

“Watch and Beware!”

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[0 : 0 0] Well, let's turn to Matthew's Gospel. We want to begin reading in chapter 15, reading down to verse 29, and then we'll read into chapter 16.

Let's read from Matthew 15, verse 29. Jesus went on from there and walked beside the Sea of Galilee, and he went up on the mountain and sat down there and great crowds came to him, bringing with them the lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute, and many others, and they put them at his feet and he healed them, so that the crowd wondered when they saw, they were amazed when they saw the mute speaking, the crippled healthy, the lame walking, and the blind seeing, and they glorified the God of Israel.

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

And the disciples said to him, where are we to get enough bread in such a desolate place to feed such a great crowd? And Jesus said to them, how many loaves do you have?

They said, seven, and a few small fish. And directing the crowd to sit down on the ground, he took the seven loaves and the fish, and having given thanks, he broke them and gave them to the disciples.

[1 : 3 7] And the disciples gave them to the crowds, and they all ate and were satisfied. And they took up seven baskets full of the broken pieces left over. Those who ate were four thousand men, besides women and children.

And after sending away the crowds, he got into the boat and went to the region of Magadan. And then in chapter 16. And the Pharisees and Sadducees came, and to test him, they asked him to show them a sign from heaven.

He answered them, when it is evening, you say it will be fair weather, for the sky is red. 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. 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. When the disciples reaped the other side, they had forgotten to bring any bread. Jesus said to them, watch and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

[2 : 5 1] And they began discussing it among themselves, saying, we brought no bread. But Jesus, aware of this, said, O you of little faith, why are you discussing among yourselves the fact that you have no bread?

Do you not yet perceive? Do you not remember the five loaves for the five thousand and how many baskets you gathered? Or the seven loaves for the four thousand and how many baskets you gathered?

How is it that you failed to understand that I did not speak about bread? Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees. 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.

May God bless that reading from his holy word as we consider what Jesus is saying there after the miracle of the four thousand when Jesus says to his disciples to watch and to beware.

The three separate headings, well, not the separately interconnected headings that we're going to look and work through. The signs that certainly the Pharisees and the Sadducees wanted Jesus to perform and what Jesus said of these signs.

[4 : 10] Then the scepticism, the disbelief that these religious leaders showed against Jesus. We'll explore that in more detail. And then really the spiritual discernment that Jesus asks those who follow him to practice in watching and being aware of those who are very, very influential in seeking to disrupt your faith in the Lord Jesus through this attitude of scepticism.

Beware, watch and beware. Because whenever we hear Jesus give this command to beware, watch and beware, to beware of something, then we can't ignore that.

Jesus is giving this command out of an urgency from his heart to those whom he loves. I mean, you know, even in life we've got to take heed of these warnings when we're alerted to something dangerous that we're told to be aware of.

It so happens that I suppose the most common wording in our English language or language structure when we're told to beware of something is beware of the dog.

And I'm certainly very aware of that sign as many of you will know. But how infinitely more important in terms of what Jesus is commanding here about what people have to be aware of.

[5 : 34] In other words, what you're to be wary of. What you have to be cautious about so as to avoid. Because when Jesus gives his warnings, his warning to beware, he's speaking about things that can so easily corrupt and damage your soul.

Things that really can so easily wreck your mind. Things that can even tear at your heart so that you're... They cause you to decline spiritually.

And yes, cause you to wander from the path of true righteousness. And in fact, there are a number of occasions Jesus gave that command to his followers to beware.

In the Sermon on the Mount, for example, twice we hear Jesus give that command to beware. Matthew 6, verse 1, Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them.

For then you'll have no reward from your Father who's in heaven. And there's Jesus warning against the spirit of self-conceit that seemingly spiritual actions being done that in fact really betray a humble following of the Savior.

[6 : 45] You know, practicing your righteousness so that others can see it. No, that's not the humility that's demanded of a follower of Jesus. Because that's totally opposite to the suffering Savior.

Or Matthew 7, verse 15, Beware of false prophets who come to you in sheep's clothing but are inwardly ravenous wolves. In other words, the danger of being lured by hypocritical church leaders who might appear godly and yet in heart are totally opposite to the Word of God and can bring so much damage to the flock of the Lord Jesus.

