

Beware the Leaven

Matthew 16:1-12

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And the Pharisees and Sadducees came, and to test him they asked him to show them a sign from heaven. 2 He answered them, "When it is evening, you say, 'It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.' 3 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. 4 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.

5 When the disciples reached the other side, they had forgotten to bring any bread. 6 Jesus said to them, "Watch and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees." 7 And they began discussing it among themselves, saying, "We brought no bread." 8 But Jesus, aware of this, said, "O you of little faith, why are you discussing among yourselves the fact that you have no bread? 9 Do you not yet perceive? Do you not remember the five loaves for the five thousand, and how many baskets you gathered? 10 Or the seven loaves for the four thousand, and how many baskets you gathered? 11 How is it that you fail to understand that I did not speak about bread? Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees." 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.

INTRODUCTION

Belief—that is our theme for today. Do you believe?? Do you believe in LeBron James? Video The Cleveland Monk Blog last Monday (6/28):

Seven years ago Nike coined a phrase that fits LeBron and his personality perfectly: We Are All Witnesses. And we were. And he loved it. The phrase implies expectation; an expectation to see something unforgettable. People "witness" miraculous works. Acts that make them believe, even. And Cleveland fans thought they were seeing, or witnessing, these works. Playoffs, All-Star game appearances, NBA Finals, his take-over of games, last second shots, and MVP seasons.

Lots of people believe, free agency feeding frenzy, JayZ, Prokoroff, "We are witnesses" Do you believe in LeBron James? If you are a witness, you will be a believer. This morning we want to consider someone far more important than LeBron, Jesus Christ, and ask, "Do you believe?" Our text today shows us that Jesus is worthy of all our faith and all our trust

CONTEXT

We're in the section of Matthew that Mark has entitled "Enigma", and with good reason. In ch. 13, Jesus speaks in parables and He does so, according to 13:13, so that those who don't see and can't hear will continue to not see and not hear. The point is that those who are inclined to believe will be given more light; those disinclined to believe will stay in the dark. Then in the parables that follow He gives pictures of situations where some believe and others do not, like the parable of the soils, and the wheat and the tares. There is a fork in the road when you

meet Jesus, and you must either believe or not. Now from the end of ch. 13 through ch. 16, Matthew shows this principle working out in real situations, stories of how when people are brought face to face with Jesus, some reject Him and others accept Him. These parables and stories are leading to the climax that Joe will exposit next Sunday when Jesus asks His disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" The enigma is close to being solved and you'll have to come back next Sunday to find out how!

So we begin today the pivotal chapter in the discovery of who Jesus is and how one comes to recognize that. In our text today, we find two groups of people, each with a different response to Jesus, the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the disciples. The way the text moves forward, each of these two groups does a little Keystone Cops routine, and then Jesus replies to each one. The two groups are: The no-faiths and the little-faiths; the cynics and the fretful; the skeptics and the worriers; they head-shakers and the hand-wringers. One group who didn't believe in who Jesus was; the other who didn't believe in what He could do. And I wonder if you are in either of those camps today?

I. THE CYNICS, vv. 1-4

Jesus has just returned from a Gentile area, where, interestingly enough, He was believed in, to Jewish territory, where, as the Scripture said, He came unto His own and His own received Him not. These Pharisees who had been sent from Jerusalem to track down Jesus, as we saw a couple of weeks ago from the beginning of ch. 15, are now joined by the Sadducees, as they come to Jesus, v. 1, to test Him. You see, Jesus, with His miracles and authoritative teaching, has become an urgent problem for them and they are here to confront the problem head on. The people are beginning to follow this usurper, and the religious leaders feel it is their duty to expose Him before the people are led astray and the leaders lose their own standing.

Now it's very curious that the Pharisees and Sadducees join forces here, and the single definite article in v. 1 shows that they are coming as a united group. They were both, of course, Jews, both were considered to be religious leaders, they worked together in the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council—but they were very different groups. Here's how you can remember them in a nutshell: the Sadducees were the Methodists and the Pharisees were the Baptists. The Sadducees were a smaller group, wealthier, aristocratic, and religiously more liberal with a focus more on the temple than on the Bible. They were rationalistic, didn't believe in miracles or the resurrection; and they were willing to compromise with the Romans to get their way.

