

The Sadducees

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Preacher: The Rt. Rev. Mike Hill

[0:00] As we sit, let's bow our heads and pray together.!

That we might receive your word, and your word would transform us to be the people you call us to be.

In Christ our Lord. Amen. So Jesus said to this curious group that we meet in the New Testament, these somewhat excoriating, harsh words.

You are in error because you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God. I want to talk to you today, particularly those of you who feel, when you're being honest with yourself, that you're not really making progress in your walk with God.

It feels like, if you think about it, and honestly ask yourself the question, you feel stuck. And I want to try and explain to you the best way I know that you can get unstuck.

[1:42] And one of the things that I have detected over the years with the people of God is that we can be a little over-optimistic when we assess ourselves as to exactly where we are in our walk with God.

And to put it another way, I would say that many of us think we're doing better than we actually are. And part of the reason for that is that we don't really give close enough scrutiny to our lives.

So, this is a word that I hope will help you, as the old hymn had it that I just quoted, help you wake up.

Because God knows the church in the Western world needs to wake up at the moment. I haven't come here this morning to make you feel bad about your walk with God.

Your experience is entirely human, and there's a reason for that. And the reason Paul gives us in 2 Corinthians is that we keep this treasure. That is the gospel. We keep it in earthen vessels.

[2:57] We have this great truth. Our souls are saved. But we're still stuck with the temptations and the limitations of our bodies.

And very often, they win the battle in our wills for our behaviours. In 1834, a man called Friedrich Schleiermacher died.

I don't know if you've ever heard of him. In some ways, he isn't somebody who kind of figures big in the pages of theology or philosophy.

But he is somebody who I think was hugely influential. And the ideas that he propagated at that time, before his death, really, how we end up today with what we call the cultural elite.

The well-educated, often politicians, often people of influence in their workplace, who brought this kind of liberal and progressive mindset to what they do.

[4:11] Every week in our newspapers and on the television, you will see stories of how this cultural elite, which claims to want us all to be kinder to each other, can be so difficult and so vindictive, especially if you do social media.

And the reason that Schleiermacher is somebody who could be credited with this change in society is that Schleiermacher was a theologian.

Certainly, between the time of Jesus' death and the time that Schleiermacher arrived on the scene, by and large, we Christians all believed the same things, or at least we said we did.

We all believed that Jesus came to earth. We all believed that Jesus came to earth to rescue us from the consequences of our sin.

We all believed in God, the Holy Trinity. Okay, there were some aberrant movements that arose, Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, people like that. But by and large, Christians thought the same thing until Schleiermacher and his like arrived on the scene.

[5:28] And Schleiermacher, although he was the son of a pastor, some say they're always the worst, he was the son of a pastor, he became very involved with a type of philosophy called

skepticism.

That is, you don't believe that things are true. And that thinking became more and more developed until the moment when it came out like this, that we will not accept anything, that we can't square with our own rationality, with our own thoughts.

See a lot of that, don't you, in society today. Our education system, by and large, in the last 80 years, has been built on that kind of rational basis.

And it's this, that if somebody can prove to me something is true and can give me statements of proof and through experiment can assure me that what they're talking about is truth, I will believe it. We have a catchphrase for it that we say, seeing is believing. You heard that? Actually, the Bible asks you to do exactly the opposite.

[6:46] The Bible actually says, believing is seeing. You start to trust in Christ and the assumption is, you will start to look at life differently, your life and the life of the world around you.

And in a way, that's our problem. Because what I can tell you is, no one in this church has the inner strength to do that on their own. So Schleiermacher is not top of my Christmas card list, but he's worthy of scrutiny because he teaches us why it is that the church is the way it is today.

Sleepy, not really measuring the kind of things that we ought to measure if we were trying to assess our success as a church.

I think there's one thing that matters more than anything. Forget numbers, forget money, forget all these things. One thing. Are you, am I, becoming more like Jesus?

And I'm not going to shout out your answer to that question, but if I were a gambling man, I would put some money on the likelihood that many of you have got a bit stuck in that process.

[8:08] The Bible's got a big word for it, sanctification. Becoming holy, becoming more like Jesus. And so we come to the Sadducees.

The Sadducees didn't believe in the resurrection. The Sadducees, their Bible was very short. It was just the five, first five books of the Bible known by scholars as the Pentateuch.

And they were a cultural elite. A bit like Schleiermacher fashioned in our society today. They were people who were right at the sharp end, the top end of Judaism.

And they had that slight inclination that all of us have if we feel ourselves to be at the top end of some kind of group or company or church. If we feel ourselves to be at the top end of that, the great danger is what?

We look down on other people. The Sadducees had a bit of that about them and they were very, very elite, very, very influential.

[9:24] If you look at the period of the Sadducees, which isn't very long in biblical history, it all fell apart in AD 70 when the temple was destroyed by the Romans.

