

The Leaven of the Pharisees

Please open your Bible to the book of Matthew 15, or turn to page _____ in the Bible under the chair in front of you.

Matthew has been showing us King Jesus and His Kingdom in this gospel account. And we've been studying the teaching and ministry of Jesus for several months now in this book. And today, we pick up the story in chapter fifteen, and we'll see a few episodes that will once again press us to consider who Jesus really is and why He is who we truly need.

Read **Matthew 15:32-16:12**

Intro

If you've ever had the feeling that you've experienced something before, then you may know the phenomenon called "Déjà vu." It's a phrase from French that means 'already seen,' as in "I feel like I've seen this before." It can happen suddenly, where you get this sense that things are familiar, but like it's happened previously. There's been a glitch in the Matrix.

But because it happens sporadically, it's hard for researchers to study it. And they estimate that over half of the population has experienced this feeling before – and it's usually younger people and tends to taper off after age 25 or 30. So maybe you have felt 'déjà vu' before or maybe you haven't. Or you've had that feeling like: I've heard this story already. Maybe even when I just read our text today, you felt that.

And here in our passage, there are a couple things that maybe feel like you've seen them before. Jesus feeds a large crowd with just a little bread and fish. And the Pharisee and Sadducees ask for a sign from heaven and Jesus tells them they'll only be given the sign of Jonah. Both of those things have already happened in Matthew's gospel (in chapter 14 and in chapter 12).

So why are they repeated here? Is it just déjà vu? What is Matthew wanting us to see about King Jesus and His Kingdom by telling us once again about these things?

Well, I believe Matthew is wanting us to see that Jesus provides the bread we need. We need Him like we need food. And maybe you noticed how the idea of bread is mentioned in different parts of our text today. Jesus feeds bread to the crowd. And then later, the disciples are worried about not having any bread. And Jesus warns them about the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees, and leaven is used to make bread, of course.

In fact, if we were to go back, we'd remember that Jesus had interacted with the Pharisees earlier in chapter 15 about their rituals around food and washing their hands. And the Canaanite woman asks for the crumbs that might fall from the master's table. So food and bread have been a theme in these sections of Matthew's gospel.

And the reason is that Matthew wants us to see and believe that **Jesus provides the true bread we need**. Over in John 6, it's even more emphatic, when Jesus will declare that He is the bread of life. Here Matthew is highlighting the need to believe that He is the one who provides what we truly need. We need to trust Him. He is our hope.

So to see that, let's take three steps through our passage this morning, and we'll make some application to our lives today along the way. So step number one...

Jesus feeds the crowd bread

This is that final section of chapter 15, verse 32-39. I've been talking about principles of Bible study with a couple of the grow groups that I'm involved with. And one of the first steps is to observe the text and try to discern what the original author intended to communicate and emphasize. And one of the things to look for is compare and contrast. Is the author comparing or contrasting elements in the text?

And yes, that's happening here. So again, earlier in Matthew's gospel, we saw Him feed a large crowd of people. At that time there were 5,000 men, besides women and children. And they had only five loaves and two fish. And after feeding the crowd, they took up twelve baskets of leftovers. And a lot of that is familiar. It sounds nearly the same. Like déjà vu.

But if we do some compare and contrast, we see that here some of the details are different. Here, there are four thousand men, besides the women and children. They had seven loaves and a few small fish. And after feeding the crowd, they took up seven baskets of broken pieces left over.

So the details are different. This is also, by the way, a good reason to trust that the original authors wrote down exactly what happened. Some people will look at this and say, "Oh, Matthew just got confused and recorded the same thing twice." Well, I would respectfully reply - that's silly. People in that day were just as smart as people are today, even if they didn't have iPhones. And Matthew is intentionally recording for us how these two events were distinct. Not to mention that Jesus Himself will say that there were two feedings. I say that to remind you that there are good reasons to trust that the gospel accounts are true and reliable sources of history. They tell us what really happened.

But the biggest contrast between these two events is the location, and so ultimately the people involved are different. As we saw last week, Jesus has come into the area of Tyre and Sidon, on the east side of the sea of Galilee. So He is in Gentile territory at this point. The first feeding was in a desolate place in a largely Jewish area. Now, Jesus is providing bread in a Gentile area. He is foreshadowing the mission of the church to go and make disciples of all nations, fulfilling what the prophets wrote.

