



Matthew 16:1-20
The Importance of Right Beliefs Pt 1

Summary: Jesus experiences conflict with arrogant Pharisees and Sadducees (He refuses to cooperate), expresses concern for the ignorant disciples (He shows concern and patience), and is recognized and adored as the Christ (He gives promises).

We pick things up in Matthew chapter 16, verse 1 – Jesus has just performed some astonishing miracles: He has been teaching, and healing all kinds of physical and spiritual problems, He fed large crowds with food that seemed to come from no where, He walked on water, and presented Himself as the bread of life – as essential, not optional, for everyone who really wants to know and worship God. And now people from the religious establishment show up to see what’s going on.

Matthew 16:1 Then the Pharisees and Sadducees came, and testing Him asked that He would show them a sign from heaven.

The Pharisees and Sadducees represent two different denominations of Jews – it would be like saying the Catholics and the Church of God folks showed up, or the Methodists and the Baptists. These groups appear repeatedly in the Gospels, though not often together. They shared some of same beliefs, but there was actually quite a bit of difference between them, and those differences could turn explosive at times like the difference between Shi’a and Sunni Muslims.

Pharisees were the rule keepers of religion and the common people – the blue-collar folks of the villages – thought highly of them. If you remember, Jesus had a conflict with them back in chapter 15 – they wanted to know why He and His disciples did not keep their tradition of ceremonial hand washing before meals.

The Sadducees on the other hand were aristocrats. They came from the higher ranks of Jewish society, typically in Jerusalem, and were well connected to the Roman rulers of the time. They had all the bells and whistles of religion – all the robes and incense and interesting hats, but it was all for show. They were the theological liberals of their day – they rejected the notion of a bodily resurrection, or angels, and the idea of a coming Messiah – all things the Pharisees believed in deeply.

Both groups seemed very religious from the outside – but inside they were spiritually hollow, there was nothing of true substance.

Compare their attitude with that of the woman we saw last week in Matthew 15. She was a Canaanite woman, an outsider, who came to Jesus begging for help, content to be seen as a dog, as long as she could feed on the scraps that fell from His table. She was aware of her

need, and she was desperate, so she humbled herself and she begged from Jesus, convinced that only He could help her. In response, Jesus commended her GREAT faith and her story is preserved forever in Scripture as an example to us all.

And now these guys show up, well-dressed, self-satisfied, skeptical, to see for themselves: what's really going on? The difference in attitude could hardly be greater.

They've come to test Jesus; the old King James Version says, "to tempt Him." It's the exact same thing Satan came to do after Jesus' baptism. It's what they tried to do by bringing Jesus the woman caught in adultery, looking for a way to trap Him. They're not doing honest inquiry here, they don't intend to let Him pass this test, it's not that kind of exam, they're looking for a reason to fail Him.

They come asking for a sign from heaven, it's actually the second time they've asked – remember back in chapter 12? Meanwhile, Jesus has done countless signs and miracles, He's just fed thousands of people miraculously (twice!), His healings are well known, even Herod, the political leader of the region has heard reports of what's going on. There is no missing the fact that Jesus is working signs and wonders, but they want to see something "from Heaven." They want Him to call down fire like Elijah (1 Ki 18:38), and Jesus says no.

2 He answered and said to 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 foul weather today, for the sky is red and threatening.*' Hypocrites! You know how to discern the face of the sky, but you cannot *discern* the signs of the times. 4 A wicked and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign shall be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah." And He left them and departed.

Now, if you're in a hurry, or your mind is somewhere else, if you're distracted, this might all just blow right past you. But if you slow down, if you pay attention, if you imagine the scene, what just happened is powerful.

Jesus just called people *wicked, adulterous, hypocrites* and turned His back on them. They happen to be very important, and very religious people, but the point is significant no matter who they are. *Jesus walked away from them.* He, in effect, said, 'I don't have time for this,' and walked out.

Now, that's not the Jesus most people think of. Most people tend to think of a softer, gentler, Jesus. He's a really nice guy, not very intimidating or impressive, easy-going. Some people reject Him because they think He's not manly enough. Whatever that might mean for the most perfect man who has ever lived.

But this Jesus just walked out on people – He didn't beg with them to understand, He didn't explain Himself, He didn't go chasing them down. He's not soft and squishy and eager to get along, He was direct and confrontational at times. He had no problem calling people out. And sometimes, He just walked away.

And if you understand who He is, if you understand what He came to earth to do, the idea of Jesus just walking away from someone should stop you in your tracks. You understand the consequences of that: where can you go for salvation if *the One who is salvation* walks away from you?

It's important to ask, how do you approach Jesus? Do you approach Him with a self-important attitude that says, "I'll be the judge of this?" If so, take note of the fact that Jesus refused to honor their request and simply walked away. He is not obligated to answer anyone, and He certainly is not required to submit to your interrogation. Who are you to put God on trial and demand that He prove Himself? Who are you to demand that He explain Himself?

