

Chapter 64: Beware the Leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees

Matthew 16:5–12

As Jesus departs from his confrontation with the Pharisees and Sadducees, the conversation is fresh on his mind. While his disciples worry themselves about physical food—and the lack of it on their boat—Jesus is worried about the long-term damage that the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees will inflict upon those who listen to it. Accordingly, Jesus seeks to redirect his disciples to what is truly important so that they *don't miss the signs about Jesus*.

No Bread (Matthew 16:5–7)

The meaning of Matthew's transition into this story is disputed: "When the disciples reached the other side, they had forgotten to bring any bread" (v. 5). The debate revolves around whether the disciples had been somewhere else while Jesus went to the region of Magadan (Matt. 15:38), where the Pharisees and Sadducees came to test him by asking for a sign from heaven (Matt. 16:1–4). In those verses, Jesus' movements are narrated by the singular "he," whereas here we read about the "disciples" reaching the other side, without a direct description of whether Jesus had accompanied the disciples on their journey. If Jesus had been separated from his disciples, then he would have left them on the east side of the Sea of Galilee in Gentile territory (Matt. 15:29) to go to Magadan on the west side in Galilee (Israelite territory). Thus, the disciples' reaching "the other side" would mean that they had now followed Jesus to join him in Galilee.

It is possible that Jesus went ahead of his disciples; however, it seems more likely that Jesus and his disciples were together when they left the four thousand to sail westward to Magadan, and now when Jesus departs the Pharisees and Sadducees to sail eastward back into Gentile territory. It is fairly common in the Gospels for the narration to emphasize one person's actions when others are also involved. Even in the verse following our passage in Matthew 16:13, we read that "Jesus came" (singular) into the district of Caesarea Philippi, but that he then asked his disciples a question. On the same logic that would have split Jesus and his disciples up over the last couple of stories, we would understand only Jesus to have gone into Caesarea Philippi, which is contradicted by the fact that Jesus was able to ask his disciples a question. The reason this is important is so that we recognize in this section of the Gospel of Matthew that Jesus (with his disciples) returned immediately to Gentile territory after the confrontation with the Pharisees and the Sadducees. Jesus is continuing his mission among the Gentiles, although he will take the rest of his time in this chapter to instruct his disciples.

The main focus of this passage, then, arises from the fact that the disciples had forgotten to bring bread (v. 5). The Gospel of Mark clarifies that they had only one loaf of bread with them, hardly enough to feed all thirteen men for any length of time (Mark 8:14).¹ Jesus adapts this concern into a

¹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 614.

warning: “Watch and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees” (v. 6). Given the enmity of the Pharisees and the Sadducees against each other, it was notable in the previous passage that the two groups came together to confront Jesus. Here again, we should observe that Jesus unifies their *teaching* (v. 12) into one message by describing it as “the leaven [singular] of the Pharisees and Sadducees.”² It is also interesting to observe the parallel passage, for Mark warns against “the leaven of Herod” (Mark 8:15). Calvin explains this observation by taking Jesus’ warning as an exhortation to beware a wide range of doctrinal errors that could lead us astray:

Here Christ takes occasion from the circumstance that had just occurred to exhort his disciples to beware of every abuse that makes an inroad on sincere piety. The Pharisees had come a little before; the Sadducees joined them; and apart from them stood Herod, a very wicked man, and an opponent and corrupter of sound doctrine. In the midst of these dangers it was very necessary to warn his disciples to be on their guard; for, since the human mind has a natural inclination towards vanity and errors, when we are surrounded by wicked inventions, spurious doctrines, and other plagues of the same sort, nothing is more easy than to depart from the true and simple purity of the word of God; and if we once become entangled in these things, it will never be possible for the true religion to hold an entire sway over us.³

In the case of the Pharisees and the Sadducees, they taught different doctrines, but the errors of each acted “like leaven which silently penetrates heart and mind when it is not recognized and expelled and thus antagonize the divine truth and ruin the soul.”⁴ Fresh off of his confrontation with the two groups, Jesus wanted to warn his disciples against even the least influence from what they taught.