So these are just some of the other warnings that Jesus has given to his people to be aware of. And he's done it and he's doing it out of love. Love for his own.

And here in this passage, it's certainly from the first 12 verses of chapter 16, three times you hear the voice of Jesus call out to beware.

Beware, watch and beware the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees. Now we'll come to these people in a moment. But he's saying, be on your guard.

- [7 : 57] Be alert. Take care because there's something that's so dangerous to your life that you really have to be aware of. But what's Jesus saying to be aware of?
- He's telling us the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees. Now, we've got to obviously to understand what's Jesus saying here, the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees.
- And not just what's he saying, but what relevance does this have for each one of us today? Well, we'll see a lot of relevance, much relevance.
- But of course, in order to understand why Jesus is saying these words, you've got to understand when he said them. Because, as we've noticed, as we read in Matthew 15 there, Jesus has been continuing his preaching, he's been teaching, he's been conducting his healing ministry, and then he's showing his miracles over nature.
- He's already done that before, he's shown it again, the feeding of the 4,000 plus the women and children. All that he's been doing up to that point, showing who he is, these signs that point to Jesus truly as the promised Christ to come, come to save his people from their sins.
- [9 : 13] The healing miracles, the miracles over nature, these signs that point to, well, his ultimate healing power, the healing of a person, changing that person's life, making that person a new creation.
- If you like, the ultimate miracle, the miracle of new life in Christ. Jesus had, not long before, fed 5,000 men plus many thousands of others. And then as we read there, he fed 4,000 plus people.
- Now, in both these miracles, they were observed. People watched them, they saw them, people, nobody could deny that a great work or great works had been done by Jesus. Miracle of the 5,000, five loaves, two fish, transformed into that great quantity to feed such a large number of people.
- Twelve basketfuls of food left over. Miracle of the 4,000, seven small loaves, a few small fish, miraculously multiplied to feed that vast number of people there who'd been with Jesus.
- telling so much about Jesus, but telling that in heaven and him alone is true satisfaction. So, thousands of people hadn't just observed the miracle, but they'd been blessed and there was physical blessing, of course, feeding, healing, but there was spiritual blessing as well.
- [10 : 39] and the disciples, they didn't just observe the miracle, but they were actually participants doing what Jesus had commanded them to do.
- They were the ones who distributed the food. So, they couldn't avoid seeing and noticing what had happened. And yet, these disciples themselves, they missed the point.
- They missed the bigger picture about what Jesus was doing, what Jesus was doing there in the mountainside. But before we actually look at the disciples and their reaction, well, we need to know who were these people who came to Jesus to test them?
- These people who appear on the scene and in fact, although they're, you know, out to really challenge Jesus and discredit Jesus, we might say inadvertently, actually, they bring about an important lesson from Jesus and a lesson that each one of us has to be made aware of.
- So, who were these two people that come together to discredit Jesus? Well, we're told, verse 1, we're told they're the Pharisees and the Sadducees.
- [11 : 48] Now, of course, I'm sure you all know the name Pharisees. You hear that name a lot in certainly the Gospels. Maybe not quite so often you hear the name Sadducees. And certainly, very, very rarely do you see these two names together.

In fact, they're only named together on four occasions in the whole of the New Testament. Once in Acts chapter 23 and the other occasions in Matthew's Gospel.

In other words, the names together. But that's no coincidence, the fact that they were rarely seen together, rarely heard together. Yes, they were the religious leaders of the day.

But in fact, they were absolutely poles apart in their theology and practice. And to put it very politely, they were really normally at each other's throats. The Pharisees, they were the Orthodox ones.

They were the fundamental religious leaders of the day. They kept the Law of Moses, yes. But they added over 600 additions to the Law of Moses. And even to the minutest of details, they developed a heartless, loveless, sort of arrogant brand of religion.

[12 : 58] because they lost sight of what true religion is. Because they forgot the need, first of all, to love the Lord with all your heart and soul and strength and mind.