The Pharisees, on the other hand, were more from the working class, tradesmen, they were conservative, fundamental, separatists. They focused on the Bible—and their traditions that they had built up around the Bible to protect it, as Mark talked about 2 weeks ago. So now you have your well-heeled liberals and your fighting fundys joining forces to face a common enemy! They have come to Jesus to test Him. This is the same word used in Mt. 4 for when Satan came to test Jesus, an opportunity, a temptation, which could trip Jesus up.

What was the test? It was to show them a sign from heaven, v. 1. Your first reaction to that might be the same as mine was, if you're following along in the flow of the story. A sign? What had He been doing for the past several chapters! Feeding 5000, walking on water, healing sick people, cleansing a demon-possessed girl, healing the lame, the crippled, the blind, the mute, and "many others." And now they want a sign?! No, you don't understand. You

see, all those things were miracles on earth. Problem: Satan can do those things. In fact, back in 12:24, the Pharisees had suggested that it was by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that Jesus was doing His miracles. No, what He had done to date didn't prove anything; what they are demanding now is not a miracle, but a stronger word: a sign, and a sign from heaven. What they wanted was something so spectacular, so undeniable, something beyond contradiction, something literally from the sky, like when fire fell from heaven in 1 Kings 18 and consumed Elijah's sacrifice, that it would be impossible to deny that Jesus was sent from God. Since they thought that Jesus was some kind of fraud or charlatan, they thought they finally had Him. When He couldn't produce such a sign, which they fully expected Him not to be able to do, He would be discredited and lose His following and these religious leaders would have their place back.

So how did Jesus respond to this challenge? Now remember, this is the Son of God, the creator of the world, who by the word of His mouth formed the heavens and the earth, whose hands formed the mountains having armed Himself with strength. I mean, this is like asking LeBron if he can hit a lay-up, Payton Manning if he can palm a football, Lionel Messi if he can juggle a soccer ball, Pavarotti if he can carry a tune, Baryshnikov if he can stand on one leg, Michelangelo if he can draw a stick figure, Bach if he could play chopsticks, Rachel Ray if she can scramble eggs, Spielberg if he can take a picture, Steve Jobs if he can re-boot your computer, Meryl Streep if she could do a skit, . . .

Imagine yourself in that situation, with all that power at your disposal, being challenged by a group of blowhards, wouldn't you just love to go zap and have the clouds spell out in Hebrew, "This is the Messiah, dummies!", with an arrow pointing down to Jesus head, and maybe some thunder and lightning thrown in to shake them up a bit, and how about a 10.0 Richter quake for good measure.

But Jesus did nothing of the sort. Instead, He says, vv. 2,3, you guys are pretty good meteorologists—red in the morning, sailors take warning; red at night, sailor's delight—but you're terrible theologians. You want a sign from heaven; well, you can read the heavens (same word) when it comes to weather, but you can't read the signs (same word) when they're staring you straight in the face. The signs of the times are right now, the things I've been doing, and you're as blind as a bat to what others can so clearly see. The proof you cannot discern the signs is that you are asking for a sign!

But He goes on in v. 4, and says an evil and an adulterous generation seeks for a sign. Evil is a word Matthew uses in other contexts to speak of spoiled fruit, worthless servants, bad eyes; it means to be in poor condition, sick, unusable. It is also a word used of the devil himself. Anyone who is against Jesus is, in His eyes, sick, evil, and wicked, you see, for there is no neutral zone between God and the devil. You're either for Him or against Him, and since they were against Him they were evil. To ask Him for a sign when He has already surrounded Himself with signs, is to test Him. This is, in Jesus' words, wicked. "It is great hypocrisy when we slight the signs of God's ordaining to seek for signs of our own prescribing" (Henry, p. 226).

No, Jesus would not perform signs to order, not like Burger King, He is not a circus performer, He is not on call, He is not submitting His work to a lab test, He does not pander to us. There will be no calling down signs from heaven in order to impress people, for these degrade God. He is God—and we are not! This is why it is not spiritual to ask for a sign, it is wicked.