The disciples respond immediately to Jesus’ words, “discussing” what Jesus had said among themselves (v. 7). As Hagner observes, this word for “discuss” has a “negative connotation in Matthew,” appearing elsewhere as “evil *thoughts*” (Matt. 15:19) and in the discussion of the chief priests and elders about how to sidestep Jesus’ pointed question about the authority of John the Baptist in Matthew 21:25.⁵ Their attention to the lack of physical bread, however, entirely blinds them to the spiritual danger that Jesus wants them to see regarding the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.⁶

Plentiful Bread (Matt. 16:8–10)

It is unclear what Matthew intends by saying that Jesus was “aware of this” in v. 8. It may be that

² Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 638.

³ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:280.

⁴ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 617–18.

⁵ Hagner, *Matthew 14 - 28*, 459.

⁶ “The implication here seems to be that the disciples can trust God’s provision for their physical need and that they ought not to be so distracted by the lack of bread that they miss altogether the point of an important spiritual warning Jesus gives them.” (Hagner, *Matthew 14 - 28*, 459.)

Jesus utilized his “divine means of knowing,” as Lenski suggests.⁷ On the other hand, Morris reasonably points out that “there would have been loud voices among the Twelve, and there was no reason for keeping the discussion secret.”⁸ Regardless, Jesus responds to what he knows about their discussion by rebuking their lack of faith: “O you of little faith, why are you discussing among yourselves the fact that you have no bread?” (v. 8). As he will make clear in the following passage, they have not sufficiently learned to trust in “the presence, promises, power, and love” of Jesus that they should have learned from him by this point, especially in the two miraculous feedings that they had witnessed.⁹

Morris comments that “We might have expected that Jesus would complain about their lack of understanding, but it is not this that concerns him. Faith is the critically important thing. Those who wholly trust God will not enter into the kind of error Jesus is castigating.”¹⁰ What Morris writes is correct; however, we should note that Jesus immediately does inquire into their understanding: “Do you not yet perceive?” (v. 9a). Therefore, the issue is not a simple opposition of faith on one side and understanding on the other. Rather, Jesus suggests by implication that true understanding requires faith. Furthermore, France notes that the question of their “understanding” is a developing theme in the Gospel of Matthew with ups and downs along the way, but that (1) “eventually...understanding dawns (v. 12)” so that (2) “the ground is thus prepared for the climactic question and answer at Caesarea Philippi which will immediately follow. There at last their developing understanding will find full expression through Peter’s declaration.”¹¹ One function of this passage, then, is to underscore the innate lack of understanding among the disciples to prove that, when Peter confesses Jesus as “the Christ, the Son of the living God,” he will do so only by divine revelation (Matt. 16:16–17).¹²

A second function of this passage is to lead the disciples into a deeper understanding of Jesus’ mission among both Jews and Gentiles by the reminders of the twelve baskets gathered at the feeding of the five thousand, and the seven baskets gathered at the feeding of the four thousand (vv. 9–10). Notably, Jesus does not tell the disciples the number of baskets of leftovers, but quizzes them on their own memory: “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?*” As Hagner writes, “This test of the memory has the effect of drawing a heightened attention to the numbers involved in each case—the very numbers that are the key to the underlying symbolism of the two feedings, twelve and seven respectively, pointing, as we argued above, to the provision for Israel and the nations.”¹³ So, in the next passage when Jesus speaks about the building of his “church,” Jesus has freshly reminded his disciples that he intends to save both Jews and Gentiles alike.

⁷ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 615.

⁸ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 416.

⁹ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 639.

¹⁰ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 416.

¹¹ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 608.

¹² Carson, “Matthew,” 412.

¹³ Hagner, *Matthew 14 - 28*, 460.

Bad Bread (Matt. 16:11–12)

The third function of this passage comes when Jesus reiterates his original warning to underscore what the disciples should and should not be concerned about: “How is it that you fail to understand that I did not speak about bread? Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees” (v. 11). At one level, Jesus is telling them that they *do not* need to concern themselves about the bread that they forgot to bring: “they have recently been given more tangible proof, twice over, that God (through Jesus) can provide food when it is needed.”¹⁴ At another level, Jesus is telling them that they *do* need to concern themselves with the teaching of the Pharisees and the Sadducees, which the disciples finally understand at the conclusion of this passage (v. 12). What, then, is the (singular) teaching of the Pharisees and the Sadducees?