See, the most important thing for these Pharisees was to tick the boxes. Because religion for them just meant the outward things, the external things, the performance for other people to see.

Because, you know, the classic example of the Pharisee and Jesus' parable. That Pharisee and his arrogance he boasted before God about all that he kept even to the minutest of detail. That's the Pharisees.

Then there's the Sadducees. We might say they were the liberals of the day. They boasted that they knew more than any other group. They denied miracles.

They denied that the soul was immortal. They denied the resurrection of the dead. All they really wanted to do was to keep in with the powers that be. They wanted to keep to the prevailing culture of the day.

[14 : 03] And so they ingratiated themselves with the secular rulers of the time. That's the fact of the Sadducees. But, yeah, as I say, you rarely see these two groups together.

But when we do read of these two opposite groups together here in Matthew 16, yes, it was an odd combination. combination. But it was a deliberate combination. Because these two groups had one thing in common.

They hated Jesus. They despised Jesus. They wanted Jesus silenced. They wanted to discredit him. And they wanted to do it in front of that crowd of people.

And before we even move on to see what they were up to, what they were doing to test Jesus, then we have to remember even today, even in our day and age. So often, even separate groups, if you like, separate groups in society will join forces together to discredit the name of Jesus, to discredit the church, and to seek to silence the influence of the church and our land.

Take our political parties, all the various, well, the major parties anyway. There are good believing people. I believe in every one of the major, main political parties.

[15 : 16] And let's give thanks to God for those who are in these parties. But we know, of course, that in each of the parties, political parties, there are those within who are united to seek to undermine a whole host of biblical teaching and things like marriage and the rights of the unborn child and the end of life and gender.

And all happening in the cause of resisting God's word, resisting the Bible and showing a hostility to the Lord Jesus. Well, that's the kind of cooperation that we see here in Matthew 16, two groups of religious leaders.

Normally, they would have nothing to do with each other. But when it came to Jesus, they were shoulder to shoulder against him, as we saw there at the start of the chapter.

The Pharisees and Sadducees, they come, they come to Jesus and they test Jesus. They ask him, show us a sign from heaven. So the Pharisees, the Sadducees, they're seeking their differences because there's that one thing that unites them.

They're seeking to undermine, they're seeking to destroy Jesus' reputation in his ministry. They're going to test him with a sign. In other words, a proof that he really is the Messiah.

[16 : 39] And they think that they've got him, they've trapped him because they didn't expect any sign from Jesus. So if Jesus doesn't do the expected sign that they're asking for, well, Jesus is going to show that he really isn't who he claims to be.

And people just will turn their backs on him. But then, just wait a moment. Hadn't Jesus just moments before fed 4,000 plus people and done so just from a few loaves of bread and fish?

Hadn't he just done the same, very much the same in feeding 5,000 plus people? Hadn't Jesus just healed the lame and the blind and the crippled and the mute and many others?

And Jesus rebukes the Pharisees for their testing him. Rebuking them for their failure to see that signs had already been given. Listen again to the words of Jesus.

When it's evening you say it will be fair weather for the sky is red and 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 appearance, the signs of the times.

[17 : 53] An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah. You see, the Pharisees and the Sadducees they'd failed to discern the signs that Jesus had already shown.

These signs of the times of Jesus. Signs that showed that Jesus truly is who he claimed to be. I mean, weren't the miracles of healing and feeding, weren't they sufficient signs of his power as who he was and is as the Christ?

I mean, the evidence was staring in the face of the Pharisees and Sadducees but they closed their eyes to the evidence. I mean, they'd seen the blind given sight and yet they remained spiritually blind to Jesus and spiritually blind because of their stubborn hearts.

I mean, the proof was there. Jesus, in his ministry, Jesus had already shown that he'd been given power from his unhigh but his enemies refused to accept it because of their scepticism, because of their disbelief.

And before we explore that a little more, let's just think of how this can connect with today because, you know, the evidence is out there. In fact, not just out there but in here.

[19 : 18] The evidence of changed lives, lives changed through the saving grace of the Lord Jesus. The evidence is there of lives that were once broken by sin and lives that are now transformed.

