their yeast (their deceptive teachings) and to keep the main thing the main thing, which is summarized in Micah 6:8. **No, O people, the Lord has told you what is good, and this is what he requires of you: to do what is right, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.** <sup>3</sup> To the one group He says, “Yes, there is mercy”, and to the other He says, “Yes there is a judgment”. You would think, then, that since Christ affirmed this, Christians would learn to stay focused on Him. However, throughout the years since Christ ascended to heaven, the church has had a tendency to wander off on tangents far from what is central. For the past 2000 years He has been trying to guide His church back to Himself; to help the church learn that what matters most is our relationship with Christ, and our work in helping others meet Jesus. That’s why we read about reformations and revivals. It’s because when the church begins to elevate the how above the why, Christ steps in and helps the church make the main thing the main thing. Christ is who truly changes people.

I’ll tell you why this is important. If we are to be helping people become followers of Christ, we should be introducing people to Him, not the peculiarities of our faith. As a person stands before God on Judgment Day, I don’t believe He is going to be concerned about the mode of their baptism or their worship style. Neither will He care about their thoughts on transubstantiation, creation, or speaking in tongues. But, He will be mostly concerned about their thoughts and feelings toward Jesus. So doesn’t it make sense that to help people become followers of Christ we make Him the main thing? We are not commanded to make people followers of a belief, but we are told to make them followers of this Man. And that starts by **“fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith”** <sup>4</sup> (Hebrews 12:2)

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<sup>3</sup>Tyndale House Publishers. (2004). *Holy Bible, New Living Translation*. Wheaton, Ill

<sup>4</sup>*New American Standard Bible : 1995 update*. 1995 (Heb 12:2). LaHabra, CA: The Lockman Foundation.