And the reason for that was Sadducees were really only interested in running the temple. The focus of the Jewish religion, although at the time of Jesus it was starting to lose focus, people were moving out of the synagogue in the first three centuries of the Christian church and they were going to synagogues.

But while the temple stood for all Jews, it would seem to be the primary expression of God's presence. No wonder there was a group of them that wanted to run it.

So you look at the history of the Sadducees, they had more people who were high priests in the key person in the temple.

They had more of them with Sadducees than any other group. So the Pharisees didn't like them that much. The scribes didn't like them that much. And so they come to Jesus with this ridiculous question.

[10:43] There was a practice around in the centuries before Jesus arrived called Levirate marriage. church. And it was this, that if a woman died and she didn't have a son, then her former husband's brother was expected to take on the woman as his wife.

It was a way of kind of giving social care to those who'd been dumped with no income and no anything else. And the Sadducees, it seemed, had got hold of this idea and they came to Jesus trying to mock him.

So they're talking about this woman who had seven husbands, every one of them died, every one of them was taken on by her, by her brother-in-law.

And so their question was, so who's going to be a husband when we get to heaven? And Jesus just gives this excoriating response.

you don't know the scriptures or the power of God. Let me say that again. You don't know the scriptures nor the power of God.

[12:03] And then Jesus tells us that our presence in heaven, when we receive our resurrection bodies, which is not immediately after we die, incidentally.

Your soul lives on after you die, if you're a believer, and goes to be with Jesus, but you won't receive your resurrection body until the Lord returns. I'm rather sad about that, and the reason I'm sad about that is I've got to look in a mirror.

So, in heaven, don't worry about this. If, you know, you're a widow, and you're worrying about, will I see my Harry ever again, don't worry about it, because I think the waste of biblical evidence would be that though marriage won't be necessary in heaven, I think we will recognize one another, maybe not immediately.

You remember when Jesus was on the road to Emmaus, and the disciples started to walk along, they didn't recognize him at first, because Jesus had his resurrection body, and it was only, it's what St. Luke tells us, when they broke bread, then suddenly they recognized it was Jesus.

So, I suspect part of the reason that we get stuck in our lives is we do not give ourselves to knowing the scriptures, and we don't give ourselves to the power of God.

[13:45] Incidentally, the power of God is not the kind of power that makes you bigger in the eyes of other human beings.

Unfortunately, worldly power has gone a bit that way. It's used for people, for self-aggrandizement, to make themselves look better than they can. That's why people are so desperate for power. You've probably read it in articles or thought it yourself that you sometimes look at our political classes, part of the elite, and think to yourself, these people are just desperate for power, and they'll say anything.

They'll sort out social care, they'll sort out this, they'll sort out that, and there'll be free sweets on Thursdays. And we buy it. Power, the power of God, is not given to you so that you can boss it. No, the power of God, the power of God's Holy Spirit, according to Galatians chapter 5, where it talks about the fruit of the Spirit. That is, what's supposed to be growing in your life if you are a follower of Jesus?

[15:06] Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, self-control. I would call that the hard yards of the work of the Holy Spirit in my life, and maybe in yours.

Are we becoming more like Jesus? today, I think in the church, and I can only primarily speak about the Church of England, which I've served for goodness knows how many years now.

But it seems to me there is cynicism. There is cynicism about the truth of God's Word, and there is cynicism about the power of God.

God's God's God's God's God's majority of them didn't believe in any way that God could be healed.

A smaller majority of them didn't believe that God raised Jesus Christ from the death physically.

See, my view is, how can you take the Bible seriously and come up with that stuff?

[16:18] God, when He saved you, assuming you are saved, God, when He saved you, didn't save you to sit around doing not much and just waiting for heaven.

No, He has a life for you. And you learn about that life in the Scriptures. The Scriptures tell us how we're meant to live. as Simon pointed out in his very first message when he preached here, there are some things in Scripture that don't sound quite right to our 21st century ears, but are we arrogant enough to think that our society has got everything right at the moment?

Things change, thank God. You know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God. God. I mean, the centrality, the authority of the Scriptures seems to me to be obvious because if we didn't have the Scriptures, we would know nothing about Jesus virtually.

Oh, we might read classical history, Tacitus, Pliny II, Josephus, people like that, and they would mention Jesus and they would say that a group of Jews believed that they had actually been raised from the dead.

But no historian outside of the Bible tries in any way to explain why Jesus died, bearing shame and scoffing rude, in my place condemned he stood, sealed my pardon with his blood.

[18:07] Hallelujah, what a Savior. Bible's important because it is the primary way that God reveals himself to us.

What would we know about God if we didn't have the Bible? What would we know about ourselves if we didn't have the Bible? And you sit light to the Bible and I promise you the true course that God has set for your life, you will wander.