God tells us clearly in His Word, "the just shall live by faith" – we won't always have all the answers, insight, understanding, explanations, or evidence we desire, but when God calls there is always enough to humbly respond with trust in what He has already done. Think of everything Jesus had already done, all the signs the Pharisees and Sadducees had to overlook, while asking for something more like what they wanted to see and ask yourself – what more does God really need to do for me to believe Him?

If you come to God humbly, honestly, open about your concerns and your doubt, He will by no means turn you away. The Bible even tells us of the time when a man came to Jesus and said, "Lord, I believe, but help my unbelief". And Jesus honored the request – it was humble, not arrogant, or proud. Jesus never turned away honest inquiries.

But these men desired to test Him, to tempt Him and not to be taught by Him; they weren't looking for evidence, they were looking to entrap.

If you're taking notes on all of this, their arrogance is the point: they thought they were OK without Jesus, they came to pass judgment on Him, to see what He could offer them, if He could stand up to their scrutiny. They took the place of superiors inspecting a subordinate, so Jesus told them the only sign you'll receive is the sign of the prophet Jonah – a warning of the coming judgment if you don't repent. And then He warned His disciples to watch out for their influence.

Matthew 16:5 Now when His disciples had come to the other side, they had forgotten to take bread. 6 Then Jesus said to them, "Take heed and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees."

7 And they reasoned among themselves, saying, "It is because we have taken no bread."

Do you ever have one of those situations where you realize, we're just not communicating here? You wonder, are we even speaking the same language? Well, this is one of those moments. He's trying to talk to them about something deep and spiritual and they think – 'Uh-oh, He knows we don't have any food and He's saying don't go asking those guys for any.'

8 But Jesus, being aware of *it*, said to them, “O you of little faith, why do you reason among yourselves because you have brought no bread? 9 Do you not yet understand, or remember the five loaves of the five thousand and how many baskets you took up? 10 Nor the seven loaves of the four thousand and how many large baskets you took up? 11 How is it you do not understand that I did not speak to you concerning bread?—*but* to 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 doctrine of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

The Bible is full of promises. God has a lot of them to make and there are many, many promises that the Christian can claim. In fact, you can find books of Bible promises – they’re meant to be encouraging and comforting to believers.

But God has a lot of warnings to give us too and we often overlook, forget, or ignore them. Here, Jesus says “**Take heed and beware**” of the influence of these men. Jesus is trying to tell His disciples something very important – there is something over here that can hurt you. He’s not just recounting the events, retelling the story of His run-in with the Pharisees and Sadducees, no, He says “**Take heed**” pay attention, and “**beware**” *watch out*, don’t let this happen to you and He compares their doctrine to leaven.

Leaven is yeast, and if you’ve ever done much baking you know how little leaven you need to work with compared to all the other ingredients.

I have this thing for baking bread. I think it magical. You can make sourdough bread with just water, flour, and some salt for taste, but really, you don’t even need that if you’re pinched – if you know what you’re doing, you can make bread the same ways humans have been doing it for thousands of years – you take these ingredients, combine them in the right way, and then apply heat and they totally transform.

If I gave you a bowl of flour and a glass of water and a pinch of salt and said here you go, enjoy, there’s nothing appetizing about that. But if you mix them the right way, and apply heat, magical things happen. Sourdough bread really is just three ingredients – water, flour, and salt – mixed with a starter that is nothing more than water and flour that have been allowed to sit for a while cultivating the yeast that is all around us in the air into a leaven. Yeast is what causes the dough to rise and creates all these bubbles that makes holes in the bread that you then cut and fill with butter. It’s delicious, right?

Now, the bread that I make for my family at least once a week, is not a sourdough, I don’t want to mess with creating a starter and keeping it alive to capture and transfer my yeast. So, I use dried yeast, the kind you’ve seen used so often in baking. But I only need a little bit – I use a half a teaspoon of yeast with 22 ounces of flour because a little bit of leaven is going to leaven the whole lump.

That’s the thing about yeast, a tiny little bit of it will spread throughout the entire dough. When you read a recipe it typically calls for less yeast than any other ingredient.

Now think about that, and look at this – Jesus tells His disciples, “Take heed and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees.”

“Take heed and beware” – does that sound kind of serious to you? It does to me. And knowing that just a tiny little bit of leaven can quickly and thoroughly spread makes me realize how important it is to be vigilant.

But, honestly, how many of take this seriously? How many of us think regularly about this? I mean even those of you who have been walking with Christ for many years, those of you who spend time in prayer and Bible reading everyday, as we all should, how many of you would say this is something you think about and take seriously? Do you parents take this seriously for your kids?

