

“LISTEN CAREFULLY”
MATTHEW 16:1-12

We are in the midst of yet another national pandemic. This pandemic is not biological but social, and it is having a devastating effect upon relationships in nearly every community and institution. It is running amok in the political arena, it is surging in race relations, and it is spreading rapidly in some of the institutions that have typically been more resilient to it, like the family and the church. It has resulted in the disintegration of tolerance, the evaporation of civility, and the proliferation of gullibility. It has put both the art of listening and the craft of conversation at the top of the list of endangered skills.

The pandemic to which I am referring is *carelessness in the way we process information*. And its symptoms typically manifest itself like this: When someone gives a speech or presents some data or makes a comment, instead of listening carefully, instead of asking questions for clarification, instead of taking time to thoroughly evaluate and investigate what is being said, we react. We immediately make assumptions, jump to conclusions, or interpret through our own biased narrative. And then we label and categorize and dismiss and castigate.

As I said, this pandemic is having devastating affects upon relationships, including the family and the church. And the fact that the church is being infected by it is extremely concerning to the Lord of the church because this is a pandemic to which disciples of Jesus ought to be immune. It is the very antithesis of who we are and what our Lord has made us. It violates the most basic principle of our identity as followers of Christ, which is love. And it contradicts the clear instruction of Jesus in his Word.

We are going to look at a story that highlights what Jesus thinks and feels about this problem, and then we are going to consider some practical instruction about how to cure this pandemic. It's a two-part story, the first of which is found in **Matthew 16:1**. *¹ And the Pharisees and Sadducees came, and to test Him they asked Him to show them a sign from heaven.*

As you know by now, the religious leaders of Judaism were out to get Jesus. They were jealous of His popularity and threatened by His influence. They were also upset (and embarrassed) that He saw through their spiritual charades, and that He had called them out publicly on several occasions for their hypocrisy and duplicity.

On this occasion two groups of religious leaders confronted Him that were strange bedfellows. We know about the Pharisees and their strict observance of the law, both the written law of Moses, and the oral traditions of men. They were the ultra-conservative wing of Judaism. The Sadducees, on the other hand, were liberals, rejecting many of the oral traditions that Pharisees held so dear, and denying some of the doctrines that Scripture clearly taught, like the resurrection of the dead. Comprised of wealthy aristocrats, the Sadducees were more politically minded than the Pharisees, and often promoted a social agenda that included compromising with the Roman government, something the Pharisees would never consider doing.

Thus, Pharisees and Sadducees had little in common, and were wary if not hostile to each other. They rarely agreed on anything and spent much of their time arguing and putting each other down.

But when it came to Jesus, they were united in their opposition to Him. Both groups agreed that it was in the best interest of Judaism (and their respective roles in Judaism) to publicly discredit Him and make Him go away. So, they came to Him together and asked Him

to show them a sign from heaven. This is not the first time that Jesus was asked to produce a sign. Earlier in Matthew 12, Pharisees and scribes had demanded a sign to prove the divine origin of Jesus' power to expel demons (12:38-39).

But this time Matthew explicitly says that they came to "test" Jesus. That word means to try to trap, or to attempt to catch in a mistake (Loew, Nida). Apparently, they did not think that He could or would prove Himself by producing a sign from heaven (which refers to a miracle that proves beyond a shadow of a doubt that God was with Him and in Him).

But Jesus does not take the bait. Instead He comments on their woeful lack of spiritual perceptivity. Look at **verse 2-3**. ² *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.*

Attempts to predict the weather are as old as time, and even in the ancient world, before barometers and satellites, there were indications from the sky itself that might be helpful. The color of the sky at the time day was one such sign. Jesus was identifying a well-known belief in Palestine at the time, which has been preserved in a contemporary proverb: "Red sky in the morning, sailors take warning. Red sky at night, sailors delight."