Then He calls them adulterous. To be adulterous is to be unfaithful, to be disloyal. These were God's chosen people, the Jews; in fact they were the religious leaders of the Jews—they had the Law and the Prophets, they had the messages from God about the coming Messiah. And yet when here He stood in their midst they rejected Him.

Finally, Jesus says, no sign will be given it except the sign of Jonah, v. 4. What was that? Matthew has already explained it back in 12:40 so he doesn't feel the need to amplify again, but the meaning is very clear: as Jonah was 3 days and 3 nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be 3 days and 3 nights in the heart of the earth. Jesus, crucified and dead, would rise on the 3rd day to life. This would be the only sign given to this generation, the power of God exerted to bring His Son Jesus back to life from the dead.

Ironically, do you remember their reaction to this sign? Mt. 28:11 says that when word of Jesus' resurrection spread, the chief priests gave money to the Roman soldiers and told them to tell people that the reason the tomb was empty was because Jesus' disciples came at night and stole away the body! They didn't believe even this one sign given to them. The teaching that doubt can only be overcome by signs and wonders is condemned here. It is their hardness of heart that prevents them from perceiving Jesus clearly, just as He had predicted in 13:10-17. In fact, in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, the rich man, from hell, begs that someone go and warn his brothers about this "place of torment." The answer is that if they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets (what God has already revealed), they won't be persuaded by a sign.

They were like the French atheist Voltaire, who said, "Even if a miracle should be wrought in an open marketplace before 1000 sober witnesses, I would rather mistrust my senses than admit a miracle." Jesus, v. 4, turns and leaves them. He had told His disciples not to throw their pearls before pigs (7:6) and to shake the dust off a village that did not receive them (10:14), so here He does the same. The Pharisees and Sadducees have had their chance; if they are not interested in believing in Jesus, well, they had had their chance and now He had others to go to who would be.

II. THE FRETFUL, vv. 5-12

Now our story takes an even more interesting turn. It's hard to trace exactly what happened, but comparing this text with the parallel passage in Mk. 8, it looks like Jesus and the disciples got back in the boat to go to the other side of the lake, and either in the boat or on the other side they realize they forgot the cooler with the lunch. Mark says they actually had one loaf with them, but what would that be among so many?!

Now in v. 6, Jesus says something very curious to them. . .beware the leaven. I'd love to have seen what happened next. You know how you're in a group of people and someone says something and you don't get it, so you kind of pull someone else aside and ask, "What did she mean?", but you don't want her to know you didn't get it. Well something similar is happening here. The disciples don't want Jesus to know how dense they are, so they kind of huddle up, look over their shoulders to see if Jesus can hear, and say, "What in the world is that reference to leaven supposed to mean?" The best they can come up with is that Jesus is upset that they forgot the lunch, because here they are again, in a remote place, without much food, and how

much longer is Jesus' patience going to last with them? They're definitely going to need to assign a new guy to the lunch detail. But now that they are stuck in a remote area, where can they find some bread. . .

Notice Jesus' response. Isn't it hilarious how the disciples can't hide anything from Jesus, kind of like husbands can't hide anything from their wives. But it's worse than that. The Greek text is cool here, just "But knowing." Jesus knows, He is knowing. Jesus knows everything, way more than your wife. There's nothing you can hide from him, so why even bother. But that's another sermon.

If you or I had been in Jesus' shoes, we probably would have grabbed a couple of them and knocked their heads together and said, "You idiots, why did you forget the lunch again? And besides, I wasn't even talking about the lunch!" How ironic that in ch. 13, Jesus told the disciples that to them was given to know the secrets of the Kingdom of heaven. Apparently, the secret is quite safe with them!