As the God says in **Isaiah 49:6**, talking about Israel and the Messiah...
It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob
and to bring back the preserved of Israel;
I will make you as a light for the nations,
that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”

God’s heart has always been for His salvation to reach the ends of the earth. As Paul tells us in Ephesians and Colossians, the mission of God is to reconcile all things to Himself through Christ. He is working to redeem a people from every tribe, nation, and tongue. Jesus loves the whole world of people!

And that’s part of the reason that the religious leaders of the day were so upset with Him. The Pharisees and Sadducees viewed the Gentiles as unclean, as dogs. And Jesus had just rebuked them by saying that it’s not the external stuff about a person that makes them unclean, but what comes out of the heart. The Canaanite woman who we saw last week is an example of a Gentile with great faith in her heart who wrestles with Jesus and won’t let Him go until He blesses her. It’s the faith in her heart that comes out because she sees and recognizes who Jesus is. And she’s relentless.

But notice here, it’s Jesus who is relentless. Notice what He says,

Matthew 15:32

Then Jesus called his disciples to him and said, “I have compassion on the crowd because they have been with me now three days and have nothing to eat. And I am unwilling to send them away hungry, lest they faint on the way.”

Jesus says, “I have compassion on the crowd.” The word for compassion here is one of those fun Greek words. It’s *splanchnizomai*. It’s the same root as the heart or guts or inward parts. He’s saying, “I’m moved with compassion.” My heart is for these people.

And notice He also says, “I am unwilling to send them away hungry.” Now, it’s Jesus who is relentless. His heart is moved with compassion, so I must provide for these people. The woman wouldn’t let Jesus go until He blessed her, and now here, Jesus won’t let the crowd go until He blesses them.

So the point, then, of Jesus feeding this crowd of Gentiles is that His Kingdom is expansive. It moves out to those who may be on the outside and on the margins, to the people whom we might be tempted to think – they're disgusting dogs. They belong outside on the streets and not in the house. But those are the people who capture the heart of Jesus. He came for the sick, not those who believe themselves to be well.

And church, this attitude should characterize us as well. When we see the brokenness and suffering in our community – the schools which are struggling, the healthcare system which is broken for so many, the people who battle with poverty and addiction and live in a place of stress and crisis – when we see these things, do we judge? Or are we moved with compassion like Jesus? Do we move toward those who are struggling or away from them?

Listen to what Jesus says over in

Luke 14:12-14

He said also to the man who had invited him, "When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return and you be repaid. 13 But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, 14 and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just."

When we minister to those who find themselves on the outside, when we help those in need, when we are moved with compassion into action and service of others – we are never more like Jesus than in those moments. When we send and support missionaries with our prayers and finances, we are serving in line with the heart of Jesus. And He says, though they may not repay you in this life, I see your good work, and I will repay you on that final day.

Brothers and sisters, it will be worth it. So don't be stingy with the bread from Jesus. We are all in need of the bread that only He provides. Before coming to Christ, all of us were hungry and in need. We are the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And it's only in Jesus that we find the bread our souls need. We go to Him.

We see the bread and are fed. We can remember that – it rhymes! And that's what we do when we put our faith in Christ. We see the bread and are fed.

And now, our role, is to share this bread with others. As the pastor D.T. Niles from Sri Lanka said, "Evangelism is just one begger telling another where to find food."¹

¹ <https://exhibits.ptsem.edu/jamesreeblectures/48-2/d-t-niles/>

That's our mission. Helping others know God by telling them where to find food. We see the bread and are fed. Jesus is our only hope. He provides the bread we need.

So that's step one. In step two, we see that...

Jesus rebukes the religious leaders

This is found in the first several verses of chapter 16. Let's start with verse 1...

Matthew 16:1

And the Pharisees and Sadducees came, and to test him they asked him to show them a sign from heaven.

So now we have these two groups – the Pharisees and Sadducees – coming together to Jesus in order to ask for a sign. This is unusual because these guys did not normally get along. Today, there are different groups among Christians today. It might be comparable to what we call denominations today. Today, there are Baptists and Presbyterians and Methodists and on and on.

Back then, the Pharisees and the Sadducees were the two main groups among the Jewish religious leaders. The Pharisees were anti-Roman, they were diligent about keeping the Law of Moses, at least on the outside. But the Sadducees were not anti-Roman. They were wealthier and got along with the Romans. They were higher on the social ladder, and they weren't nearly as concerned with the keeping the rules and regulations of the Old Testament. They would say it was important, but not to the same degree. And they were willing to compromise to retain their power and influence.

