

The story is told of a time when Pope John Paul II visited a hospital. And, while most of the hospital staff and many patients awaited his arrival together in the large vestibule area past the entry of the building - a doctor with a handful of paperwork walked in and took a seat in a wheelchair and busied himself with his notes as he waited with the others. Not long after, the Pope arrived, and as he swept in the door, he noticed the doctor sitting in the wheelchair. The Pope walked over to him and raised his hand and gave the doctor a blessing - who then immediately stood up from his wheelchair and walked towards the Pope. The devout in the Pope's entourage crossed themselves and rolled their eyes upward to the heavens in response to what they believed to be a miraculous healing by the power of the Pope.

The truth is, how we interpret what we see and hear is determined by what we want to believe, whether what we have seen or heard or believe is true or not. What that means is that all of our expectations, and our responses to those expectations, are determined by what we want to believe, whether our beliefs or our expectations or our responses are valid or not. Decades of social science research show this to be true. While we commonly believe our actions and behaviors flow out of our opinions and beliefs – studies reveal the exact opposite. Dr. Mark McMinn writes: “More often than not, we first observe our behaviors and then craft our opinions to be consistent with those behaviors. In other words, we justify what we have already done, by changing our beliefs. . . . We shift our opinions to be consistent with our behaviors.” Of course none of us is immune to this. The Word of God tells us the same. This is the self-centered blind spot of the fallen sinful nature of our flesh that we all possess. This is the context for our text for today in that Jesus just addressed this in Matthew 15 when he talked about the fallen depravity of the human heart: *“For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander”* (Matthew 15:19). God Himself speaks of this in Jeremiah 17:9 when He declared: *“The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?”* In our text for today Jesus focuses on the blind spot in our hearts that keeps us from fully seeing and truly knowing Jesus.

As we step into Matthew 16 this morning, another highly significant change begins to occur in Jesus' ministry. Remember again we saw the first significant change in Jesus ministry when we stepped into Matthew 15, where Jesus began to withdraw from his ministry of preaching, teaching and healing - so that he could begin to head towards Jerusalem, where he would ultimately sacrificially fulfill the purpose of his life on cross, as the long-promised Savior, who would redeem and restore fallen humanity back to the relationship with God we were created for. Now, as we step into Matthew 16, we will see the second significant change in Jesus' ministry, which will be exclusively toward his disciples.

Prior to this point, Jesus had not said anything to them about the cross. As far as they knew, they would be following Jesus until he assumed his rightful place upon the throne of David in Jerusalem, to rule as the King of the Jews. But in the words to come, after our text for today, in the remainder of Matthew 16, Jesus will announce to his disciples that he is drawing close to the important crisis point of the cross. But before this point, in the chapters behind us, Jesus had been revealing much to them along the way about his divine sovereign “identity.” The signs and miracles that he did before their eyes had progressively revealed to them that he was the Son of God in human flesh. And so it's in this chapter that that progressive revelation of his identity comes to a head in an aggressive confrontation which produces an all-important affirmation of revealing Jesus' identity to be Almighty God Himself. The truth is, this is a pivotal chapter for you and me also. So much of what has happened prior to this point was meant to bring his disciples—and us, as followers of Jesus, who have been going through the Gospel of Matthew—to the point of a bold, humble, dynamic, passionate faith in Jesus, who was about to die on the cross, as the Messiah, the Son of the living God. It's not by chance that this chapter begins with the story of how people struggled with the increasing witness of Jesus being the one true God. Our text begins with the opposition Jesus received from those who would not believe in him, and then Jesus gives us a lesson in what it means to truly believe in him and trust him and love Him with all of our hearts.