Jesus says “Take heed and beware.” Is that something we need to listen to? I think so and I think we need to take special note that it was said *to religious people* – the disciples, *about religious people* – the Pharisees and Sadducees.

The doctrine of the Pharisees could be categorized as zealous fundamentalism. You keep all the rules, but your heart isn't really in it. This is why you can have people who don't drink alcohol, or watch bad movies, or cuss, and wear very conservative clothing, but there's no warmth to their relationships – they're very stern. They're all about keeping the rules and proving they can do it – remember the question the Pharisees asked Jesus: why don't your disciples wash their hands the right way? Christians, it is possible to be going through all the motions with the outside of your life and have your heart far from God. Parents, it is possible to have your kids following all the rules on the outside, while their hearts are far from you and God – don't mistake compliance for conversion.

On the other side you have the doctrine of the Sadducees which could be classified as modern theological liberalism – these are the churches that embrace whatever the rest of the culture cares about – they're socially conscious and conversant about the latest issues. You can tell because they have signs and flags outside the buildings showing that while they're religious, they're not religious 'like that.' They're open-minded. But in the process of trying to keep up with the culture, they're getting out of step with God. Christian, it is possible to get so caught up with the issues of the day, so caught up in what the culture is saying and doing, that you wander from your relationship with God while trying to be relevant. You have just enough religion to check the box, but there's no power to it, just a lot of talk about ideals, ambitions, and ethics and things people ought to do.

Both sides agree about that – there are things people ought to do. They just disagree about what they are and how to do them - there is a ditch on either side of the road, and it's just as much of a tragedy to fall into one as it is to fall into the other. The problem both sides share is a religion that is very religious without Jesus. That's the doctrine you need to watch out for. That's the leaven that can creep in all too easily – religion without relationship with God.

When the Pharisees and Sadducees went back where they came from, they just carried on with their religion, nothing about them changed – they didn't need Jesus, they had their religious views, their religious traditions. In fact, some of them saw Him as a threat to their status quo, so they tried to get rid of Him and would eventually arrest Him and hand Him over to the Romans accusing Him of treason. Why? So they could get back to their religion the way they liked it.

Now, let me ask you – is that something that we still see today? Are there people who love their religion, but have no time for Jesus? Of course there are. It might even be true for some in this room today – you like the social aspect of church, this is where your friends are, you like the therapeutic nature of it, especially when the music is good, the songs are your favorite, and the pastor says some positive and encouraging things. But what about Jesus? Are you here for Him?

If this were a civic club – if we didn't have a sermon, would you still come? To see your friends, to talk with people, to discuss religious and philosophical ideas, to organize some charitable work? Undoubtedly some people would.

There are plenty of “churches” like this today. They have all sorts of activities, groups, and meetings, but very little Scripture and very little Jesus. They might have impressive architecture and nostalgic buildings or they could look like the latest trendy meeting spaces with lots of pallet wood in the background and bare bulb light fixtures – they might be appealing to the young crowd or the older generation, but meeting Jesus is not their first priority and if need be, they can get along without Him as they pursue their activities, or discuss their politics, or dispense the latest positive psychology and life coach self-help tips.

Friends, [“Take heed and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees.”](#)

Because, while the Pharisees and Sadducees were walking back home, returning to their religious ideas, practices, and lives without Jesus, He was busy turning the lives of others upside down – radically transforming the lives of disciples who simply could not live without Him.

We'll explore this section more next week, but for now, you simply have to see the question that Jesus asks and the confession Peter makes, especially in light of all we've seen this morning.

Matthew 16:13 When Jesus came into the region of Caesarea Philippi, He asked His disciples, saying, “Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?”

14 So they said, “Some say John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”

15 He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?”

16 Simon Peter answered and said, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

17 Jesus answered and said to him, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed *this* to you, but My Father who is in heaven. 18 And I also say

to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.

Here is the question we all must answer this morning – who do you say that Jesus is? The Pharisees and Sadducees had their answer and Peter had his. What about you? Are you OK without Him, is your spirituality, your faith, OK without Jesus, or are you desperately dependent on Him? Is Jesus an optional accessory to your way of life, or is He the very foundation on which your life is built? Do you approach Him as an inspector, or as a beggar? Who do you say that He is?

We're going to receive communion now, an ordinance that Jesus gave to the church, a reminder of His identity, His sacrifice, His life, death, and resurrection. By receiving the bread and the cup we profess our doctrine – our belief that we are sinners, in need of forgiveness and grace, and that these cannot be found anywhere else. That there is no other name given under heaven by which men must be saved. By receiving the bread and the cup we proclaim His death for our sin, his substitution for our guilt, and our identity as His disciples. We profess that we are those who desire to take heed and beware the intrusion of anything that could separate us from Him.

Let us pray,