Jesus says, "If you religious leaders want to know what the weather is going to be like on any given day, you look at the sky for clues. Unless you are colorblind, it doesn't take a lot of expertise to figure that out. But ironically, though you are supposed "experts" on the Scriptures, you've completely missed the clues that point to the signs of the times."

What were those clues? The Old Testament is full of prophecies that predicted what Messiah would be like and what He would do when He arrived on earth. For example, when Jesus was in Nazareth, He quoted Isaiah 61:1-2 and said that it was a reference to Him.

*"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because He has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives
and recovering of sight to the blind,
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."*

When John the Baptist sent His disciples to find out if Jesus was really the One who was to come, Jesus said to them, *"Go tell John what you hear and see: ⁵ the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them"* (Matt. 11:4-5).

Jesus had done plenty to prove that He was the Messiah. It's just that the religious leaders were not paying attention. They were not listening carefully, they were not evaluating what He was saying and doing in the light of Scripture, and they were not interpreting things objectively. Instead, they reacted. And it was careless of them. It caused them to make wrong assumptions and jump to wrong conclusions, and as a result, reject God's provision for them.

And that rejection was an indication of their spiritual bankruptcy. Look at **verse 4**. [Jesus said,] 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 repeats almost word for word what He told the scribes and Pharisees in Matthew 12. They are an evil and adulterous generation, meaning that they turned away from what is truly good and right, and betrayed the very one they profess to worship and obey. As a result,

they forfeited their opportunity to participate in the kingdom and its blessings.

I want to emphasize that this forfeiture was because they came to Jesus with their minds already made up about Him and with ulterior motives. They did not come as sincere seekers of the truth with humble hearts; they came as hypocritical know-it-alls with hard hearts. And that attitude gets you nothing from God.

Let's move on to part two of this story. **Verses 5-7.** *⁵ 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."*

Jesus and His disciples left where they were on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee near Magdala, and went to the other side of the lake, which would likely have been in the general vicinity of where Jesus had fed the five thousand a few months before. Ironically, after they arrived, the disciples discovered that they had forgotten to bring bread with them. Jesus apparently heard them discussing it, and then said to them, *"Watch and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees."*

This statement was confusing to the disciples and got them to wondering. It's somewhat related to their discussion among themselves about not having brought any bread, but they couldn't make the connection to the Pharisees and Sadducees. Was Jesus commenting on bread He had seen the Pharisees and Sadducees holding or eating when they had their recent encounter? Was He suggesting that their encounter with these religious leaders had so flustered the disciples that it caused them to forget to bring bread on their journey?

While they were whispering to each other about this, Jesus continued, **verses 8-11.** *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? 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."*

I think it is appropriate to interpret Jesus' attitude toward His disciples as one of frustration. He was frustrated by their lack of faith and their lack of perceptivity. Verse 8, "O you of little faith!" Verse 9, "Do you not yet perceive?" Verse 11, "How is it that you fail to understand...?"

Jesus is frustrated by their lack of critical thinking skills regarding events and conversations that had just happened. First, they should have known that a bread shortage (hunger) was not a problem for Jesus. In the vicinity of where they were now talking, Jesus had turned five loaves and two fish into a satisfying meal for thousands. And they had just seen Him do the same thing in the Decapolis a few days before.

"This is not a matter of forgetting to bring bread as if we're going to go hungry," says Jesus, "and you of all people should know that. How many times do I have to prove that bread is not a problem for the Son of Man, O you of little faith?"

Second, they should have been able to discern the real problem. They had just witnessed a tense conversation between Jesus and the Pharisees and Sadducees that was unresolved. The leaders of Judaism had come away from their conversation with Jesus in their same state of unbelief and hard-heartedness with just as much (if not more) hostility toward Him.

Was that a problem? Yes! Why? Because they were the esteemed teachers of the

Scriptures among the Jews. And if *they* did not see Jesus in the Scriptures, how could they lead others to see Him? If *they* rejected Jesus as Messiah, they would try to persuade others to reject Him, too. And this would have a detrimental effect upon the lost sheep of Israel. Many would stay in their lost condition.