“And the Pharisees and Sadducees came, and to test him they asked him to show them a sign from heaven” (Matthew 16:1). In order to understand our text for this morning we need to remind ourselves that the context of this story was a miracle. Jesus had just feed a multitude of people with a few small loaves of bread and a few small fish. The disciples were intimately involved in this miracle. Jesus took the loaves and the fish, gave thanks to the Father for them, broke them, and distributed them to the disciples; and it was the disciples who distributed the bread and fish to the crowd. Immediately after the feeding of this great crowd, Jesus and His disciples left to go to the opposite side of the Sea of Galilee where they were greeted by a group of Pharisees and Sadducees waiting to oppose and attack Jesus again. The Pharisees and the Sadducees were the two main groups of leadership who represented the Sanhedrin, the Jewish council that essentially ruled over various spheres of Jewish life. They had most likely been sent as an official delegation to question and confront Jesus. Even though the Pharisees and Sadducees differed from one another in their beliefs and practices, they were united in their opposition to Jesus.

The Pharisees were a religious and political party that had its origin about two-hundred years before Jesus walked on earth. At a time when it seemed as if the whole world was embracing Greek culture, a group of Jewish leaders arose to combat its influence and to preserve Jewish ways. Eventually one branch of this group established itself in regular Jewish life, but were very careful to keep itself separate and distinct from the 'contaminations' of pagan culture. The name "*Pharisee*" means "separated ones," and they set themselves apart by their rigid devotion to God's law and their own teachings - and in the process, became guilty of trusting their status before God on their own rigid obedience to the law and tradition. In chapter 15, we saw that the Pharisees had taken their traditions and teachings and elevated them to the place and even trumping God's Word. They were marked by *self-righteousness*: asserting themselves by their own righteousness by their own works in the face of God.

The Sadducees, on the other hand, were a bit different. They were marked by *self-indulgence*: pleasing themselves apart from God. The Sadducees were predominantly from the wealthy class of Jewish people, who were the ruling party in Jewish cultural life. They were known for pursuing both political and social approval and power. Their mind set was: "Hey, this life is all there is, so let's make the most of it," and they had the means to do so. Many of the Sadducees made fortunes on temple concessions, money-changing, and ritual sacrifices. They were more strict than the Pharisees in some ways, in that they rejected the oral traditions that the Pharisees held to and they believed that only the five books of Moses were authoritative. While the Pharisees believed in angels, spirits, and the resurrection of the dead, the Sadducees did not. Pastor David Platt writes:

“While there's a lot to criticize about the Pharisees and Sadducees, we should be able to see in them a reflection of tendencies in our own hearts. On the one hand, the Sadducees loved to adjust the rules to fit their own preferences, priorities, and pursuits in this world. On the other hand, the Pharisees loved to keep the rules, and they were taking great pains to do everything right according to the law and their tradition. If we're honest, we can see ourselves in these two extremes. Some of us love to adjust (or even break) the rules in order to prioritize our own pursuits in this world, while others of us try our best to live nice, decent, moral, and even religious lives. . . .Part of the point of this story in Matthew 16 is that both of these approaches—self-righteousness and self-indulgence—entirely miss who Jesus is. They both oppose Him . . . Despite the fact that the Pharisees and Sadducees were at odds with one another, often being antagonists of one another in Jewish leadership, here in the face of Jesus they stand together. A common opponent always transforms enemies into friends. So they tested Jesus by asking him to show them a sign from heaven (v. 1), as if Jesus had not already given enough demonstrations of His divinity.”

The word translated “*sign*” here in the phrase “*sign from heaven*” means much more than simply a miracle or a demonstration of power. It means “a wonder by which one may recognize a person or confirm who they are.” You would think that the Pharisees and Sadducees would have heard about and seen enough “*signs*” to know who Jesus really was. He had just fed 4,000 men, plus the women and children—with a few loaves of bread and a few small fish. Prior to that, He had fed 5,000 men, plus the women and children, through a similar miracle. Jesus had healed great multitudes of sick people and cast out demons. He had cleansed lepers and given sight to the blind. He had stopped a deadly life-threatening thunderstorm and calmed raging waters with one word. But in spite of all this, they still demanded more. They wanted something big and dramatic. They demanded “*a sign from heaven.*”

