

**Jesus Warns about the Pharisees and Sadducees**  
**Matthew 16:5-12**  
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Matthew 16 continues the theme of opposition to Jesus by the religious leaders, leading Jesus to turn away from these leaders and to focus His ministry on His disciples as He enters the final stage of His public ministry, which culminates in the crucifixion. As the Jews demonstrate unresponsiveness toward His teaching, we have seen the Gentiles demonstrating faith in Jesus with the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15:21-28. The feeding of the four thousand in Matthew 15:32-38 was among those who were primarily Gentiles. This growing rejection by the Jews, as represented by the joint opposition by the Pharisees and Sadducees, and acceptance by the Gentiles, will lead Jesus to reveal to His disciples the work of God in the church (Matthew 16:18), as the gospel will go to the Gentiles.

**The circumstance (16:5)**

Matthew's description of the departure across the Sea of Galilee is a bit unclear. Matthew 16:4 describes Jesus as leaving the Pharisees and Sadducees, with verse five stating the disciples came to the other side. This loosely implies that He left by himself and the disciples followed. The parallel passage in Mark 8:13-14 also specifies Jesus as embarking before discussing the disciples. So it is more than possible that the disciples followed Jesus in a boat. However, this understanding depends on whether the pronoun "they" in verse five only refers to the disciples, or also includes Jesus as well.

Since the disciples "*came to the other side of the sea,*" they apparently crossed the Sea of Galilee. They were off of the eastern coast of the sea when Jesus fed the four thousand, before traveling to the Jewish western coast (Matthew 15:39), where He encountered the Pharisees and Sadducees. So in Matthew 16:5 they return to the eastern coast of the sea, in Gentile territory, before heading north to Caesarea Philippi (Matthew 16:13).

The disciples "*had forgotten to bring any bread.*" This could be because they needed to depart quickly in order to follow Jesus in their boat. Mark 8:14 notes that they only had one loaf of bread with them, "*And they had forgotten to take bread, and did not have more than one loaf in the boat with them.*" This is not a discrepancy since only one loaf was wholly inadequate to feed all thirteen of the travelers. This piece of information would become the catalyst for the teaching of Jesus in this section.

## **The caution (16:6)**

Jesus was aware that the disciples forgot to bring bread and used this as a teaching opportunity for them. He commands His disciples to (1) “*watch out*” and (2) “*beware*.” These are not quite synonymous since the first refers to always being on the alert, while the second speaks to the proper response while being alert.

Mark 8:15 records Jesus as saying, “*Watch out! Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod.*” In Mark’s Gospel, the warning regarding the Sadducees has been replaced by the warning regarding Herod. Herod did not pose a personal threat in his teaching, this was more through his political leverage over the Jews through the Herodians. Earlier in Mark 3:6, the Pharisees and the Herodians joined in a plot to kill Jesus.

Therefore, there are three groups that Jesus exhorted His disciples to beware of, the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and the Herodians. The Herodians were a distinct sect who were ardent supporters of the Herodian dynasty. In the area of Galilee, they would be loyal to Herod Antipas, who would behead John the Baptist (Matthew 14:1-12) and mock Jesus (Luke 23:7-12).

The Herodians were not aligned with either the Sadducees or the Pharisees. They were sympathetic with the desire to be freed from Roman oppression but were far more pragmatic with the Herods to compromise with the Romans to preserve their standing in the society. They were not active in the temple like the Sadducees nor involved in teaching the Law like the Pharisees, but desired the more secular rule of a descendant of King Herod. They gained their position in the society through their involvement with the Herodian dynasty rather than through the religious life of the Jews.

Jesus likened the influence of these groups to “leaven.” Just as leaven, or yeast, is very small, it gradually has a great effect upon the dough. Leaven is used repeatedly in the Scripture as the spread of evil (Exodus 34:25; Leviticus 2:11; 1 Corinthians 5:6-8). So too with the influence of these groups upon the people. Their influence was corrupting the Jews, even though they were not large in number. According to the ancient Jewish historian Josephus, there were about 6,000 Pharisees and substantially less Sadducees among the roughly four million Jewish residents of Judea. But they had an oversized impact upon the thinking and actions of the Jews of Jesus’ day. Like leaven, their influence affected the entire nation.

### **The conversation (16:7)**

The disciples responded to Jesus' warning by taking His words literally, "*saying, He said that because we did not bring any bread.*" However, Jesus was speaking metaphorically, not literally. They continued to focus on their concern that they had forgotten to bring any bread (16:5). Mark 8:16 echoes these same words of concern regarding forgetting to bring any bread.

The concern over forgetting bread is remarkable in light of the feeding of the 4,000 and 5,000 without sufficient bread. Yet the disciples continued to view themselves as dependent upon their own ability to provide for themselves.

It is also notable that their discussion was "*among themselves.*" They did not consider to include Jesus in their discussion, although He was aware of what they were saying (16:8). They concluded their problem was their failing to bring a provision for themselves, completely missing the point that Jesus was making about the Pharisees and Sadducees.