In other words, the Pharisees and Sadducees were a barrier to people partaking of the Bread of life. Jesus repeats Himself. *“Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.”*

When Jesus made this statement, leaven (or yeast) had been used in bread for at least two thousand years. The first known reference to leaven in bread comes from Egypt, and though it is not known precisely how it came to be used in bread, it is not hard to imagine that it happened purely by accident. Wild yeast is a single-cell sugar fungus that floats through the air and seeks warm, moist surfaces upon which to settle and feed. Bread dough that has been left to sit spontaneously attracts these wild yeast spores. After sitting on the surface of the dough for a while they react with the mixture of water and wheat flour and begin to ferment, which causes the dough to swell to three or four times its original size.

People in the ancient world soon learned that the texture and flavor of leavened bread was preferable to flat bread, and so they learned to save and store a small portion of each batch of leavened dough and combine it with every subsequent batch of dough that was made. We call it “starter.”

So, why does Jesus compare something about the Pharisees and Sadducees to leaven? Two reasons, I think. First, leaven is *insidious*. When it first comes into contact with the dough it appears to be harmless; it appears to be benign. But it spreads slowly, subtly, and gradually to make drastic changes in the composition of the bread. Second, leaven is *pervasive*. It affects the entire batch of dough. No part of that dough is unaffected by it.

So, what, specifically, is the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees that Jesus was talking about? We find out in **verse 12**. ¹² *Then [the disciples] understood that He did not tell them to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.*

Though the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees was quite different from each other, both had this in common: It was saturated with their own self-serving biases. They emphasized things they liked, and discarded things they didn't like. They twisted truth in order to promote their status in the community—that made them appear to be righteous—and rejected truth that revealed their unrighteousness and exposed their spiritual bankruptcy. Most of all, they denied the clear teaching of Scripture about the Messiah, even when those Scriptures were fulfilled right before their eyes. And they did this because they hated Jesus. Their personal animosity prevented them from being objective.

But the real problem with this false teaching is that when someone has been given a platform, which the Pharisees and Sadducees had, the teaching spreads to others so that whole community can be affected by it. It's like yeast, that slowly, insidiously works itself through the whole lump of dough.

And Jesus says to His disciples, “Beware!”

So, what is the application from this story for our lives? First, I want to suggest to you that these two incidents have something in common. Jesus was rebuking both the religious leaders and the disciples for not paying careful attention to His words. The Pharisees and Sadducees were dismissive of His written word, which predicted what He would be like and what He would do. The disciples were simply lazy with Jesus' words, which led them to jump to conclusions and miss what He was saying.

Here is the application: Discipleship requires the use of critical thinking skills. We must

use our brains and exercise mental effort. If we do not, we will miss things that are right in front of us, we will misinterpret, we will stay stuck in lazy or destructive thought patterns, and we will be vulnerable to false teaching.

Let me identify some components of critical thinking skills that are necessary for effective discipleship. First, we must evaluate the present in light of previous events or circumstances. Why did Jesus rebuke the disciples for their lack of faith? Because they were so caught up in their present dilemma of not having brought bread for their journey that they forgot that Jesus had proven twice that He could miraculously provide bread whenever at will.

Why did Jesus rebuke them for not understanding when He told them to be aware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees? Because they had just come from an unpleasant encounter with them, and they should have known that Jesus was referring to that encounter, not to their anticipated hunger.

The disciples' problem was that they were so focused on their present dilemma that it caused them to have a knee-jerk reaction. And their reaction was void of faith and void of spiritual perception. And if one does not have faith or spiritual perception one cannot do anything for the Lord.

People who chronically worry fit into this category. So do people who wallow in shame or self-pity. They are not remembering God's promises, or God's forgiveness, or God's past provision. Instead they are focusing on themselves and are allowing their present problem to distort reality.

