

## Matthew 16:1-12 – “Seeking a Sign or Trusting the Saviour?”

As we move along in Matthew we're continuing to see the shift in Jesus' ministry. The nation of Israel has by and large rejected Jesus as their king, and so He's moving out from the house of Israel to focus on preparation of His disciples and giving them opportunity to grow in their faith. He's also giving previews to the scope of the gospel in going to Gentile territories. We saw that in Chapter 15. And now coming into Chapter 16, we're not just seeing a shift in Jesus' **ministry**, we're seeing a shift in Jesus' **mission**. We'll see throughout this chapter how Jesus is preparing His disciples for His ultimate mission – *the cross*.

- A key verse in this chapter is **Matthew 16:21**, "*From that time Jesus began to show to His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised the third day.*"
- And because this is Jesus' destiny, we begin to see the shift in the program of Jesus. That it will be through His disciples and the soon to be formed church that will carry out the work of Jesus once He is back in heaven. Chapter 16 is the first time that we see the church mentioned.

Now remember, Jesus has been covering a lot of ground. He's been up in the region of Tyre and Sidon. He then goes to the east side of the Galilee in Gentile territory – the Decapolis. And then He heads back across the Sea of Galilee to Magdala. As soon as He's back in Israel territory, the religious leaders once again are waiting for a confrontation.

### 1. Religious Leaders Question Jesus' Authenticity – 16:1-4

**16:1-4 - *Then the Pharisees and Sadducees came, and testing Him asked that He would show them a sign from heaven.***

The Pharisees and Sadducees were two of the main religious/political parties in Israel. They made up much of the Sanhedrin, a 71 member council that presided over Jewish affairs dealing with religious, political and social dynamics in Israel.

The funny thing is that Pharisees and Sadducees didn't see eye to eye on everything and were quite often at odds with each other. And yet they unite over their common disdain of Jesus.

- A common enemy will make quick friends of divided people.

To give a little background of these two parties:

- The **Pharisees** were conservatives. They wanted to uphold every bit of God's Word and the oral traditions passed down from other rabbis. But in order to keep their law meticulously, they often added to the law in trying to decipher how best to observe it. It became rigid and legalistic, and they became very proud and self-righteous.
- The **Sadducees** were liberals. They were predominantly the aristocrats of Jewish society and they loved to indulge themselves in the pleasures of life. They were in charge of the temple, its services, and concessions. They only held to the Pentateuch (the first 5 books of the bible) and were very materialistic. They did not believe in angels, spirits, or the resurrection of the dead. So, they were all about making the most of life now and living it up. They were a self-indulgent group.
- The Pharisees added to the Word and made it hard to follow. The Sadducees went the other way and subtracted from the Word making it easy to fit their own desires.
- Though we can criticize these two groups, we must be aware that these are tendencies we can so easily find in our hearts. An attitude of pride and self-righteousness like the Pharisees by how much religious zeal we have. Or it can be an attitude of seeking our own comforts above devotion to God. Be careful of the subtle slide we can allow into legalism or liberalism.

Despite the hostility these two groups had with each other, they stand together in coming against Jesus.

And notice the motivation here in this question. It's not to get answers, or because they're really trying to understand Jesus more, it's a test. A test they have no plans on passing Him on.

They want to see ***a sign from heaven***. Now you might be thinking, have they been living with their head in the sand? Haven't they seen enough?

- It seems the proof is in the pudding for those who choose to see it. When another Pharisee approached Jesus, he came with a completely different perspective. Nicodemus said to Jesus, "*Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him*" (John 3:2).
- It seems evident that Jesus has already given enough signs. Throughout Matthew we've seen the sick healed, leprosy cleansed, sight restored,

people freed from demons, walking on water, feeding of the multitudes, the list goes on.

But many, like these religious leaders, believed that Satan and his agents could perform all these things, at least a counterfeit of them. So, they want something significant in their eyes, one that will differentiate that it's truly a sign from heaven.