Transformed by the grace, the saving grace of the Lord Jesus. The evidence, the evidence of the Lord's people. Those who stand for truth in the world that certainly will throw every accusation against the Lord's people are even worse.

Even in the face of that evidence, the eyes of disbelievers, the eyes of unbelievers, remain closed. I pray that's not anyone here this morning.

Your eye is still blind because you can't see the difference that the Lord Jesus has made to the lives of sinners who were once lost in sin and darkness and now transformed by the power of God's love.

Because the spiritually blind now do see you. You know him as Lord, you see him, you see Jesus and you see him and you follow him. The spiritually lame now walk in Christ.

[20 : 28] The spiritually mute now speak of Jesus from before he just spoke of self and spoke of sin. because it's very much the failure of the modern day Pharisees and Sadducees to failure to see Jesus.

It's so evident. And that failure of the first century Pharisees and Sadducees, well, as we said, it was because of their skepticism, their unbelief, their disbelief.

As Jesus tells us in verse 5, when the disciples reached the other side, they'd forgotten to bring any bread. Jesus said to them, watch and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

They're united, the Pharisees and Sadducees in their skepticism and their disbelieving attitude, attitude to Jesus. I mean, the Pharisees, they hated Jesus.

They hated Jesus because, well, Jesus wouldn't comply to their very rigid interpretation of the law. The Sadducees, they disagreed with Jesus because they disagreed with them and all the main truths of Scripture.

[21 : 40] But what united these two together and particularly what Jesus says, the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees, what do we understand by this?

And what's the warning that we have to learn about the leaven, the Pharisees and Sadducees? Well, think about leaven for a moment. It's not yeast, by the way.

Some translations have it yeast. It's not yeast, that's not the word, it's leaven. Well, leaven, I'm no baker, as some of you will know, but leaven, it's a small lump of dough that's taken from the previous week's batch, that small lump of dough that hadn't been baked, but yet it can be used for a large amount of flour the following week to help that flour to rise.

And that leaven is hidden in the batch of flour, that new flour. But the little lump of leaven that previous week's batch, that small lump of dough, it's got such a great influence.

I mean, after the dough is mixed, you can't see the leaven, but you can see the result. The dough rises as a result of the leaven. And you can see how the metaphor is emerging.

[22 : 54] Leaven, it's small, and in many ways we might say it's unseen when it goes into the flour. But although it has a small impact, it's great. It's impacting something else is great.

And it tells us of the sinister, the evil influence that corrupts. A little something that works quietly, but in the end has such a devastating impact.

And you know, when you think of the influence of these Pharisees and Sadducees, their influence to potentially cause disruption to a believer's heart, in fact, actual disruption, actually impacting even the followers of the Lord Jesus, that danger was real because the danger was their skepticism, their unbelief.

And if that unbelief could unite two seemingly divided groups, well, it could even have an impact on the disciples, the followers of Jesus, not just 2,000 years ago, but through the ages.

Jesus, and because of that danger of unbelief, disbelief, not believing in the Lord Jesus, it's a danger. And because it's a real danger even today, it requires spiritual discernment.

[24 : 14] That's what Jesus was so eager to teach his disciples. We're not going to read verses 7 to 12, we've already read them, but you can pick up what's happening.

because the disciples really hadn't grasped what Jesus was saying about the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees. And we're told actually in verse 7, they began discussing it among themselves saying, we brought no bread.

In other words, they're showing how slow they were in their spiritual understanding. They hadn't seen what Jesus was saying. They thought Jesus was speaking about physical food. I mean, Jesus had supplied that, that food.

He'd done it twice in his miracles. Because they failed to see that what Jesus was speaking about concerned something far more important than physical sustenance.

What Jesus was teaching was about spiritual truth. You see, the disciples, they were focused on the material things. They were guilty because they brought no bread.

[25 : 21] They were actually chastising themselves. they'd forgotten to take sufficient provisions, as they ought to have done. In other words, they were focusing on themselves rather than others.

And they thought Jesus was chastising them for their forgetfulness, not bringing the right amount of bread. But of course, they should have realised that Jesus wasn't talking about material things or external matters.