Here is another component of critical thinking: Paying careful attention to words. We do not know if Jesus ever engaged in small talk about the weather or about food or some other insignificant thing. But maybe He did, and they thought He was mindlessly commenting when He said, "Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees." However, it seems that instead of mumbling to themselves, "I think He must be commenting on our failure to bring bread on the journey," they should have just asked Him, "Lord, what do you mean? Can you explain this to us?"

I said at the beginning of this message that we are in a pandemic in which when someone gives a speech or presents some data or makes a comment, instead of listening carefully, or asking questions for clarification, or taking time to thoroughly evaluate what is being said, we react. We make assumptions, jump to conclusions, or interpret through our own biased narrative.

Disciples of Jesus cannot do that. People are too important. The stakes are too high. We have to listen well, and part of listening well is paying attention to every word, and not assuming that the speaker's definitions of words match our own definitions.

Another component of critical thinking skill is understanding spiritual dynamics. For example, if we are having a conversation with an unbeliever about Jesus and the Gospel, it is pointless to get frustrated with him/her if they are not persuaded by our presentation. It may also be wrong to conclude that our presentation was somehow flawed because we failed to persuade them. The New Testament says that the god of this world (Satan) has blinded the minds of unbelievers so that they cannot understand the gospel (2 Cor. 4:4). The Holy Spirit must first open their spiritual eyes.

Furthermore, there is an admonition in 2 Timothy that has been tremendously helpful to me when having conversations with quarrelsome people. Paul says, ²³ *"Have nothing to do with foolish, ignorant controversies; you know that they breed quarrels."* ²⁴ *"And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil,*

²⁵correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, ²⁶and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will” (2:23-26).

How do people get in a pattern of being argumentative and divisive? They get entrapped by the devil so that they can do his will. What is his will? To divide and alienate. Keep that in mind as you think what is going on today in our culture. How are people released from that trap? God may grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth.

Whenever we are having conversations about Scripture or spiritual things, we need to understand that there are spiritual dynamics that will have bearing on the conversation.

Finally, we must use critical thinking skills in order to discern truth from error. False teaching comes in many forms, and not all of it is obvious to the average listener. Some of it sounds perfectly logical, some of it is couched in humor, some of it is presented by winsome spokespersons, and some of it is accompanied by apparent signs and wonders. That is why false teaching is like leaven; it is subtle, sly, insidious.

But all false teaching is destructive, and we must be on guard against it. The only way I know to do that is know the Word of God well enough that when you hear false teaching you can identify it because it either contradicts what is recorded in Scripture, or it is not found in Scripture. Oh, false teachers love to use Scripture, just like Satan used Scripture to tempt Jesus. But they always take it out of context or misinterpret God’s intended meaning.

We must be careful listeners. We must pay attention to words. We must evaluate and investigate statements and teachings, being sure to understand definitions and other nuances. This requires vigilance and rigorous mental effort. But because people’s eternal destinies are at stake, it is well worth the effort.

Listen Carefully **Matthew 16:1-12**

Main Idea: *Disciples of Jesus must use their critical thinking skills*

Jesus converses with religious leaders (1-4)

Strange bedfellows ask for a sign (1)

Jesus refuses to give them a sign (2-4)

They can read the sky and predict the weather

They cannot read the “signs of the times”

The request reveals their spiritual bankruptcy

Jesus converses with His disciples about bread (5-12)

The disciples forget to take bread on their journey (5)

Jesus warns of the leaven of Pharisees & Sadducees (6)

The disciples misunderstand Jesus (7)

Jesus is frustrated by their lack of perceptivity (8-11)

They should have known that a bread shortage (hunger) is not a problem for Jesus (8-10)

They should have known that the Pharisees and Sadducees are a threat to the Bread of life (11)

The disciples finally understand (12)

Application

Every word of Jesus with spiritual significance

Discipleship requires the use of critical thinking skills

Remembering previous events/conversations

Paying careful attention to words

Understanding spiritual dynamics

Refusing to jump to conclusions

Discerning truth and error