So these groups didn't get along under normal circumstances. It'd be somewhat like the Baptists and the Methodists. Or the Baptists and the Presbyterians. Or the Baptists and the Baptists. I'm kidding of course, we are working to change that reputation.

So these two groups come together because they have a common enemy in Jesus. He's a threat to both of them. And so they come asking for a sign. And of course, Jesus has been doing signs all along. He's been healing people and casting out demons and feeding thousands with just a little bread and fish. But they doubt that He's God.

So what are they really after? Well, Matthew tells us that they came to test Him. They weren't really trying to see if Jesus was the Son of David, the Messiah prophesied about in the Old Testament. They wanted to find a reason to reject Jesus. This wasn't a question asked in good faith, truly seeking an answer.

And Jesus sees that, so listen to what He replies...

Matthew 16:2-4

He answered 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 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. **4** 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.

Jesus has a heart of compassion for the vulnerable and those on the outside. He moves toward those who are struggling. But Jesus will not play games with those who refuse to believe and try to test Him.

So Jesus says – you guys know how to understand weather patterns in the sky. You can predict when it’s going to rain. You may have heard the old proverb that says, “Red sky at night, sailor’s delight. Red sky in the morning, sailors take warning.” Well, this is like an old, old version of that.

Jesus is also being a bit punny here too. In that day, they talked about the sky as the heavens. And they’re asking Jesus for a sign from heaven. And he says, “when you look at the heavens, you know how to predict storms. But you don’t get what’s going on around you; you don’t know how to understand the signs of the times.”

So the question for us is – what does He mean with the phrase, “understand the signs of the times”?

I think some people hear that phrase and they immediately think of the signs of the end times – the wars and rumors of wars, the anti-Christ, and the beast and all of that. But here, it doesn’t seem like that’s what Jesus is talking about.

Instead, Jesus is talking about recognizing what is happening right in front of you *right now*. The ‘signs of the times’ describe the fulfillment of prophetic expectations that are happening before your eyes.

The Old Testament prophets spoke of a time when God would send a King to deliver His people, a servant who would suffer in their place, and the seed of the woman who would crush the head of the serpent. And when He comes, He would bring good news to the poor, bind up the brokenhearted, and proclaim liberty to the captives (Isa 61). He will open the eyes of the blind and bring healing (Isa 42).

So when Jesus says, you can’t interpret the signs of the times, He’s saying, “You can’t recognize that I am fulfilling all of those prophetic expectations.”

You don't see who I really am. And that's because you're *unwilling* to see me. You need to know the signs of the times to see that I am who I say I am.

And because the religious leaders refuse to see, Jesus says, you're not getting another sign from me. You **can't** see Me because you don't want to, and you **won't** see me because you're unwilling. The only sign that I'll give you is the sign of Jonah.

And what's that? What's the sign of Jonah? Well, Jonah was a prophet in the Old Testament, but if you read his story, he didn't perform any miracles in Ninevah. No, he himself was the sign. And just as Jonah was entombed in the belly of a fish for three days and nights, Jesus says, so too will I be before I rise again. The only sign left for you is my resurrection from the grave.

In just a little while, the religious leaders' growing hatred for Jesus will result in their having Him delivered over to the Romans to be crucified, despite His complete and total innocence. They will stir up the crowds against Him. And Jesus will be killed and buried in a tomb. But on the third day, Jesus will rise again. In fulfillment of prophesy, including His own words like these, Jesus will conquer the grave as a sign to all the world that He is truly the Son of God. That's the sign of Jonah.

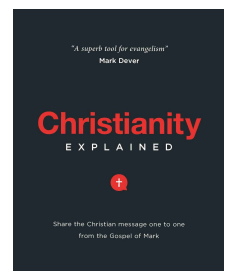
Some people today want a sign from Jesus. They say, "I would believe in God if only He would prove Himself to me. If He would just show me a sign, then I would believe."

But friend, if that's you, then let me tell you that Jesus has given you a sign – the sign of Jonah. Look at His resurrection. Look at the evidence. Look at the accounts in the gospels. Look at the historical record. Look at the words and actions of Jesus Himself. In other words, look at the signs of the times. That's what Jesus rebukes the religious leaders for – their refusal to know the signs of the times.

