

The Leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees

Matthew 15:32-16:12

On our chronological journey through the gospels we had last seen Jesus in the book of Matthew, healing people in the region of Decapolis. Decapolis was a non-Jewish territory on the opposite side of the Sea of Galilee from Capernaum. Then the book of Mark detailed out for us one of Jesus's more unusual healings as He was there- Jesus healing the deaf and mute man through a unique step by step process. We were reminded that sometimes God's work in our lives is a process, even sometimes a strange process that can be difficult to understand. But we are to trust Him, knowing He will see us through the process.

As we continue reading in the book of Matthew, chapter 15, we'll see that Jesus stayed with the people from the Decapolis region a total of 3 days before heading back to the other side of the lake. Let's look at the passage together, [Matthew 15:32-39](#).

Ok, so Jesus had just recently fed the 5000 on the shores of the Galilee in a different location, so my first reaction after reading this is to ask the disciples "how did you so quickly forget that event?" Why would you ask again "where are we going to get so many loaves in this desolate place to feed such a large crowd?", when Jesus had already answered that question just recently? But just as I'm starting to get fired up at the disciples' short-term memory, I am convicted at just how often I somehow "forget" how God has worked or taken care of me in the past. It seems as if with every new challenge that arises, I get anxious and/or stressed, and I start to worry, question, doubt, and fear. How am I any different than these disciples here? Is it just me, or is there anyone else that perhaps reacts in a similar manner? It's often very easy in a difficult time, or in a time in which God is seemingly slow to respond, to forget how He has responded and worked previously. Let's pause for a moment, and ask for the Lord's forgiveness and help in not forgetting how He has, is, and will take care of us.

So, after feeding the crowd miraculously, Jesus and the disciples got back into the boat, and headed back to the other side of the lake, to Israel proper. They landed in the region of Magadan, which is just south of their home base of Capernaum. And let's see what happened there, chapter [16, verse 1](#).

You might recall that the Pharisees had already once asked Jesus for a sign, but this time the Pharisees teamed up with the Sadducees as well in order to confront Jesus. Now that in itself is notable. The Pharisees and the Sadducees were quite close to being enemies of each other. While both were considered religious and political leaders during the time of Jesus, they both had radically differing beliefs. Both adhered to the books of the law of Moses, the Torah- but the Pharisees started their own tradition of interpreting the law of Moses, and writing down their interpretations along with added laws and customs. The Sadducees violently condemned this act, considering adding to the law of Moses a blasphemous act. On the other hand, unlike the Pharisees, the Sadducees didn't believe in a resurrection of the dead, in other words they didn't believe in an afterlife- Heaven or Hell. So, the Pharisees and the Sadducees lived their lives in anger at each other for what the other group believed or didn't believe, and yet here in this passage they find a common enemy- Jesus- and are able to put aside their differences in order to confront Him.

They requested that Jesus show them a sign from Heaven. The Pharisees believed that demons and false gods could perform certain miracles on earth, as they had already accused Jesus of performing miracles by demonic power. They were now requesting of Jesus that God move somehow in the heavens- for Jesus to perform a miracle from where God was seated in order to prove His divinity. A strange movement or darkening of the sun, lightning and thunder, manna again falling from the sky, etc. The Sadducees however, didn't believe so much in supernatural occurrences, so perhaps their motivation behind teaming up with the Pharisees in asking Jesus for a heavenly sign was so that they could catch Jesus in a lie, proving that all the supernatural eternal Kingdom stuff Jesus proclaimed was false. Well, what did Jesus say in response to their request? [Verses 2-3...](#)

What Jesus speaks of was probably a common local way of weather forecasting. If there's a beautiful sunset late afternoon with all the red and orange hues lighting up the skyline, then usually it's a beautiful clear evening. However, if there are clouds reflecting colors from the sun in the morning, chances are there will be more clouds moving in as well that will carry storms and rain. He commends them on their wisdom concerning weather signs, but calls them out on their inability to recognize the indicators showing that He was sent by God as the Messiah. [Verse 4...](#)

An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign... Lord forgive us for seeking signs and wonders instead of seeking to know the God of salvation. And Jesus again, as He had before, answered that He would not give them the type of sign that they were requesting, rather the sign He would show would be the sign of Jonah.

Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days before rising from the depths of the ocean back to land, and so Jesus would be in the belly of the earth for three days before rising back to life. One theologian noted some other ways in which Jesus would demonstrate the sign of Jonah, he wrote: Jonah was thrown into the sea by the mariners, to whom he had entrusted himself; and Christ was delivered to death by the Jews, to whom he was specially promised. Jonah willingly threw Himself into the sea; and Christ willingly laid down his life- both sacrificing their life for others. Jonah by being cast into the sea saved those in the ship: Christ by his death saved the children of men. The Ninevites, through the preaching of Jonah they made a show of repentance, yet soon returned to their former sins and were destroyed; and so were the Jews within forty years after Christ's ascension into Heaven.

Jesus did indeed give them the sign of Jonah, but I also think about how Jesus gave signs from Heaven as well during His crucifixion. As He was upon the cross, from noon until 3pm the sky went completely dark. ([Matt. 27:45](#)) The curtain to the entrance of the temple room that contained God's presence was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook with an earthquake and rocks split. Tombs broke open and people were resurrected back to life. ([Matt. 27:51-53](#)) What other kind of God sized signs could you possibly ask for? Many did realize the significance of all that happened and exclaimed "Truly this was the Son of God" ([Matt 27:54](#)) While many did realize and interpret the signs appropriately, there were many others that witnessed all that took place and yet hardened their hearts, choosing to reject Jesus and His message. You think about Judas, a disciple of Jesus who witnessed Jesus's ministry first hand, from the very beginning... and yet chose to betray Him, perhaps upset that Jesus wasn't fulfilling the role of the Messiah in the way that Judas thought He should be fulfilling it.

