

Sign-Seeking Skeptics and Slow-Learning Disciples

Matt.16:1-12

Intro. In some respects, the faith we gather to celebrate and encourage is a mysterious thing. We wonder how the Syrophenician woman of **chap.15** would so readily acknowledge Jesus as Son of David and call Him, **Lord**. She wasn't raised to believe in the true God. Her life was immersed in a culture of religious confusion and immorality. But despite all these strikes against her, she came to Jesus believing He was **Lord** with power to deliver her daughter from demon possession. And Jesus didn't turn her away. He said in **Jn. 6:17**, **All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away.**

On the other side of the tracks were Israel's leaders. These men refused to believe Jesus was their Messiah even though they were exposed to God's Revelation their whole lives. They had the genealogies and prophetic Scriptures. They witnessed the miracles of Jesus and sensed the unique authority of His teachings. Though they tasted the powers of the age to come, they refused to believe Him. In Christian families still today, we wonder why one sibling believes, but another doesn't.

From the human side, faith is a matter of the will. We choose to believe or we choose to disbelieve. Compelling arguments and mounds of evidence are never sufficient to convince a person who is determined to remain in unbelief. Faith is also a matter of obedience. As far as God is concerned, faith isn't optional. God has commanded every human being to repent of sin and trust Him. In **Acts 17:30** Paul confronted the idolatry of the Athenians and said, **In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent.** Another verse is **1 Jn. 3:23 - And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us.** Faith then is a decision to obey God.

From the divine side, however, faith involves a mysterious work of God's Spirit. The Holy Spirit produces faith in the hearts of those who are broken and willing to receive it. This is why so many destitute and hurting people turn to Jesus. Their bank accounts and portfolios are empty. They've run out of options and they are reaping what they have sown. Life has disappointed them and they've disappointed themselves. Needy and broken, their hearts are anxious for some Good News.

In the old hymn, I know whom I have believed, Major Daniel Whittle expressed what I'm talking about. The 2nd and 3rd verses say...*"I know not how this saving faith to me he did impart, nor how believing in his word wrought peace within my heart. I know not how the Spirit moves, convincing us of sin, revealing Jesus through the word, creating faith in Him."* In humility and honesty, the song-writer freely admits, *"I don't know how it happens. I don't know what causes the lights to come on for some and not for others."* Jesus spoke of faith's mystery in **Jn. 3:8** when He told Nicodemus ...**"The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."** Like the wind, we can't trace or anticipate the movements of God's Spirit and we don't have to. Our responsibility is to **seek the Lord while He may be found. – Isa. 55:6**

This AM we come to two sections which revolve around faith in Christ. The passage resists a simple outline because it has so many moving parts and a variety of life applications. The Jewish leaders we meet in the first section were sign-seeking skeptics. Despite their privileges, these men had **no faith**. The disciples, on the other hand, had **little faith**. Like so many of us, the disciple's faith was not what it should have been but it was growing. And **little faith** is always better than no faith! Little faith will take you to heaven, but no faith sends you to Hell. It's always better to be a slow learning follower of Jesus than an unbelieving skeptic going his own way! But even slow learners need to grow up.

1. Sign-seekers with no faith – vs. 1-4 - The Pharisees and Sadducees came to Jesus and tested him by asking him to show them a sign from heaven. He replied, "When evening comes, you say, 'It will be fair weather, for the sky is red,' and in the morning, 'Today it will be stormy, for the sky is red and overcast.' You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times. A wicked and adulterous generation looks for a miraculous sign, but none will be given it except the sign of Jonah." Jesus then left them and went away.

15:39 says, **After Jesus had sent the crowd away, he got into the boat and went to the vicinity of Magadan. Mk. 8:10** says, **the region of Dalmanutha.** After the well fed crowd of 4,000 plus was sent away, Jesus and His disciples got into a boat and crossed the Sea of Galilee. They went ashore somewhere near Tiberius on the western shore. There Jesus was met by a delegation of **Pharisees and Sadducees** who came to test and discredit Him. I can picture them marching toward Him.