Well, the truth is, the Pharisees and Sadducees didn’t really want to see a “*sign from heaven.*” We know that from the text in that Matthew tells us that “*the Pharisees and Sadducees came . . . to TEST him*” – and in the context of Matthew 12:14, that told us that “*the Pharisees went out and CONSPIRED AGAINST him, how to DESTROY him.*” It’s clear that they were *testing* - Jesus so they might trap him, so they could discredit him, so that they then could destroy him. It is highly significant that the Pharisees and Sadducees, in their self-righteousness and self-indulgence, wanted to dictate the standards and terms of what would validate and confirm who Jesus truly was, demanded a sign from heaven” of *their* choosing. It is not by coincidence that the phrase “*to test him*” in the original Greek is the same phrase that Matthew used of the actions of the devil, when we read in Matthew 4:1 that “*Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted (to test him) by the devil.*” The Pharisees and Sadducees tested Jesus, not to see a sign that would prove his divinity, but to justify their hard-heartedness toward him.

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. Matt 16:1-4

Jesus responds to the Pharisees’ and Sadducees’ demand for a “*sign from heaven*” by talking about the weather. These men of high regard could discern the weather based on the color of the sky - a red sky in the evening meant fair weather, while a red sky in the morning meant bad weather - but they couldn’t interpret the “*signs of the times.*” Jesus criticized these religious leaders because *they were all so focused on worldly things that they could not see spiritual matters.* They could discern weather patterns, yet they were all blind to eternal realities. Though they claimed to have special knowledge of God and His ways, they missed the signs God was performing right in front of them in Jesus, the promised Messiah.

They paid so much attention to things like changing weather conditions, that they were missing the momentous spiritual changes in the history of universe in God’s redemption of His people. God had broken into the world, coming as a man to heal the sick, raise the dead, cast out demons, quiet storms, and bring salvation. Christ’s entire earthly ministry was evidence of the victory of God over sin, suffering, the Devil, and demons. All of this was being done right before their eyes, and the Pharisees and Sadducees were missing it. The Pharisees and Sadducees began by asking Jesus for a sign and Jesus responded by saying: “*An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah.*” Now “*The sign of Jonah*” is not some kind of “*sign*” that Jonah brought. Rather, Jonah was the “*sign.*” His appearance was the “*sign*” to the people of Nineveh that his message was from the God, who had rescued him from death by drowning in the sea. Jesus’ resurrection from the dead will be the sign of hope and judgment to the generation that hears his message. The actions of the pagan people of Nineveh who repented at Jonah’s preaching forms the hope for those who turn to God in repentance by receiving Jesus as Lord and Savior – and judgment on all who do not repent at Jesus’ announcement of the arrival of the kingdom of God, including the Jewish religious leaders who stubbornly refused to believe in him.

Just as Jonah was three days in a fish, so Jesus would be three days in the grave, and then he would rise again. But even this miraculous sign would not be enough for Jesus' opponents. The Pharisees and Sadducees came to test Jesus. But the resurrection is what tests all people. To those who seek a sign in order to justify their unbelief, Jesus' resurrection is the only sign they'll be given - and even then, some will not believe. Romans 1:4 tells us that Jesus *"was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead."* Jesus' decisive victory in the resurrection would not be enough to convince these hard-hearted leaders who, in their self-righteousness and self-indulgence, were so focused on temporal worldly matters that they had become blind to eternal spiritual realities. Jesus knew that. And so, after confronting them, *"he left them and departed"* with the disciples..

When the disciples reached the other side, they had forgotten to bring any bread. Jesus said to them, "Watch and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees." And they began discussing it among themselves, saying, "We brought no bread." 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 perceive? 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? How is it that you fail to understand that I did not speak about bread? Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees." 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. Matthew 16:5-12

In these words the focus shifts from the Pharisees and Sadducees to the disciples. Clearly the disciples were slow to get a grasp on what Jesus had been teaching them. When they forgot to bring bread with them on their journey, Jesus told them to *"beware of the leaven (yeast) of the Pharisees and Sadducees."* And, as usual, they missed his point entirely, thinking he was speaking of literal leaven/yeast. *"O you of little faith!"* he said. Then Jesus asks them a series of questions concerning their constant failure to understand what they had already seen in the stunning signs/miracles of his ministry. The two miraculous feedings had apparently made little difference in the faith of these hapless disciples.