Jesus, however, patiently switches to their track and comes down to their little world of worry. Oh, you're worried there's no bread for lunch? You shouldn't be worried about that. In fact the reason you're worried is that you are little-faiths, 8a. Notice He doesn't call them "little-brains." He quickly forgives them for forgetting bread—He doesn't care how smart we are or if we are forgetful. But what does concern Him is that they are "little-faiths." This was a special word that Jesus Himself probably coined, not used in classical Greek, one word. He's used it 3 times before and will once more, to describe those who worry about what they're going to wear and eat and drink (6:30); for the disciples who got afraid during the storm on the sea (8:26); for Peter when he began to sink after he started to walk on the water (14:31); and then He'll use it again in 17:20 for the disciples when they couldn't drive out a demon from the epileptic boy.

They shouldn't be worrying about lunch, should they?! Why? Because Jesus has already proven He can meet their physical needs. He uses 3 verbs in vv. 8,9: perceive, remember, understand. He says, have you forgotten so quickly, do you still, after all I've done, fail to get it. Then He quizzes them to help them remember. V. 9 is a question in Mk: how many baskets for the 5,000? He waits for an answer! Sheepishly they say, "12." Vs. 10, how many baskets for the 4k? 7. Now they get it, I guess bread is not the problem. It's not that we should be foolhardy and careless and fail to provide for ourselves. But when we've done what we can or if we've just made a mistake or forgotten something that we need, we need not to worry, Jesus has our back. What, me worry? But this attitude comes only as we see the world, and their problems, through the eyes of faith. Magic Eye illustration. Their insufficiency is not the problem; their lack of faith is.

Jesus does gently chide them, v. 11a, you should have gotten this by now, you've been around long enough and seen enough. But then He gets back to His original point: beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees. Their forgetting of bread, Jesus thought, would be a good springboard to talk about what is in bread that makes it grow, the yeast that permeates and influences and changes the dough. Jesus goes from the physical world to the more significant spiritual world and says there's a teaching that if it gets into your lump of dough will ruin the whole thing. And now the great Teacher has led his students to finally figure it out without spelling out the answer for them: what they have to watch out for is the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

What is that teaching? I had always thought this meant the legalism and hypocrisy of these religious leaders. Jesus has already dealt with that in ch. 15 and will do so again, scorchingly, in ch. 23. But, as we've seen, the Pharisees and Sadducees actually have quite different teaching. So v. 12 can't refer to their general teaching; I think in context it must refer to their actions in v. 1, their own inclination to disbelieve and their teaching that Jesus will have to produce a conclusive sign from heaven or they will continue in their unbelief. The yeast is this: the disposition to believe only if the signs which compel faith are produced (Lane, 281). It is an attitude of unbelief toward divine revelation that could not believe Jesus to be the Messiah but rather tried to control and tame Him (Carson). It is demanding manipulative signs instead of believing the already bountiful evidence. It is religious sensationalism, looking for the dramatic. Or in one word, per Bruner "moreism." It is withholding belief, or demanding of Jesus that He do more than He's already done, insisting that God work according to your plan

APPLICATION

So that is the main thrust of this text, and the spotlight for a minute needs to focus on the skeptics, the cynics in the room. I know there are some, and I'm glad you're here, for whatever reason you came. Here's my question for you, based on this text: what are you waiting for? I'm not asking you to believe in an unknown quantity. Illustration of me speaking at the Detroit Lions chapel, greatest wide receiver in the world. . . That would be foolish to believe in somebody who just talked. But Jesus has already swished it from full-court. What do you want Him to do, throw it off the floor, the wall, the ceiling, and then in?

You're waiting because you want to see more of Jesus, you want to see a better Jesus than you've already seen. You may be disappointed with Him because of things He's let happen in your life or your world. You may be unimpressed with Him because He hasn't done anything for you or at least He hasn't done what you've wanted. Or here's one: you're waiting for God to correct all the injustices in the world, or rid the church of hypocrites. And so you're withholding your belief.

Do you see what you're doing? You're just like the Pharisees and Sadducees, you're asking God to meet you on your terms rather than meet Him on His, and that is testing God. God calls this an evil and a wicked thing to do. Remember, the person who rejects Christ does not do so because of the lack of evidence but in spite of it.