Now what would a sign from heaven entail? Would it be calling fire down from heaven like Elijah? I wonder if Jesus was tempted to do just that? He could have brought fire down on one of these skeptics and just left him a crispy shell of who he was while the rest of the guys looked on in wide eyed fear. I could see Jesus saying, *any more questions*, with these guys running all the way back to Jerusalem.

But as always, Jesus responds in grace and patience. Now remember, these guys are looking to discredit Jesus. It's a test to turn people against Him. If He does another sign, they'll just say He's operating as an agent of Satan, like they did in Matthew 12:24. They're showing once again that their hearts are hardened from ever receiving the truth, no matter if it hit them square between the eyes.

**12:2-3 - He answered and said to them, “When it is evening you say, ‘It will be fair weather, for the sky is red’; <sup>3</sup> 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.**

These guys already knew how to discern signs around them. You know the saying, red night, sailors delight. Red morning, sailors warning. Jesus came up with that phrase here. His point is that these religious leaders would look at what's going on around them to determine what the outcome might be. Jesus holds them to account for not taking the same action regarding the signs He's already done.

How about us? Are we discerning the signs of the times? With all that's happening with Israel and Iran at this present moment, which is unprecedented, it's hard not to see this as signs of the times. This is what the Bible said would happen (Ezekiel 38-39). We're living in exciting times where Biblical prophecy is unfolding before us. We need to be discerning the signs of the times around us.

And we need to be ready to push back against the evil of this age and stand for righteousness.

Though we should be discerning the signs of the times around us, and looking at things through the lens of Scripture, we're not to be seeking after signs in order to bolster our faith.

Look at what Jesus says about that...

**12:4 - *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 I don't know about you, but I like having signs. Signs help confirm things for us. When I was trying to lay off the Starbucks latte's, I decided to do my best to not drive by them on the way to the church. Well one day I had to alter my route and I'd be driving by a Starbucks. I said, Lord I don't want to stop, but if there's a parking spot out front, I'll take that as a sign from you. And sure enough, on my 8<sup>th</sup> time around the Starbucks, a spot opened up.

Jesus says it's ***a wicked and adulterous generation*** that ***seeks after a sign***.

An adulterous generation is one that is walking in unfaithfulness. They're not following God, they're not believing in Him, they've gone their own way. It's wicked in that they've hardened their heart to accepting Jesus.

These religious leaders didn't have a lack of evidence, they had a lack of belief. They willingly chose to reject Jesus.

The reason that we don't seek after signs is because we're basically saying, Jesus I need more. You've done a lot, but I still need you to keep showing Yourself and proving Yourself.

- Signs don't move us to greater faith. Look at the story of Lazarus and the rich man. **Luke 16:27–31**, *“Then he said, ‘I beg you therefore, father, that you would send him to my father’s house, <sup>28</sup> for I have five brothers, that he may testify to them, lest they also come to this place of torment.’ <sup>29</sup> Abraham said to him, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.’ <sup>30</sup> And he said, ‘No, father Abraham; but if one goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ <sup>31</sup> But he said to him, ‘If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead.’”*
- Signs may excite us, but if our faith is built on signs it's built on shaky ground. We'll constantly be wanting to see more and greater signs.

- And if signs are absent then our faith gets questioned. God doesn't want our faith built on what we need Him to continue to do, it's to be built on what He's already done, and what we already see in His Word.
- That's why **Romans 10:17**, says, *"So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God."*

Only one sign will be needed for them. It's the same sign Jesus spoke of in Matthew 12, it's the sign of the prophet Jonah. Jesus said in Matthew 12:40 that *"as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth."* This spoke of the death and resurrection of Jesus. This is all you need to know to believe. No other religion can boast such a claim. Buddhists can't speak of Buddha living today. Muslims can't claim that Mohammad is still living. Only Christianity has a living Saviour! This is the sign that puts all other belief systems to rest. Jesus is alive and because He is I can put my faith in Him and know that I have everything I need in Him. He doesn't need to do another thing. I don't need another sign to validate who He said He is. He's already validated who He is, and the work He did, through His resurrection.