At times we wonder why the disciples didn't get what was going on. Even when Jesus clearly explained what he did and why he did it, it still didn't sink in. They seem to be so clueless at times, particularly with all that Jesus was saying and doing in their presence. You would think they would eventually get it. But the truth is, at least for me, I am no different than any of the disciples. How many times has our most gracious God in His great mercy taught and shown me the same truths again and again and again – and still I don't get it or I don't want to get it or don't do it once I do get it. God has shown Himself to be so faithful to me in everything, in spite of my *wondering* because I still don't understand and because of my *wandering* when I do. Praise God for His mercy and His patience with us through Jesus Christ!

If we have died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him; if we deny him, he also will deny us; if we are faithless, he remains faithful—for he cannot deny himself.
2 Timothy 2:11-13

Jesus said: *"Beware of the leaven (yeast) of the Pharisees and Sadducees"* and then he explained that the leaven/yeast he was referring to was the *"teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees."* Jesus uses *"leaven"* or *"yeast"* here as a symbol of that which is small, and that operates and spreads in a hidden way; but that once allowed into a thing, it spreads its influence and ends up permeating the whole thing. Just as a little yeast leavens the whole lump, a little of the *"leaven"* of the Pharisees and Sadducees can work its way in, spread its influence, and end up permeating the whole of a person's heart and soul. What was the *"teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees"* that was the leaven/yeast they disciples were to beware of? Well, we will be taking a closer looking at this when we get to Matthew 23, but Luke also records what this leaven/yeast is in Luke 12:1: *"Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy."* The outward form of what the disciples needed to be on guard against from the Pharisees and Sadducees was their *"teaching"* that affirmed appearing to be *"seekers of the true truth"* while still believing your own truth.

The Pharisees and Sadducees perfected the art of pretending to seek the truth when they were not seeking the truth at all. They were, in fact, seeking ways to avoid the true truth. All the signs and the evidences were pointing to Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah, the Son of God and King of the Jews. But *they didn't want him be who he truly was*. They would not bow down to him and worship him. They would not accept God's plan for them through his cross. Their pursuit of the truth was a pretense and sham. Jesus was warning His disciples, warning us here today, to beware of that attitude in our hearts. We must also be on our guard against the hypocritical pretense of "seeking the truth" by seeking "signs" – proofs, evidence and confirmation that validate and support our beliefs, our opinions, our positions, our rights, our feelings, our desires, our preferences, our behaviors, our expectations and our interpretations – whether it be our faith in Jesus or voting for the Mayor in Port Alberni. True followers of Jesus have an intimate relationship with him the effects everything they believe and do!

What Jesus teaches his disciples – which includes us - from all of this is that they/we must beware of demanding "signs" from Jesus and demanding that he first prove himself to them/us - before they/we will surrender and submit and trust themselves/ourselves to him by faith, in who he truly is - as our most sovereign God and sacrificial Savior, who lives and reigns supreme in our hearts and souls. And Jesus also warns us about our fallen predisposition of "seeking the true truth" by adjusting that truth - to agree with our own opinions, beliefs, expectations, preferences, priorities, and pursuits of this world.

Don't miss the word of warning here. Self-indulgence and self-righteousness will blind us from truly seeing and knowing Jesus Christ. Like a little bit of yeast that inevitably spreads, these heart-attitudes of seeking "signs" that support and affirm who we are and what we want, will slowly ruin our souls. Today we are being called to guard our hearts and souls against focusing on the temporal things of this world – focusing on what we can be or do or obtain and achieve in the here and now – will blind us to the world to come. We are to focus on what matters for all of eternity by fixing our eyes on Jesus Christ!

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.

Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these the wrath of God is coming. In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.

Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. Colossians 3:1-17

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