



“The Leaven Warning”

Matthew 16:1–12

The Authority of the King

Introduction:

Matthew 16:1–12 – “The Pharisees and Sadducees came up, and testing Jesus, they asked Him to show them a sign from heaven. But He replied to them, ‘When it is evening, you say, ‘It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.’ And in the morning, ‘There will be a storm today, for the sky is red and threatening.’ Do you know how to discern the appearance of the sky, but cannot discern the signs of the times? An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign; and a sign will not be given it, except the sign of Jonah.’ And He left them and went away. And the disciples came to the other side of the sea, but they had forgotten to bring any bread. And Jesus said to them, ‘Watch out and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.’ They began to discuss this among themselves, saying, ‘He said that because we did not bring any bread.’ But Jesus, aware of this, said, ‘You men of little faith, why do you discuss among yourselves that you have no bread? Do you not yet understand or remember the five loaves of the five thousand, and how many baskets full you picked up? Or the seven loaves of the four thousand, and how many large baskets full you picked up? How is it that you do not understand that I did not speak to you concerning bread? But beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.’ Then they understood that He did not say to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.”

1. An Unholy Test (vv. 1–4)

Unusual Facilitators with an Unreasonable Demand (v. 1) “The Pharisees and Sadducees came up, and testing Jesus, they asked Him to show them a sign from heaven.”

The Pharisees “the serious”—Bible-centered—conservative

The Sadducees “the sophisticated”—temple-centered—liberal

The two groups set aside their differences and banded together for their mutual hate for Jesus.

Unyielding Response (vv. 2–4) “But He replied to them, ‘When it is evening, you say, ‘It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.’ And in the morning, ‘There will be a storm today, for the sky is red and threatening.’ Do you know how to discern the appearance of the sky, but cannot discern the signs of the times? An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign; and a sign will not be given it, except the sign of Jonah.”

“Red sky at night, sailor’s delight. Red sky at morning, sailor’s warning.”

Seeing is not always believing.

John 20:29 – “Jesus said to him, ‘Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.’”

The Sign of Jonah

Matthew 12:40 – “For just 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.”

2. A Misguided Interpretation (vv. 5–7)

Spiritual Warning (vv. 5–6) – “And He left them and went away. And the disciples came to the other side of the sea, but they had forgotten to bring any bread. And Jesus said to them, ‘Watch out and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.’”

Leaven – fermented substance that causes dough to rise. Corrupting substance; pervasive by nature.
(1 Corinthians 5:6; Galatians 5:9)

Physical Focus (v. 7) – “They began to discuss this among themselves, saying, ‘He said that because we did not bring any bread.’”

Time and time again we see the words of Jesus misconstrued.

Spiritual birth vs. Physical birth (John 3:4)

Living water vs. Physical water (John 4:11)

Bread of life vs. Physical flesh (John 6:51–52)

3. A Justified Correction (vv. 8–10)

Faith Lacking (v. 8) – “But Jesus, aware of this, said, ‘You men of little faith, why do you discuss among yourselves that you have no bread?’”

Faith Restored (vv. 9–10) – “Do you not yet understand or remember the five loaves of the five thousand, and how many baskets full you picked up? Or the seven loaves of the four thousand, and how many large baskets full you picked up?”

4. The Dangerous Teachings (vv. 11–12)

(vv. 11–12) – “‘How is it that you do not understand that I did not speak to you concerning bread? But beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.’ Then they understood that He did not say to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.”

“teaching” – *didachē* – doctrine

Romans 16:17 – “I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine [*didachē*] that you have been taught; avoid them.”

The doctrine of the Serious Pharisees was *legalism*.

The doctrine of the Sophisticated Sadducees was *liberalism*.

Conclusion:

Jesus’ leaven warning is in all three synoptic gospels, each with a slightly different emphasis.

-Mark has a political lean. Mark 8:15 – “...beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod.”

-Luke has an ethical lean. Luke 12:1 – “Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy.”

-Matthew has a doctrinal lean. Matthew 16:12 – “...beware of ...the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.”

1 Peter 3:15 – “...but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect.”

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What “sign of the times” did Jesus think the Pharisees and Sadducees should have been able to interpret?
(See Matthew 9:32–34; 15:31)
2. What are followers of Jesus to understand and remember about the feeding of the five and four thousand?
3. What is the danger of a little leaven (incorrect doctrine) in our lives?
4. What “superconservative” or “supermodern” doctrines may we have to be aware of in our day?