A key word in **vs.1-4** is **sign** which is repeated 4x's. **Sign** is from the Greek word, **semeion** which signifies a miraculous show or display of power. Because their minds were already made up about Him, their motive was to discredit Him and establish justification for having Him eliminated. **Mk. 8:12** says Jesus **sighed deeply**. His **sigh** was one of deep grief and disappointment. As John wrote, **He came to that which was His own, but His own did not receive Him. (Jn. 1:11)**

These unbelieving clerics demanded something more sensational than the miracles of healing or feeding Jesus already performed. They wanted Him to perform some cosmic display that would really "wow" them. **Jn. 6:30, 31** - **So they asked him, "What miraculous sign then will you give that we may see it and believe you? What will you do?"** Their repeated demand for a sign was itself a sign...a sign of their unbelief. Faith doesn't demand signs. Signs or experiences are never what faith or a relationship with God is built on. True faith is described in **Heb. 11:1** - **Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.** The religious leaders turned this around. They refused to believe Jesus was the Christ until He showed them something really spectacular. Underlying their request was the idea that if He didn't do what they asked for it proved what they already believed...that Jesus was a fraud. Their demands for signs were remarkably similar to Satan's temptations in **Matt. 4**. Four characteristics of unbelieving skeptics emerge from these verses.

First, skeptics often join force with other Christ-deniers. The Pharisees and Sadducees were bitter rivals with very little in common except for this one thing...they agreed Jesus was an imposter who had to be eliminated. They were like republicans and democrats united against ISIS. **Acts 4:26, 27** shows the wide diversity of those who were allies when it came to Jesus. **The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against His Anointed One. Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed.** What a diverse band of unbelieving antagonists! Yet the same will be true of the nations gathered for the Battle of Armageddon. **Rev. 19:9** says, **Then I saw the beast and the kings of the earth and their armies gathered together to make war against the rider on the horse and his army.** Nations with little else in common will unite to resist King Jesus when He returns. I read the end of the book and my advice to you is this...choose the side that is for Jesus not against Him!

Second, the demand for a **sign from heaven** meant they rejected the signs they were already given. The unspoken notion that they might believe if given something more convincing was entirely disingenuous and untrue. That isn't why they laid in wait for Jesus, nor is that how faith is produced. They came to test Jesus...to expose Him as a fraud. Their minds were already made up. Miracles and answers to prayer can reinforce faith when faith is already present. But miracles never produce faith. The demand for visible confirmation is insatiable for those who don't want to believe.

Third, in **v.3** Jesus implied Israel's leaders were better weathermen than Bible scholars. Like Saginaw Bay Walleye fishermen, they could predict the weather from certain cosmological signs. But because of their unbelief, they were unable to **interpret the signs of the times**. The fact is...people who are wise about many things are often ignorant about the things of God. Many today have remarkable insight about the things of the world but little or no understanding about the things of God. Experts predict weather / forecast ups and downs in the stock market / the value of the dollar and real estate. Others predict trends in education / sociology / and morality. But these same prognosticators have no understanding of God's plan for the world. They know what "*Miller time*" means, but "*Messiah time*" means nothing to them.

Every indication from the prophetic Scriptures leads us to believe we are living in the last of the last days. Conditions are just as Jesus said they would be. The world stage is set. The nations are lined up just as the prophets foretold. Even now, some primary actors may be moving into place. In the twinkling of an eye, Jesus has promised to return to claim His bride. The dead in Christ will rise first and believers who are alive will be caught up to meet Him in the air. Once the restraining influence of the Spirit is withdrawn, evil will progress like traffic with speed bumps removed. The world will blindly enter the Great Tribulation under the banners of peace and safety. Are you ready for this? We're on the threshold of these events. Do you know what time it is and what's ahead?