Again, the two groups were quite different in their respective emphases: “the Pharisees [taught] spurious legalism and formalism, whereas the Sadducees [advocated] skepticism and liberalism.”¹⁵ Nevertheless, we should remember that in the previous context the two had joined forces to press Jesus with one specific demand: “a sign from heaven” (Matt. 16:1). Then, Jesus had responded by explaining to the Pharisees and Sadducees that they were oblivious to the “signs of the times” (Matt. 16:3). Now, when Jesus reminds his disciples of two miraculous signs that he performed, he seems to be implying that they, like the Pharisees and Sadducees, had missed the importance of the “signs of the times” because they were “of little faith”: “The miracles Jesus performs, unlike the signs the Pharisees demand, do not compel faith; but those with faith will perceive their significance.”¹⁶ If the disciples had “understood” the signs (vv. 9, 11), they would have believed in Jesus—unlike the Pharisees and the Sadducees who did not.¹⁷

Yet, as much as the disciples fall short here of understanding Jesus’ warning, Carson is correct when he observes “why the next pericope (vv.13–20) is so important: Peter makes the confession that Jesus is the Messiah, not on the basis of manipulative signs, but by revelation from the Father.”¹⁸ On their own, the disciples falter in their understanding here. With divine revelation, the disciples will come to a true understanding of Jesus Christ in the very next passage. Furthermore, the way that the Lord led the disciples to this kind of understanding is the same way he leads us to understanding: not through our own cleverness, but by the Spirit of God, sent by the Father and the Son into the world

¹⁴ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 610.

¹⁵ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 617. See also Morris, who writes, “Thus the Pharisees put a great deal of emphasis on the ‘tradition of the elders’ with its stress on the written and oral law, whereas the Sadducees would accept nothing but the law written in the Bible. The Sadducees were politicians; they were a comparatively small, but wealthy, aristocratic party, very anxious to work with the Romans. The Pharisees were not politically minded but would live under any government that allowed them to practice their religion. But in different ways both were conservative, and over against Jesus and his followers they might be said to be united and form a unit. At the very least they were linked by their inability to see that Jesus was the Messiah, by their hatred of him, and by their determination to overthrow his teaching if they could.” (Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 417.)

¹⁶ Carson, “Matthew,” 413.

¹⁷ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 610.

¹⁸ Carson, “Matthew,” 412.

to bring the fullness of Jews and Gentiles into Christ's church.

Discussion Questions

1. Where are Jesus and his disciples in v. 5? Where had they been in the previous two passages? What had happened back in Galilee in the previous passage (Matt. 16:1–4)? How does that conversation inform Jesus' warning to his disciples about the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees? In the context of other uses in the Gospel of Matthew, what does the word "discussing" suggest about the misguided nature of the disciples' conversation (v. 7)?

2. Why does Jesus rebuke his disciples as having "little faith" when they worry about their lack of bread (v. 8)? What kind of perception is Jesus seeking when he laments that they do "not yet perceive" (v. 9)? How is faith related to perception? Why does Jesus ask about whether the disciples "remember" the feedings of the five thousand and of the four thousand? Why does Jesus ask whether they remember the number of baskets gathered?

3. Why does Jesus insist that his disciples do not need to worry about the bread (v. 11)? What does Jesus instead mean when he speaks about the "leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees" (v. 12)? What precisely is this leaven? Why does it take so long for the disciples to "understand" Jesus' point (v. 12)? How does this understanding relate to the understanding of Peter in the next passage (Matt. 16:13–20)?

4. What pulls at you to distract you from Jesus as the Messiah of his Jewish and Gentile church? In what ways do the concerns about your physical needs distract you from Jesus the Messiah? What kinds of religious traditions from your past keep you from embracing Jesus in his fullness? What temptations toward radical individualism and personal autonomy pull your heart away from the Lord?