In a few weeks, we will celebrate the resurrection on Easter Sunday. (we really celebrate the resurrection every Sunday...). And we may have some visitors who would perhaps come to a service like that. And I hope we do have visitors because you be inviting people, right? Right Cornerstone?

Well, starting the week after Easter, we want to invite people who aren't yet Christians to investigate the claims of Jesus. That's what this study called "Christianity Explained" is all about. (show slide)

It'll be a chance to read through an account of Jesus's life in order to see what He did, what He taught, and what it means to become a Christian. So if you've been a Christian for a while, this is not for you.



But if you're interested in looking into who Jesus is, I would invite you to come. It'll be on Sunday nights at my house. If you sign up, that'll help me prepare. Or if you want to invite a friend, they are welcome to come. We're aiming at people who want to check out what Christianity is all about.

We want to help people **know the signs of the times**, as Jesus says. (Again, it rhymes...)

So step one, Jesus provides the bread we need. So see the bread and be fed. And step two, Jesus rebukes the religious leaders, so know the signs of the times. And then lastly, step three...

Jesus warns the disciples

Jesus has left this conversation with the Pharisees and Sadducees, and now He's headed toward Caesarea Philippi. And on the way, there is this somewhat humorous exchange because they totally miss what He's saying.

Matthew 16:5-7

When the disciples reached the other side, they had forgotten to bring any bread. **6** Jesus said to them, "Watch and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees." **7** And they began discussing it among themselves, saying, "We brought no bread."

So they've got this problem. They're walking along with Jesus, who they've just seen provide bread for thousands of people. And yet, they're hungry. They don't have any bread for themselves. They forgot to bring anything to eat.

And Jesus says to them, "Watch out for the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees." And that goes right over their heads. They don't get what He's saying at all. Jesus means this as a kind of parable, but they take Him super-literally. And they're now talking about it among themselves.

"Ok, so did you bring any bread? No? Ok, anyone else? No one brought bread? Well, bummers, we don't have any bread...and hey – if anyone goes to get some bread or make some, Jesus wants us to be sure that we don't use any of the leaven from the Pharisees or Sadducees for some reason..."

That's what's going on. They're totally misunderstanding His point. So it continues...

Matthew 16:8-12

But Jesus, aware of this, said, "O you of little faith, why are you discussing among yourselves the fact that you have no bread? **9** Do you not yet perceive? Do you not remember the five loaves for the five thousand, and how many baskets you gathered? **10** Or the seven loaves for the four thousand, and how many baskets you gathered? **11** How is it that you fail to understand that I did not speak about bread? 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 teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

So Jesus gives a warning here to his disciples. He asks this series of questions – do you know yet understand? Don’t you remember the leftovers we had after the crowd was fed? When I tell you to beware the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees, I’m not talking about the literal leaven used for bread.

And then they get it, Matthew says. He was talking about the *teaching* of the religious leaders. Ohhh...right....now we get it. They were struggling, but now they understand.

And so there are a couple of questions that we need to answer so that we understand as well. First, we need to ask what is the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees? Matthew doesn’t tell us explicitly here, but he’s arranged these stories so that we might see what Jesus is addressing in particular.

We just read about the feeding of the crowd with bread, and then this interaction about the religious leaders failing to know the signs of the times, and now here, Jesus warns about the leaven of those religious leaders influencing the disciples. So I think the warning is particularly about the kind of doubt that the religious leaders have against Jesus.

Don’t fall into that same kind of doubt, Jesus says. Don’t let that kind of thinking into your life, or it will grow like leaven and spread. Their rejection of me, and their false teaching about what it means to follow God will end up leading you astray.

So the point is, you need to watch out for doubt.

Watch out for Doubt

In order for us to hear this warning from Jesus, we need to understand how he’s using this word “doubt.” It may not be the same way that we talk about it.

Today, people might say, “I’m in a season of doubt.” And what they mean is that they’re struggling with the claims of the Bible – that God really cares or that His way is best. They are wanting to believe, but they’re finding it difficult to hold fast to Jesus. But the word for that in the gospels is not usually ‘doubt’ but ‘unbelief.’

So think of the story of the father who brings his son to Jesus for healing. And Jesus tells Him, “All things are possible for the one who believes.” And he says, “I believe! Help my unbelief!” In other words, I’m trying to believe, it’s just hard right now.