It is unclear why the disciples would have taken Jesus' words literally. What could be their concern about the bread that belonged to the Pharisees and Sadducees? Because they had forgotten to take any bread with them, were they thinking that Jesus was warning them to not eat the bread of these religious leaders? This becomes more perplexing when we take into account their departure from the Jewish side of the Sea of Galilee, thus leaving the Pharisees and Sadducees behind. There seemed to be no real possibility of eating the actual bread of the Pharisees and Sadducees at the other side of the sea.

This then appears to be another incident of the disciples missing the teaching of Jesus so badly that they took His words to warn them against something that was not an actual threat. It is unlikely that the bread of the Pharisees and Sadducees posed any real physical danger to anyone. Therefore their conversation surrounded the earthly, material issues that were not only fleeting but were of limited danger.

The disciples then lacked both the understanding to perceive what Jesus meant by the metaphorical sense of "*the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees,*" and also they lacked faith in the ability of Jesus to once again provide for their needs. Jesus would then direct them toward the intent for His warning about the Pharisees and Sadducees.

### **The correction (16:8-11)**

Jesus knew about their conversation, most likely because He overheard them. He addressed His awareness of their confusion with the rebuke regarding their faith, *“You men of little faith.”* He then asked a rhetorical question about why they were discussing their lack of bread.

Jesus had earlier used the term *“you of little faith”* to describe those who doubt His ability. Matthew 6:30 describes those with little faith to trust that God would provide for necessary clothing, *“But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the furnace, will He not much more clothe you? You of little faith!”* Jesus also rebuked the disciples for not trusting His ability to deliver them from a storm when *“He said to them, ‘Why are you afraid, you men of little faith?’ Then He got up and rebuked the winds and the sea, and it became perfectly calm”* (Matthew 8:26). Similarly, Jesus rebuked Peter when he began to sink after walking with Jesus on the water, *“Immediately Jesus stretched out His hand and took hold of him, and said to him, ‘You of little faith, why did you doubt?’ When they got into the boat, the wind stopped.”* (Matthew 14:31-32).

Therefore, Jesus rebuked them again for their littleness of faith by not trusting His ability to provide for their physical need of food. However, Jesus said this in light of their discussion among themselves that they had not bread. This was not the point that Jesus initiated by His warning.

The disciples had two problems. First was their little faith, demonstrated by their concern about forgetting to bring bread and ignoring Jesus’ ability to provide for them. Secondly, they were oblivious to the real danger that Jesus told them to be on watch against.

The rest of Jesus’ words to His disciples addressed both of these issues, not only their lack of faith in His ability to abundantly provide for their needs. This is clear from Matthew 16:11, *“How is it that you do not understand that I did not speak to you concerning bread.”* Therefore, Jesus’ reminder of the feeding of the five thousand in verse nine and of the feeding of the four thousand in verse ten was spoken to not only teach them to not doubt but to teach them about His metaphorical meaning of the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees. After reminding them of these two feeding miracles, Jesus expected the disciples to understand that He was not speaking about literal bread. Furthermore, Matthew 16:12 informs us that what He said in verses nine and ten was indeed effective to bring understanding to the disciples that He was not speaking about literal bread of the religious leaders.

But what was it about Matthew 16:9-10 that made the disciples aware of the real point that Jesus was making? On the surface, it appears that Jesus is only reminding them of the prior two instances of His miraculous ability to provide for their needs, thus only addressing the littleness of their faith in His power to provide for them.

When we observe verses nine and ten, we can see the emphasis that Jesus placed upon the number of baskets full that they picked up. This seemingly small detail in both of the feeding miracles is pointed out by Jesus and He certainly expected the disciples to remember how many baskets were picked up. Furthermore, Jesus did not make a general statement about their being an abundance of leftovers. Rather, He divided out each miracle and addressed each one specifically.

Another important observation is that the word for “baskets” is not the same word in verse 9 and in verse 10. Matthew 16:9 uses the term for “basket” (KOPHINOUS), which describes a basket that was used by Jewish people to carry kosher food. Matthew 16:10 uses the Greek word for “basket” (SPYRIDAS) that describes what was woven of rushes, or plants from marshes, and used to carry fish and other food in the Roman empire (cf. Acts 9:25). This distinction reflects the same difference between the word used for baskets in each of the feeding miracles. The feeding of the five thousand described the leftovers being gathered and placed into a Jewish basket (Matthew 14:20) and the feeding of the four thousand described the leftovers being gathered and placed into a Gentile basket (Matthew 15:37). This distinction between the type of baskets that were used would be expected since the feeding of the 5,000 was near Bethsaida, an area with many Jews, while the feeding of the 4,000 was in Decapolis, which was predominantly Gentile.

