

## Matthew 16:1-12

**I. Matthew 16:1-4 – *And the Pharisees and Sadducees came, and to test him they asked him to show them a sign from heaven. He answered them,* “When it is evening, you say, ‘It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.’ And in the morning, ‘It will be stormy today, for the sky is red and threatening.’ You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times. *An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah.*” So he left them and departed.**

The first and last verses of this section are basically identical with Matthew 12:38-39. This is why Matthew sees no need to explain to us the “sign of Jonah.” This was *already* explained back in Matthew 12:40 – “For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.” I was very tempted to preach the same message that I preached seven months ago on Matthew 12:38-42. This is a very *important* message! But whether for better or for worse, I have chosen not to repeat it. You can listen to the message or read the message on our website at [www.livingwordbible.org](http://www.livingwordbible.org). This morning, what we need to see is how verses 1-4 are setting us up for verses 5-12.

In Matthew 12 it was the *scribes* and Pharisees who came to Jesus requesting a sign, but here in Matthew 16 it is the Pharisees and *Sadducees*. Only in Matthew are the Pharisees ever paired with the Sadducees and only in three places (cf. 3:7; 22:34). As a general rule, the Pharisees and the Sadducees were bitter enemies. We’ve already seen that the Pharisees added a lot of their own “authoritative” traditions to the Scriptures. The Sadducees, on the other hand, accepted *only* the five books of Moses as their final authority. Everything else was subordinate to Moses and should be accepted only to the extent that it *agreed* with Moses (this applied to the traditions of the Pharisees as well as to the rest of the Old Testament). You can imagine that the Pharisees and the Sadducees would have ended up with some pretty serious doctrinal disagreements! Their *teachings* were opposed to each other in a number of important ways. But they were also at odds with each other *politically*! The Sadducees were an exclusive class of wealthy aristocrats, and so they had a very strong desire to preserve the status quo. They were usually in favor of doing what it took to keep the Romans happy. They were not motivated by any dreams of a Messianic kingdom (cf. Hagner; PEotB). Now the Pharisees, on the other hand, were *always* a threat to the Romans. They were looking for Israel’s political and nationalistic fortunes to be restored in the coming kingdom of the Messiah. So on the one hand, the Roman rulers were always trying to avoid trouble with the Pharisees. On the other hand, the Sadducees were always anxious to avoid trouble with the Roman rulers (compare Mat. 16:11 & Mark 8:15)! So in light of all this, the fact that the Pharisees and Sadducees came *together* to test Jesus is pretty significant! In spite of all their differences, they had at least enough in common to agree in their rejection of Jesus! And so Jesus responds to the Pharisees and Sadducees together:

“When it is evening, you say, ‘It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.’ And in the morning, ‘It will be stormy today, for the sky is red and threatening.’ You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times.”

These “signs” of the weather wouldn’t apply in most places, but they made sense in Israel where the storms and rains almost always arose in the west. The Pharisees and the Sadducees predicted the weather based on their interpretations of the appearance of the sky at sunset (in the direction of the Mediterranean Sea) and the appearance of the sky at sunrise (in the direction of the desert). They could read the signs in the sky, but they couldn’t read the far more important signs of the times. As Jesus says in Luke 19:44, “You did not know [*recognize*] the *time* of your visitation”. The Pharisees and the Sadducees have this in common – they are both blinded to the true *meaning and significance* of what has been happening all around them! We can see from their predictions of the weather that their *physical* eyes and their *mental* faculties are in perfect working order. But the fact that they are still demanding that Jesus show them a sign from heaven is proof positive that they are *spiritually* blinded. Their spiritual faculties are completely “out of order”. Calvin writes: “While they are sufficiently acute in matters of the present life, yet [they] knowingly and willfully quench the heavenly light.”

“‘An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah.’ So he left them and departed.”

**II. Matthew 16:5-12** – When the disciples [went to\*] the other side, they had forgotten to bring any bread.

By now, bread should be something very familiar! With the mention of bread here in chapter sixteen, we can’t help but be reminded of the feeding of the 4000 in chapter fifteen and the feeding of the five thousand in chapter fourteen. There does seem to be a repeated emphasis on bread!