But there is a kind of doubt, on the other hand, that is a more willful and active denial of God and the work of Jesus. So think of the book of James where it says that we should not pray with doubt, for the one who doubts is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways. That kind of doubt is a more conscious denial that it's really going to do anything. James says, "You shouldn't just pretend to pray and expect anything from God." That's doubt.

The point is that there's a difference between wrestling with a kind of unbelief and struggling to hold fast to your faith on the one hand, and on the other hand, the kind of deliberate rejection and walking away that says "I won't believe. I doubt that Jesus is who He says He is."

It is this kind of doubting the person and work of Jesus that He is warning the disciples about here. You need to watch out for doubt. Be careful that you don't begin to follow the teachings of the Pharisees and Sadducees, lest you end up rejecting me and walking away.

So what does that mean for us today? For us to 'watch out for doubt' means that we should pay attention to the teaching and theology that we take in. You need to be aware of and discerning about the kinds of teachers and influencers that you follow.

And that means examining the preachers and teachers in the church that you listen to. That includes what you hear in our ministry (though I hope there's a degree of trust that you have for us), but also voices in the larger church. Just because someone claims to follow Christ or uses the Bible, does not mean that they are worth following.

So ask yourself, what podcasts are you taking in? Who are you following online and in social media? Are they helping you draw close to Jesus?

And I'm not saying that they all need to be biblical expositions like that's the only thing that draws us close to God. But have you asked yourself – is my taking in these things helping me love Jesus and enjoy Him? Or are they sowing doubt about who He is and His love and care for me? Are they helping strengthen my marriage or my relationships? Am I being encouraged in holiness? Or are they full of the leaven of doubt which may spread if I don't avoid it?

Brothers and sisters, watch out for doubt.

Another question that we should ask in light of this passage is this: when are you vulnerable to the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees? What are the circumstances in which it becomes easier for you to doubt?

Let me suggest that it's often those times when we fix our eyes on what we lack or we put our attention on our fears. Those are the times when our faith struggles.

Look at what Jesus says in verse eight...

Matthew 16:8

But Jesus, aware of this, said, "O you of little faith, why are you discussing among yourselves the fact that you have no bread?"

He says, "O you of little faith..." We've heard Jesus say this exact phrase before in Matthew's gospel. And it comes at times in which Jesus is warning his followers about putting their focus on temporary, earthly things, and not the eternal and heavenly truth about Him.

So for example, in Matthew 6 in the sermon on the mount, Jesus is speaking about not being anxious about the Lord's provision, and He says,

Matthew 6:30

But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?"

It's when we are putting our eyes on the temporary and earthly, like what we're going to wear or who is going to feed us, that we have little faith.

Or over in Matthew 8, when the disciples are caught in a storm on a boat out at sea, and the disciples are afraid, thinking they're going to die. But Jesus is asleep. And when they wake Him, Jesus says,

Matthew 8:26

And he said to them, "Why are you afraid, O you of little faith?" Then he rose and rebuked the winds and the sea, and there was a great calm.

When they're looking at the storm, their faith struggles. Once again, over in Matthew 14, when Jesus walks to the disciples on the water, and Peter gets out and walks to him, he's doing great until he puts his focus on the wind and becomes afraid and begins to sink. And Jesus says, "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?"

You see, it's when our circumstances are hard. When we're hungry and forgot to bring bread. When we're worried about our finances. When the storm is raging, and we see the wind and the waves. It's in those times that we are most tempted to doubt.

What are those times in your life? Is it when that bill comes in the mail? When you press submit on that assignment? When you send that email to your boss? When you're

waiting for the test results from the doctor? It's when our circumstances are hard that we can be tempted to doubt.

And so when Jesus tells us to watch out for doubt, He is calling us to fix our eyes on Him. have faith! Trust that God has this.

So don't ignore the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees. It's still a temptation today. Instead, go to Jesus. He is the only source of life. He provides the bread we need. He is our only hope. That's what these passages are teaching us.

We should see the bread and be fed.
We should know the signs of the times.
We should watch out for doubt.

(It's like I'm a poet and didn't know it.)

Friends, in this section, Matthew is calling us once again to see and believe on Jesus. He provides the bread we need. And if it sounds like this is the same message over and over, then that's the best kind of déjà vu. It is the good news of the gospel. And it's our only hope.

Let's pray...