Why would these details cause the disciples to understand that Jesus did not speak about literal bread? Jesus’s words would have caused them to recall an important detail in the two feedings, when He asked about how many loaves baskets full of leftover bread was picked up. The Jewish multitude of 5,000 started with five loaves of bread (Matthew 14:19) and left twelve baskets of bread while the Gentile multitude of 4,000 started with seven loaves of bread (Matthew 15:36) and left seven baskets of bread. The Gentile crowd had consumed relatively more of the available bread than the Jewish crowd did.

This responsiveness of the Gentiles is consistent with the theme of Jewish rejection, epitomized by the Pharisees and Sadducees, and Gentile acceptance of Jesus, epitomized by the Canaanite woman (Matthew 15:21-28). The disciples had traveled with Jesus to Gentile areas and had seen this contrast personally.

When the disciples recognized that leftover baskets were metaphorically representative of the responsiveness of the Gentiles and the resistance of the Jews, it would have reminded them of the recent opposition of the Pharisees and Sadducees to Jesus in Matthew 16:1-4. Just as the bread in the miraculous feeding was used by Jesus as a symbol of greater resistance by the Jews to Jesus, so the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees was used as a symbol of greater resistance against Jesus. This symbolism is what allowed the disciples to see the metaphor of the leaven as referring to the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

### **The comprehension (16:12)**

Matthew 16:12 states that the disciples “*understood that He did not say to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.*” They had been growing in their perception of the reality that the religious leaders of the nation did not represent God, but rather were a danger to spiritual truth. The symbol of leaven communicated the nature of the spread of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

Just as a small amount of leaven will transform an entire lump of dough into bread, so too a relatively small number of Pharisees and Sadducees had corrupted an entire generation of Jews (Matthew 16:4). Those who were His own did not receive Him (John 1:11) because they were not alert to the fact that the teaching of the Pharisees had invalidated the word of God for the sake of their tradition (Matthew 15:6). They did so because “THIS PEOPLE HONORS ME WITH THEIR LIPS, BUT THEIR HEART IS FAR AWAY FROM ME. BUT IN VAIN DO THEY WORSHIP ME, TEACHING AS DOCTRINES THE PRECEPTS OF MEN.” (Matthew 15:8-9). They seated themselves in the chair of Moses (Matthew 23:1), as the authority of instruction for the nation, but in this role they were unfaithful to the word of God and they served themselves.

### **Conclusion**

This warning by Jesus to “*Watch out and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees*” is as meaningful today as it was for the disciples. While the Pharisees and Sadducees have long passed into the annals of history, their danger has persisted. Those who claim to represent God and His revelation, but supplant the word of God with the precepts of men abound in various forms. Some modern day prophets overtly declare themselves speaking from God. But, more commonly, leaders who present themselves to be the arbiter of truth for the church can become the functional equivalent of modern day Pharisees.

Our allegiance as Christians is to the Lord Jesus Christ, as revealed by the Holy Spirit through God's word. To put anything, secular or religious, person or institution, equal to Him is idolatry. We cannot fear the opinions of men, regardless of their external piety, but we must fear God, who *"is able to destroy both soul and body in hell"* (Matthew 10:28).

This leverage that the Pharisees and Sadducees held as the teachers and leaders of Israel is what made Jesus warn the disciples to beware of their leaven. Even the disciples showed fear of these leaders when they told Jesus, *"Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard your statement"* (Matthew 15:12). This intimidation led to the Jews accepting the traditions of men, even when the word of God was being invalidated. Rather than receiving *"the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so,"* as the Bereans did when Paul visited them in Acts 17:11, the Jews followed the traditions of the Pharisees and the Sadducees uncritically.

Today, the information age has allowed the access that religious entities have to our attention to be greater than ever. In our natural inclination toward tribalism, we can become very attached to those who sound authoritative in their teaching. At times, those we have learned the Bible from may wander from the very truth they once taught. We will scrutinize those who are not in our camp without hesitation but will dismiss greater failures from those we follow. This tendency leads to an inability, even an unwillingness, to *"watch out and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees."*

The reason we must *"watch our and beware"* is because the legalism of the Pharisees is appealing and persuasive. It is this appeal to our flesh that makes this works-oriented teaching so insidious. We want to be able to take credit for our righteousness and desire the approval of those in religious authority. When people exalt their opinions to the level of Scripture, this not only invalidates the word of God, it feeds the appetite for an external, man-centered form of godliness that is devoid of spiritual power (cf. Colossians 2:20-23; 2 Timothy 3:5). This leads to the boastful pride of life (1 John 2:16-17; contra Ephesians 2:8-9; 2 Corinthians 10:17).

This outward appearance of righteousness serves our flesh, not the Lord, who taught us to *"Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them, otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven"* (Matthew 6:1). There is no end to religious schemes that are designed to produce supposed godliness, which are useless to bring *"the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith"* (Philippians 3:9; cf. Romans 3:21-26). We must *"beware and watch out"* for all these ways that people try to produce man-made righteousness.