Jesus then issued a stern warning in **v. 4**. He said, "**A wicked and adulterous generation looks for a miraculous sign, but none will be given it except the sign of Jonah.**" This generation of Jewish people and their leaders was both **wicked and adulterous**. **Wicked** means they had wandered far from God's moral and ethical standards...His ideals for humanity. **Adulterous** means they were unfaithful to their side of the covenants God made with them. In **Matt. 12:40** Jesus explained what **the sign of Jonah** would consist of He said, "**For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.**" - **12:40** The final miraculous and spectacular confirmation God gave the world was the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Yet even this doesn't mean much to many people. If a person refuses to believe the claims of Christ despite the evidence God has given, no other signs are forthcoming.

v.4 ends this way...**Jesus then left them and went away**. His departure illustrates the fact that a time will come when those who reject Christ and refuse God's salvation will be rejected and refused by God...a time when the door of salvation will be closed just as God shut the door of Noah's ark. While some were shut in, most were shut out. Having rejected God, the unbeliever is ultimately abandoned by Him. No crisis is more desperate than this. Yet as the Scripture affirms, the unbeliever who is finally rejected will be without excuse when he/she stands before God.

So these are four characteristics of people with no faith. They find allies among those of diverse opinions / their demand for signs is essentially evil and insatiable / they are ignorant of God's program / and having rejected Christ, they will ultimately be abandoned by God. The principles here apply not only to Israel's leaders but to every human being. **Heb. 11:6 - And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to Him must believe that He exists and that He rewards those who earnestly seek Him.** Have you trusted Jesus Christ to save you? No question is more significant!

2. Slow-learners with "little faith" – vs. 5-12 - When they went across the lake, the disciples forgot to take bread. "Be careful," Jesus said to them. "Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees." They discussed this among themselves and said, "It is because we didn't bring any bread." Aware of their discussion, Jesus asked, "You of little faith, why are you talking among yourselves about having no bread? Do you still not understand? Don't you remember the five loaves for the five thousand, and how many basketfuls

you gathered? Or the seven loaves for the four thousand, and how many basketfuls you gathered? How is it you don't understand that I was not talking to you about bread? But be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees." Then they understood that he was not telling them to guard against the yeast used in bread, but against the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

Do you learn spiritual lessons the first time around? Are you "good to go" after reading a verse or hearing a teaching just once? Do you trust God for everything? How does God's faithfulness to you in the past influence your faith today? Or...like me...do you tend to forget? These are questions raised by this next section. But among these questions, Jesus included a sober warning against powerful influences that are false and misleading. Twice He said, **"Be on your guard."** For lack of a better way to organize these verses I've divided the passage by three key words that appear in the text.

The first word is **bread**. Jesus knew exactly what His disciples were talking about. There's no escaping the fact that Jesus knows all about us. Growling stomachs may have reminded them that they'd forgotten to bring bread. And maybe some finger pointing was going on. Their crisis was complicated by two factors. First, they were headed toward an uninhabited region where bread was scarce. Second, the only bread they were likely to find on that side of the lake was Gentile bread. For a Jew, Gentile bread was inedible. It was defiled because of the Gentiles who baked and sold it. So when Jesus said, **"Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees."** the disciples naturally thought He was talking about the **bread** they forgot to bring.

We might accuse the disciples of being shallow and always thinking about material things and that's partly true. We see this tendency of theirs throughout the Gospels. But there was a deeper concern. Hadn't Jesus just taught them about God's view of defilement? Didn't He just say, **"What goes into a man's mouth does not make him 'unclean,' but what comes out of his mouth, that is what makes him 'unclean.'"** - Matt. 15:11 I'm thinking that lesson hadn't connected yet. The more obvious issue is the fact that Jesus was with them. And as they should have known by now, with Jesus there's no such thing as lack or shortage. *We may forget bread and forget Jesus but He never forgets His own!* He taught them to pray, **Give us this day our daily bread...**and to pray that way fully expecting that prayer to be answered! But isn't the patience of Jesus amazing? He knew their thoughts and He heard all of their silly faithless conversations. Yet He loved these men. *"He loves us just as we are but He loves us too much to leave us that way."* Listen...there's hope for slow learners like you and me.