We read some sobering words there at the end of vs. 4: ***He left them and departed.*** They had every opportunity to receive Jesus and enjoy the promise of life, but their unbelief put a divide between them and Jesus.

- **Hebrews 3:12–13**, *"Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God; <sup>13</sup> but exhort one another daily, while it is called "Today," lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin."*

Jesus will warn His disciples next about this deceitfulness of sin...

## 2. Disciples Question Their Own Actions – 16:5-8

**16:5-8 - *Now when His disciples had come to the other side, they had forgotten to take bread. <sup>6</sup> Then Jesus said to them, "Take heed and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees." <sup>7</sup> And they reasoned among themselves, saying, "It is because we have taken no bread." <sup>8</sup> 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?***

Jesus wanted His disciples to really understand the deception of the Pharisees and Sadducees. He tells them to beware of their leaven. This is explained later as being their doctrine; the things they are teaching. We'll get to that in a moment.

But notice how quick the disciples are to misunderstand what Jesus means and bring this down to a physical level.

They did what we are so prone to do, which is to get occupied with earthly matters and cares.

- They had forgotten to take bread with them, and they immediately think Jesus is speaking about real bread.
- They're all reasoning among themselves and trying to figure out a solution. Perhaps they're thinking that Jesus is testing them again and ready to rebuke them for not being prepared. *Where are we going to buy bread now, and how do we know if it contains Pharisee or Sadducee leaven?* This is what they're concerned about.
- They're all worried that their physical needs and their responsibility for these things is being called into question.
- We can be a lot like that. Jesus is looking to lead us into the realm of the spiritual and grow our faith, yet we remain caught up in all the fleshly worldly stuff. We can tend to live more by sight than by faith.

And Jesus knowing where they're at responds, ***O you of little faith...***

His rebuke was not because of their failure to grasp the meaning of His warning, but at their failure to understand the meaning of His presence with them.

They didn't need to be worried about physical things because Jesus has already given them permission to not worry about these things.

- **Matthew 6:31–33**, *"Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?'"*<sup>32</sup> *For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things.*<sup>33</sup> *But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you."*

With Jesus with them they should never worry about their supplies or needs.

And yet how often do we face fears over our daily provision?

We need to remember God's past faithfulness in our lives, and know that He is the same yesterday, today and forever. Jesus reminds them of His goodness...

### 3. Jesus Questions the Disciples' Awareness – 16:9-12

**16:9-12 - *Do you not yet understand, or remember the five loaves of the five thousand and how many baskets you took up? <sup>10</sup> Nor the seven loaves of the four thousand and how many large baskets you took up? <sup>11</sup> 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.*” <sup>12</sup> 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.**

Jesus has already shown so faithfully that He can provide their daily bread in miraculous ways. Just find a kid who's willing to share his lunch, and we can feed a whole city. So Jesus rebukes them for having their minds focussed on material things when Jesus wants to bring them to more important matters on spiritual things.

Then they began to understand that He was referring to ***the doctrine of the Pharisees and Sadducees***. So what is that and why refer to it as leaven?

- Remember, leaven in Scripture is used as metaphor of sin. It's fitting because a little leaven can permeate its way through the whole batch of dough. It causes it to rise or be puffed up. That's what sin is like.

So, what is the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees? It's their sinful actions, selfish motives, and erroneous teachings that you need to be careful to not be influenced by.

- Remember, the Pharisees looked holy, they looked righteous, but it was an outward act. They added to the Word of God so as to make themselves look more religious. Yet it was all a self-righteousness. A moral mask that caused them to be puffed up. It was all a pretense. Jesus said in Luke 12:1 that the leaven of the Pharisees was hypocrisy.
- The Sadducees lived in self-indulgence. They ignored the supernatural and took away from God's Word.
- These are two camps that every Christian needs to be careful not to be influenced by. Don't let self-righteousness and legalism creep in, and don't let liberalism and pursuit of self-indulgence creep in.
- Look at all that Jesus has done for you and all that He is to you. Live in Him and for Him. Don't be influenced by the things of the world but live by faith in Christ. And remember His goodness always in your life.