**III. Matthew 16:6** – Jesus said to them, “Watch and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.”

What is the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees? Well, we know from verse twelve that Jesus is actually referring to their *teaching*. But what do the Pharisees and the Sadducees have in common in their teaching? What, specifically, is Jesus referring to when He warns of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees? The fact that Jesus names the Pharisees and Sadducees *together* means that He must have in mind the recent encounter in verses 1-4. *Both* the Pharisees and the Sadducees required a “sign from heaven” before they would believe. They *both* required “proof” on demand, and of the kind that appealed to their *physical* senses – something that would “wow” them with shock and awe. But this could only mean that they were *both* blinded to the true, spiritual meaning of the signs that Jesus was already performing – of His miracles of healing and His casting out of demons. So the demand for a sign was really just a reflection of the fact that *both* the Pharisees’ and the Sadducees’ were preoccupied with *materialistic and worldly* concerns (the Sadducees in the “here and now”, and the Pharisees in their ideas about the coming kingdom). The teaching of both the Pharisees and the Sadducees betrayed a very “*this-worldly*” focus that made them blind to the true spiritual realities of the Messiah’s kingdom – realities that were now all around them! So Jesus says: “Watch and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.” “Watch and beware”! Notice that Jesus *doubly* emphasizes this warning to the disciples. The idea is this: “Watch out” and “Beware” (cf. NRSV)! But why the extra emphasis?

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\* Cf. NIV; TEV; TCV; Carson; Hendriksen; Mark 8:14

Should we assume that the disciples are somehow extra vulnerable to this “leaven” of the Pharisees and Sadducees?

**IV. Matthew 16:7** – And they began discussing it among themselves, saying, “We brought no bread.”

*We* know that Jesus is not talking about literal bread for the stomach, but the disciples don’t – not yet. To their mind, and especially in light of their worrisome shortage of bread, when Jesus refers to the *leaven* of the Pharisees and Sadducees, what else can He be talking about but literal *bread*? Obviously, Jesus has become aware of their predicament, and He is now warning them against *buying* any bread from the Pharisees and Sadducees – perhaps from a bakery run by a Pharisee or a Sadducee!

Now before *we* start pointing fingers at the disciples, let’s ask ourselves if we really think we would have responded any differently. We know what a big deal a meal is! Let’s say that we set out on a fifteen mile hike in the woods. About half way through our hike, we sit down on the side of the trail to eat lunch and realize that we forgot to pack the food. Do you think that we might begin to look at all the world through the lenses of our missed lunch? It’s a rare thing that we should ever find ourselves without food readily available. But if this should ever happen, I wonder how quickly our minds would become consumed with the thought of where we will find our next meal?

“[The disciples” began discussing it among themselves, saying, ‘We brought no bread.’”

**V. Matthew 16:8-10** – But Jesus, aware of this, said, “O you of little faith, why are you discussing among yourselves the fact that you have no bread? Do you not yet *understand*? Do you not remember the five loaves for the five thousand, and how many baskets you gathered? Or the seven loaves for the four thousand, and how many baskets you gathered?”

The disciples were not wrong to be concerned about a meal, but in light of their response to Jesus, we can see that they have become far too anxious and preoccupied with their lack of bread. So Jesus takes this opportunity to remind them of the feeding of the five thousand and the feeding of the four thousand. The point isn’t necessarily that the disciples should have been expecting another miracle. If Jesus did make another miraculous provision of bread, we certainly never hear about it! But what Jesus *is* trying to do is put the disciples’ lack of bread in proper *perspective*. It’s not really that big of a deal! You’re talking about bread for only one meal, for only thirteen men! And the disciples are obviously not in any danger of starving to death! At the most, they may possibly miss one meal! If there were ever truly cause for concern, Jesus would certainly be capable of providing for His little band of twelve disciples! So on the one hand, the temporary lack of bread due to an accidental oversight is really no big deal! The real problem here is not bread – or the *lack* of bread!

But now notice that Jesus says: “O you of little faith... do you not yet *understand*...?” What is He asking the disciples? “Have you not yet seen the *true meaning* of the bread for the 5000 and the bread for the 4000 and what this bread says about *who I am*?” Have you not yet understood

that I am the *true* bread of life, and that my teaching is the *true* bread of life? And isn't this infinitely more important and significant than the bread that you forgot to bring with you in the boat? But if you *have* understood these things, then...