The **second** word is **yeast** or **leaven** (as KJV has it) **Jesus said to them. "Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees."** Throughout the Bible, **yeast** represents spreading influence. And the influence of **yeast** is always associated with some form of corruption. Each Passover, the Jews were to remove every trace of **yeast** from their homes. **(Ex. 12:18-20)** Just as **yeast** spreads through a batch of dough, there are false and damaging influences followers of Christ must acknowledge and avoid. This teaching carries over to the NT. It appears in the instruction Paul gave the Corinthians with regard to their Love Feast and the corrupting influence of any sin the church tolerates and refuses to judge. **I Cor. 5:8 - Therefore let us keep the Festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and wickedness, but with bread without yeast, the bread of sincerity and truth.**

But once again, the disciples proved they were a little dense...a little obtuse. When Jesus mentioned **yeast**, they thought He was talking about bread. They were on a different wavelength altogether. Have you ever had a conversation like that? On a return flight from Moscow, I was seated next to a wild child from Netherlands. When I shared my faith, she was thinking incense, crystals and higher consciousness. Her response to everything was, "wow." Never for a moment did I feel we were close to being on the same wavelength!

So the disciples are thinking, *"He's upset with us because we forgot to bring bread. Who forgot to bring it anyway, was it you, John?"* They completely missed the point! Jesus was talking about His encounter with the **Pharisees and Sadducees**. Jesus was talking about something of great spiritual significance and they were stuck on Pepperidge Farm.

So what was His point? What **yeast** was Jesus talking about? Notice that the **yeast** He referred to was present in both the **Pharisees and Sadducees**. According to **Mk. 8:15**, **Herod** had some of this **yeast** too. In the context of these events and teachings, the yeast relates generally to the way the religious leaders and Herod arrived at truth...how they decided what to believe and disbelieve. The Jews demanded signs before they would believe and Herod was no different. **Lk. 23:8, 9 - When Herod saw Jesus, he was greatly pleased, because for a long time he had been wanting to see Him. From what he had heard about Him, he hoped to see him perform some miracle. He plied him with many questions, but Jesus gave him no answer.** The religious leaders and Herod had the same approach. They refused to believe Jesus without some sensational demonstration. They said, *"show me something...then maybe I'll believe."* Many approach faith this way and in coming days the disciples would be challenged to decide on what basis their faith would grow and proceed.

A lady who lived next door to the church I pastored in Cleveland told me about the miracles she witnessed in Lourdes, France. She said, *"Nobody could see what I saw and not believe!"* I then asked, *"Believe what Darlene? I mean, what exactly do the eye-witnesses believe?"* Her demeanor instantly switched from sunny to partly cloudy. She said, *"Well, I can't say... they just believe."* The content of whatever faith she was talking about didn't seem to matter. But faith is only as valid as what it's based on! (write that down somewhere) I suspect the miracles happening in Lourdes are Satanic deceptions. The apparitions are always of Mary, not Jesus. **Jas. 2:19** says even the demons believe in God. Satan loves to have people believe in faith / or religious incantations / or positive thinking / or whatever. The NT warns that in the last days Satan will pull out all the stops and use all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders to deceive the world. **II Thess. 2:9-10**. His ambition is to keep people from believing the truth that Jesus Christ is the incarnate revelation of God and our only hope of salvation. The only foundation for faith is the unfailing Word of God! I need an Amen!

But let me go out on a limb for a moment and suggest something. Maybe I'll finally give you cause to run me out of town. **Jn. 1:14 - The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.** Notice two qualities specifically named about the glory of Jesus. The verse says, He was **full of grace and truth**. Here's my suggestion. Although much more can be said about them, the **Pharisees** were essentially legalists and the **Sadducees** were essentially rationalists. The Pharisees insisted on rule keeping and often found fault with Jesus and His disciples who didn't abide by their man-made regulations. The **Sadducees** were liberal elites who denied almost everything supernatural. Though bitter rivals, the two sects denied Jesus was Israel's Messiah and believed He was a threat. As legalists, the **Pharisees** were offended by the **grace** of the Lord Jesus because they were all about rule keeping and works. As separatists, they hated His associations with tax collectors and prostitutes. On the other hand, like good liberals, the rationalistic **Sadducees** opposed the **truth** of the Lord Jesus which in every respect involved things supernatural.