Paul said in 1 Cor. 1 that Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom. But Paul had determined to do nothing but preach Christ crucified. Christ has died for your sins, He has been proven to be the Son of God through the resurrection from the dead (Rom. 1:4). The Son is not a Showman—He prefers to be with us in cruciform (Bruner). It is the only sign that is guaranteed to be given to the seeker of God. This sign is glorious, in fact Bruner says it is a sensation to satisfy thrill seekers! Can you imagine being there in the cool of the early morning on that first Easter day, Jesus had clearly been killed in front of everybody, and his corpse locked into a stone tomb by His enemies, but now that tomb is empty, and then the very same Jesus talks to you, alive and in person! It is a majestic sign, it is unparalleled, it is God's final sign, and it is undeniable—and it is decisive for those with eyes to see. If you are searching for a more relevant or powerful revelation of Jesus than the resurrection, your search is in vain, for that something does not exist.

There may be some here today who are believers in Christ, but if you were honest your belief is wavering, it's on hold, it's gone cold. This following Christ thing hasn't turned out like you had hoped or thought it would; you've been disappointed with something that God or His people have done—or not done. You're wondering if it's worth keeping on following. Jesus says to you this morning, "Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees." You're closer to it than you think. Beware of slipping into the trap of asking God to do more for you than He's already done as a condition of your faith in Him. This type of cynicism is toxic and it spreads. We must guard against it. He has given you one rock-solid sign—the resurrection. And that should be enough for you.

In Ps. 95, God warns His people not to harden their hearts, as the Israelites did in the wilderness when they put God to the test, though they had seen His work, when they asked Him to do more than He has already done. When He doesn't respond like you are demanding, the heart hardens, and the harder your heart the longer the road back. So how do you get faith? You can't drum it up. You look to the one sign given, the resurrection of Jesus, and let that create faith in your heart.

That's for the head-shakers in the room, now for the hand-wringers. Here's the secondary application of this text. What do you do when you find no bread in the boat? You do the two things the disciples failed to do:

1. **You remember.** You remember all the things God has done for His people throughout history, the stories you read in the Bible, like the ones we've just read of feeding the 5000 etc. But you also remember the things God has done for you in the past. Has he ever answered prayer, ever provided for you unexpectedly, ever met a need you thought was impossible?

2. **You understand.** Behind the facts of these great stories lies the great Shepherd of the sheep Himself. Their level of understanding of the miracles remained at the level of satisfaction of human needs, they didn't see behind it to the person of Christ. Look at the math of the two feedings—the less the disciples had and the bigger the problem, the more that Jesus did! We must not look at what we have but at Whom we have. We may lack water, but we have the fountain.

So how do you get faith if you don't have it? You look at the resurrection. How do you strengthen it if you do? You remember and perceive the works of God. In, short, you look to Christ.

As we close, let me lift up your eyes from the landscape of this story to the majesty of Christ behind it. There are two great peaks we see of the glory of Christ.

One is that we see **Christ as revealer**. God has not remain hidden; He has not forced us to guess about His existence or how He feels about us; He has spoken to us in many times and in many ways through the prophets, and now in these last days He has spoken to us in his Son. He has revealed the Father to us, and the revelation of His glory through His Son has been full of grace and of truth.

Now it is true that He has not revealed Himself to us in a strictly mathematical, linear, rational way such that there would be no other intellectual route possible. If He had done that, there would have been no need for faith. If it was as simple as $1+1=2$, everyone would believe. His miracles do not compel faith. Rather, the point of His answer to the Pharisees and Sadducees was that you have seen enough, in the works of Christ, in His words, and finally in His resurrection from the dead, to believe. Not everything you would perhaps have wanted to see; He hasn't bared it all. But for those who want to see, the path is clear enough. "It is fit that the proofs of divine revelation should be chosen by the wisdom of God rather than by the follies and fancies of man" (Henry, p. 225). Christ the revealer.

The other great peak, slightly smaller in this text, is that Christ is revealed again as Provider. O ye of little faith! What problem could you possibly have that would present a challenge to the Creator of the universe? All you must do is believe, with your mustard seed of faith, you must call out to Him for help, as the Syro-Phoenician woman did. And then watch as He works through the 5000 problems in the 5 million ways He has of solving them.

Who do you say Christ is?

What does He mean to you for your problems today?

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