They'd seen Jesus perform miracles on so many occasions. Christians. They'd heard Jesus preach about the kingdom of God for those who were blind, lame, deaf, mute.

And they'd seen the change that Jesus had made in people's lives when Jesus healed. But still, they hadn't grown spiritually. I mean, they ought to have done us.

They were the closest people to Jesus. They were still spiritual infants. They weren't spiritually mature. And so Jesus tells them, as he tells us so often, O you of little faith.

[26 : 25] And you see, the reason for their spiritual maturity, and the reasons for our own spiritual maturity, in many ways it's really the same. It's the same then us now, allowing the world around us to shape, to mould our thinking, to mould our practice, rather than allowing the word of God to mould your thinking and practice.

Because that's what we're seeing here with the disciples. You see, the Pharisees and Sadducees, they were showing their scepticism about Jesus. But wasn't that the same trap that the disciples were falling into?

Now, okay, they weren't as far down the road as the Pharisees and Sadducees were in outright hostility to Jesus. But like the Pharisees and Sadducees, they lacked the conviction of faith that Jesus truly is the Son of God, the Divine Son of God, and that Jesus could do what he can do as the Divine Son of God.

That Jesus, in fact, has power over life itself. And so Jesus tells the disciples that, in fact, where they were going wrong was their preoccupation with external things, bread.

They'd lost sight of the spiritual dimension that truly matters. Because they failed to trust Jesus. In fact, they were in danger of becoming like the Pharisees and Sadducees because in their failure to discern what Jesus was talking about, they were showing that they were skeptical about the person of Jesus.

[28 : 01] They were disbelieving that the work of Jesus was much more than physical. That he'd come to feed souls. That he'd come to give life.

That he'd come to give life from spiritual death. See, the disciples, all they were focused on was self. They were not just focused on external things even.

They were being, as it were, influenced by the influencers of the day, the Pharisees and the Sadducees. And so Jesus is teaching them that that influence, that leaven, is actually so invasive, so subtle, subtle that even the corrupting influence of the Pharisees and Sadducees, that that was even impacting their lives.

And it's when Jesus tells them these things that they begin to understand what Jesus is teaching. But what does all this tell you and tell me? What lessons do we learn from Jesus when he tells us to watch and beware the leaven of the Pharisees?

Well, just this surely. To be careful, to be aware, to be so on our guard, on our guard against the influences of the world around, the influences of the disbelievers, to be so on our guard against the sceptics who will undermine the person and work of Jesus.

[29 : 29] Because those who seek to undermine the work and person of Jesus can speak words that can so easily shake you, can even shake your confidence in the uniqueness of the Lord Jesus.

And the words of those around that can actually even at times make you doubt the power and love of the Lord Jesus for sinners such as you. And even the influences all around that when you even for a moment absorb them can actually make you think less of Jesus in all his greatness and his glory.

you see the spirit of the age, the age that we're living in, is actually one massive scepticism against Jesus. So don't be influenced by those around you.

Don't be influenced by that universal attitude that reduces Jesus at best to a good man but nothing else. In your heart, in your mind, rise above that influence, rise above that attitude and do it by faith.

that strong faith in the Lord Jesus and look to him, look to the one who fed 4,000 plus people and healed, healed all who came to him.

[30 : 44] And look to Jesus, Jesus who doesn't look in the outward things but looks to the heart. Look to Jesus who calls you to watch and beware, to discern the times and to discern where true spirituality lies.

It's not in the externals. it's in the heart. And yes, go in your way with that greater understanding of the Lord Jesus, the Saviour, the suffering servant, the one who came for you in love, who gave himself for you to give you life eternal.

Amen. And let us pray. Lord our God, there is much that we don't understand. Be it, Lord, you have given us sufficient to understand of your greatness, of your love, of your power.

Forgive us, Lord, when even we yield to the temptation of others to doubt the power and the love of Jesus. Lord, strengthen our faith, we pray, so that as we look to Jesus, we follow him, believe him, believe in him, and go the way that he commands us to go, even on that narrow road.

Hear us, Lord, this week, cry unto you for mercy, and for the forgiveness of our sins, we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.