**VI. Matthew 16:11a** – “How is it that you *fail* to ***understand*** that I did not [just now] speak about bread?”

The true meaning of the feeding of the 5000 and the feeding of the 4000 was not just the provision of literal bread for the filling of empty stomachs. It was a sign and symbol of the true bread of life! But if you understand this, then how can you fail to understand that even now, I am not speaking to you about literal bread!

**VII. Matthew 16:11b** – “*Beware* of the *leaven* of the Pharisees and Sadducees.”

What is this leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees? It's their *teaching* – and it's specifically teaching that suffers from a preoccupation with materialistic and worldly concerns. The teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees results in a “this-worldly” focus that causes people to be blind to the true *spiritual* realities of the Messiah's kingdom. And now, look! The disciples have fallen into the very trap that Jesus is warning them against! In their anxious preoccupation with bread for the stomach, they have become completely oblivious to the true meaning of what Jesus is saying! Jesus is not warning them against the literal bread of the Pharisees and Sadducees! Instead, He is warning them against the kind of *teaching* that ends up placing a higher premium on bread for the stomach than on the true bread of life. And since the disciples have now proved how much they need this warning, Jesus repeats it a second time: “*Beware* of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.”

**VIII. Matthew 16:12** – Then they understood that he did not tell them to beware of the leaven of *bread*, but of the *teaching* of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

Now can you imagine what happened when the disciples finally “*understood*”? I can only assume that their temporary lack of bread would no longer have seemed that important. No, it's not fun to miss a meal, but there are also much bigger and far more pressing realities! Of far more concern than a temporary lack of bread is the ever present danger of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees. Of far more concern than a temporary lack of bread is the danger of being so preoccupied with bread that we become *insensitive* to the spiritual realities of the kingdom.

## **Conclusion**

Isn't this the ***constant*** danger that we face today? Our preoccupation with the realities of life in this world makes us insensitive to the things of the kingdom – things such as the blessedness of those who are poor in spirit, of those who mourn, of those who are meek, of those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, of those who are merciful, and pure in heart, and peacemakers, and of those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake. Think about it: The disciples heard Jesus talking about a loaf of bread that you buy in the market place, when in fact Jesus was talking about the spiritual dangers of false teaching! *How* could they have missed this? How could they

have been so blind? Well, the same way that you and I are blinded every day to the things that *really* and *truly* matter.

“The disciples... fell into that very common error of letting relatively unimportant and mundane concerns block out the teaching of their Lord... they should not have allowed themselves to become so distraught over something so relatively minor that it controlled their very thinking (and hearing).” (Hagner)

I wonder how many of us have been blinded to the things of God’s Word because we have become preoccupied with the things of life in this world? But isn’t that *all* of us, to one extent or another? Our concern for the stuff of this life is *constantly distorting* our hearing and *blurring* our vision so that even as we are reading the Word, and hearing the Word, and even studying and memorizing the Word... we remain oblivious. We are unable to grasp the precious truths of God’s Word because our minds and hearts are bent in another direction. They are preoccupied with the realities of this world – with houses and lands, and food and clothing, and school and jobs, and cars and bills, and even hobbies and toys. This was the problem with the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees – a “this-worldly” focus that blinded people to the far more important spiritual realities of Christ’s kingdom. And so we should hear Jesus saying to us, no less than to His disciples: “*Watch out and beware* of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees” If we had been in the disciples’ shoes having forgotten to bring any bread, and Jesus had spoken to us about the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees, what would we have *heard*? Would we have heard Jesus talking about literal bread or would we have understood that He was warning us against the spiritual dangers of false teaching?

- ✓ Matthew 6:31-33 – Therefore do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But *seek first* the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.
- ✓ Philippians 3:19-20 – Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Maybe there have been earthly concerns consuming your mind – things that have been preventing you from really hearing God’s Word and recognizing the things that are truly important. Will you hand over these earthly concerns to the one who feeds the 5000 with five loaves of bread – *and then* find that in exchange for these concerns about earthly bread, you actually end up with the true bread of life – the bread that really *matters* after all? Will I?

- ✓ Colossians 3:1-4 – If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.