For Judas and the religious leaders to have witnessed Jesus's signs with their own eyes and yet miss the significance of them, how much more careful must we be to not miss His signs and works that point to His authority and demand our

obedience! We have to be careful to not only notice the stop sign in the road, and realize what it means and what it is saying, but for our own benefit we must follow through with action- *stopping* at the stop sign. The signs our eyes see and our minds comprehend has to be turned into heeding those signs, submitting to the authority and wisdom of the author of those signs. We see the evidence of Jesus, we comprehend the significance of the gospel message, and we can choose to be stubborn like the Pharisees and Sadducees, or we can choose to accept, submit, and make changes in our lives as a result of seeing His signs.

Jesus and His disciples had just arrived here in Magadan and notice how quickly after exchanging a few words with the Pharisees and Sadducees that Jesus and the disciples left. Jesus wasn't going to waste any more time with these who hearts were hardened. There were others out there that had still yet to hear, who would receive Him lovingly into their hearts. So, they all got back into the boat, and crossed back over to the other side of the Galilee. [Verse 5...](#) ([Matt 16:5-7](#))

This is really quite comical; this passage actually makes me feel a little better about some of the words of Jesus that are difficult to interpret. Even Jesus's own disciples had problems interpreting His words sometimes! I guess during the super short visit to Magadan they barely had time to get out of the boat, much less go into town and buy more food before they were already back on their way to again cross the Galilee. Maybe they thought Jesus was instructing them not to receive any bread given to them by a Pharisee or a Sadducee. Maybe they thought He was insinuating that it was actually the religious leaders that carried the spiritual defilement "cootie" disease that everyone had thought those of other nations carried. Either way, they begun to talk about it among themselves, perhaps embarrassed to ask Jesus about what He said. But Jesus knew, verse 8... ([Matt. 16:8-12](#))

Ah ha... now they get it! Jesus didn't really give them the meaning of what He was talking about, but He outlined for them clearly what He *wasn't* talking about. It's like He said: "Guys, why would I be talking about provision of real bread? I created bread for the 5,000 and you had twelve basketfuls left over. And then I created bread for the 4,000 and you had seven basketfuls left over- I'm obviously not concerned about a lack of bread! But beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees." So, after He made it clear that He was talking metaphorically,

and then repeated Himself, they got it- Jesus was saying to beware and guarded against the *teaching* of the Pharisees and the Sadducees.

Now for Jesus to have said this to His disciples, there must have been a real threat of them wrestling with the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees. After this encounter, after these religious leaders had asked Jesus for a “real” sign from Heaven, I imagine maybe some of the disciples began to wonder if a sign from Heaven might be appropriate after all? Perhaps the silent, unseen yeast of the religious leaders was attempting to spread even to Jesus’s disciples- slowly working and penetrating the dough of their minds. After all they had seen and experienced, it was still possible for the leaven of the religious leaders to spread and pass onto them and hinder them from truly seeing Jesus’s signs.

Might I suggest that if this was possible with Jesus’s closest disciples, how much more possible could it be with you or I? The leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees is still alive and well today! The Pharisaical work of adding onto God’s word, or manipulating it to one’s own benefit, or appearing on the outside to live a godly life is still highly practiced. The attitude of the Sadducees in saying that there is no eternity, that you just live in the here and now and that’s it- is a perspective today taken by many. Followers of Jesus live in a world as a minority among a majority of modern-day Pharisees, Sadducees, and all other kinds of perverters of God’s truth. Is it possible that some of us here this morning need Jesus to remind us to “beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees?”

The evil of the religious leaders wasn’t always easily detected, nor were the religious leaders all bad. They believed truth, and much of it. They did good things, they knew God’s commandments. But there was a harmful, silent, hard to detect, deadly virus growing in them and spreading amongst them. That virus was causing them to miss Jesus, and if untreated, it would cause them to miss out on eternal life with Jesus in His Kingdom.

Today that virus, that leaven, travels through means of the media, movies, television shows, news, politics, through schools and even some churches. It’s everywhere. I’m not suggesting that you can shelter yourself from it, but I am suggesting that we each need to be on guard- to watch out and beware of the leaven that is permeating this world. If we are constantly being bombarded by the leaven of the world, the ideas, philosophies, perversions, compromises, worldly

gratifications, then how much more important is it for us to be firmly rooted in God's word, allowing it to saturate our hearts and minds with its truth? It's of utmost importance- to spend time reading, studying, wrestling with the truth that God has given us. It is our best protection, guarding us from the yeast of this world. It is also the best remedy if by chance you feel that the yeast has already affected you- spreading and rooting itself in you in some way. [Hebrews 4:12](#) says this of God's word: "For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart." Some of us perhaps need this type of spiritual surgery, using the word of God as the sharpest of scalpels to carve out and remove any bit of worldly leaven that has entered into the heart and mind.

If you are not daily spending time in God's word, then you are very vulnerable to the spreading yeast of this world. If you are not daily spending time in God's word, I challenge you to make a commitment to do so right now. Even if it's just 5 minutes a day, right when you wake up, or as you go to bed, or in your car after you've rushed out of the house, or on lunch break- commit to making a habit of finding even just a few minutes out of your day, every day, to read and meditate on God's word. If reading is difficult, then there are plenty of options out there to listen to God's word being read. Do whatever you have to do to ensure that God's word can penetrate you and work in you daily, allowing it to guard you against the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.