These two sects may represent two major deceptions Satan has used to keep many in bondage and from the truth that leads to eternal life. On the one hand are legalists who insist salvation is not a free gift but must be earned through rituals, penance and law-keeping. I listened to one on the radio yesterday. On the other hand are rationalists who deny everything they find unnatural and too amazing to believe. While the one is offended by **grace**, the other is offended by **truth**. When the two unbelieving influences join forces, who are they opposed to but Jesus Christ? So Jesus said, **Be on your guard against** them. They are enemies of Christ and His Gospel.

Having abandoned the authority of their Scriptures, the creed of both sects was based on what is visible and apparent. If Jesus gave them a sign, they would need another the next day and others after that. They already accused Him of performing miracles in the power of the devil. So Jesus here warned His disciples against their false teaching and corrupting influence. These disciples would become the leaders of His Church and the warnings Jesus gave them were vital. Like yeast, false teaching is impossible to remove once it's introduced. It spreads and contaminates the whole. But because their stomachs were growling and their thoughts were locked on lunch, the meaning Jesus intended flew right over their heads. Though slow-learners, **v.12** says they finally caught on.

The **third** and final word is **faith**. **Little faith** was one of the Lord's often used designations for His disciples. (**Matt. 6:30; 8:26; 14:31**) As we said earlier, **little faith** is far better than **no faith**. Like a little child, **little faith** can grow given the right environment and input. The disciples had many lessons to learn before they would graduate to mature faith. But their faith wouldn't grow by sight. It would grow only in proportion to their acceptance of His Word in the tests of life. Having missed the point completely, Jesus asked a series of questions that forced them to relive and rethink things they had recently heard and experienced in His presence. Let me read **vs. 8-12** again and end with only a few comments. **Aware of their discussion, Jesus asked, "You of little faith, why are you talking among yourselves about having no bread? Do you still not understand? Don't you remember the five loaves for the five thousand, and how many basketfuls you gathered? Or the seven loaves for the four thousand, and how many basketfuls you gathered? How is it you don't understand that I was not talking to you about bread? But be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees." Then they understood that he was not telling them to guard against the yeast used in bread, but against the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.**

Jesus had something important to say to His disciples. But with stomachs growling, their minds were preoccupied. Have you ever paused to inventory the items that can divert your attention from God and His Word? Some are good and essential, but others are just distractions that take up space on your hard drive. Jesus had spiritual lessons to teach but His men were thinking about bread. And hadn't He had given them His word on this earlier? Remember **Matt. 6:32, 33? For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.** Allowing ourselves to be so easily distracted from what is truly important is an evidence of **little faith**. Jesus has promised to take care of all these concerns if His people would concentrate on His Kingdom and His righteousness. The questions Jesus asked were designed to help the disciples remember how faithful He'd been to meet their needs in the past. He said, **Don't you remember? "When did I ever let you down? When did you ever go hungry? When did I ever fail to provide the bread you needed? OK fellas, let's do this...let's stop worrying about lunch. Clear your minds of trivia so we can get down to business. I've something to say that really matters."** **Col. 3:1, 2** echoes this, **Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.**

Undergirding this section that revolves around faith is the all sufficiency of Jesus Christ. Israel's religious leaders were blind to His glory. They were offended by His grace and truth, but their hearts were cold and their lives were empty. They had no faith in Him. I trust that isn't where you are. Though your faith may be little as the disciple's was, here's what you need to know...Your Savior is great! Amen? When you have Jesus, you have everything! He supplies every need no matter how great or small. No situation is too hard for Him so stop worrying and trust His love! As Creator, He has options we could never imagine. Get into His Word and allow His Spirit to increase your faith. Beware of the unbelief that comes disguised as legalism and rationalism and trust Jesus alone. He is our life! **Col. 3:3, 4** continues...**For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.**