And you know that because you are a world-class classroom of wanderers. You know neither the scriptures nor the power of God.

Listen, watch this. These two things are not mutually exclusive. It's not like some of you can be really diligent about reading and understanding the Bible and others can get off on a kind of charismatic wave of celebrating the Bible.

No. It's both. They're connected. John writes in chapter 14, John writes this, he says, when he comes, the Holy Spirit, he will teach you all the things I commanded and bring to remembrance the things I have taught you.

[19 : 30] You can only have your memories jogged if you know stuff in the first place. I mean, my goodness, I'm at the age where I really get that. The Holy Spirit brings the truth of Scripture home to his people.

David Watson had it right, didn't he? He had this little adage. I mean, incidentally, David Watson is mainly known as a very popular preacher, and indeed he was, and he was a brilliant preacher.

you need to know is this guy's ultra bright, you know, got a double-starred first from Cambridge, really clever guy, who could take the grass and put it where the goats could eat it.

David Watson used to say this, all word and no spirit dry up. I've been around conservative churches for a very long time, and I can tell you some of them are as dry as the grass outside today.

All word, no spirit, dry up. All spirit, no word, blow up. Spirit and word grow up.

[20 : 52] Let me say that again. Repeat it after me. All word and no spirit, dry up.

All spirit and no word, blow up. Word and spirit, grow up.

Grow up. If you want to know what passive-aggressive looks like, come and stand here right now. So, we need both.

We need to be, if we are to live the life that God has for us, we need to know the scriptures and we, you don't need a doctor, of course not, I'm just talking about knowing what God wants from you.

And on the other hand, we need to know the power of God. you see, what we can celebrate today is that God doesn't leave you alone with this life to lead, he sends the Holy Spirit to help you, to help your character to form in the likeness of Christ, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, humility, and help with how to live your life.

[22 : 11] I have spent a lot of my life talking to people, and I mean, I think you would dispute this, but I try and listen to them as well.

And I hear a lot of people, particularly like many of you seniors, who have this haunted feeling that the life they've lived, wasn't the life that they were intended to live.

Paul Tillich, the systematic theologian, put it like this, he said, there is a deep and ineradicable anxiety in people.

Have we got it right? Listen, the Sadducees in turn to the kingdom of God were no hopers.

And if you're the kind of person who's prepared to acknowledge today that you're stuck, that the people who love you enough to tell you the truth, if you ask them, am I becoming more like Jesus, it might not give you the answer you would hope for.

[23 : 37] Does it matter? Yes. is it irreversible? Certainly not. Why? Because God is faithful.

Because God has your best interests at heart, even though that's very hard to believe sometimes when stuff goes wrong for you. As Joshua said, you know, as for me, I will trust the Lord, even when I can't see what's happening.

I have no idea what Jesus would say if he were to return today and write a report on the state of the church in the West.

Friends, it wouldn't surprise me if he might chastise us and say, you don't know the scriptures and you don't know the power of God.

Knowing about the power of God is a very different thing than knowing the power of God. God calls you to impossible things, but he will also give you the resources to get past that.

[25 : 02] David prayed earlier. You're sitting here riddled with guilt. God can help you get past that. You're sitting here today stuck with a habit which you're really ashamed of and you keep meaning to stop it, but it's still going on.

God can help you get past that. You've got worries about your children, about your finances, about all this. God can help you get past that. What a tragedy.

If the commentary on Michael's life was you know not the scriptures nor the power of God. Friends, I don't want to be like that.

And I would hate for any of you to be like that. So as we come to an end, why don't we just pray together and pray that the scripture and the power of God will set us free to be freer than we have ever known in our lives before.

Let's pray. Our gracious Father, we have to be honest and admit to you that we would love our spiritual development, our desire to grow like Jesus was a straight line in an upward direction, but Lord, you know we fail.

[26:33] and Lord, we've not come here this morning to be made to feel worse when we leave the church than when we arrive because the truth of your word and the power of your spirit can bring change to any and every situation in the life we have.

And Lord, it's never too late. We need to come before you and admit our need. We need Lord to understand that your Bible is your primary way of communicating your sovereignty and your power and your beauty.

And Lord, we need to know that, but also your word tells us what we're like. Lord, we can be on fire today and extinguish tomorrow.

So Lord, please, refill us with a desire to know your word. Send us the power to be diligent in read, mark, learning your word.

Lord, because Lord, it's your word that communicates your amazing difference to each of us. Lord, it's your way of communicating your infinite quality to our finite minds.

[28:20] God, we pray that you would give us the strength and the grace to leave this place this morning, not with bowed heads, but with a spring in our step, knowing that both your word and your power can save us from any situation that we face right now.

And we thank you for that in Jesus' name. And the people who agreed said together, Amen.