
Beware of Religion

Matthew 16:1-12

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Viruses are dangerous...

They are unseen...

They are contagious...

They may be naturally occurring or human manufactured...

They can cause weakness, sickness, and sometimes, death...

They need to be protected against through vaccination, inoculation, prevention...

Religion is a virus. It is deeply dangerous to unbelievers. It is particularly dangerous to believers.

It is often unseen...

It is highly contagious...

It may be naturally occurring, human manufactured, and spiritually caused...

It will cause spiritual weakness, debilitation, and sometimes, death...

It must be protected against through vaccination, inoculation, prevention...

False teaching is often compared to communicable diseases. They did not know about viruses; but they did know about leprosy. We need to think carefully about the dangers of false doctrine.

Matthew gives us an example of two dangers to God's people. It is ever important that we remember our two horizons, our two audiences. There is the horizon of Jesus' day and the horizon of Matthew's day. There are the people Jesus is engaging with. But most importantly, there is the audience Matthew is writing to. Jesus is living and acting under the Old Covenant and the Mosaic Law. Matthew is writing under the New Covenant. He is writing to the church. He is writing about what Jesus did and said in order to warn the church about what was going on in their day.

Make no mistake. False religion is common in the church. It was and still is common in the world. So what!!! It is the world, after all. But it was common inside Judaism and under the Mosaic Law. Jesus regularly had to confront it. False religion, false teaching, error are common in the church. It acts as a dangerous and deadly virus that infects believers and churches with devastating effect.

Its Example (v.1-4)

Jesus often clashed with the religious leaders of His day. He was a threat to them. Matthew has shown that escalating antagonism several times. Here we go again...

And the Pharisees and Sadducees came, and to test him they asked him to show them a sign from heaven. ²He answered them, "When it is evening, you say, 'It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.' ³And 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. ⁴An 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.

A Pack of Mortal Enemies (v.1)

We get used to seeing the Pharisees and scribes attacking Jesus. Now, the Pharisees have teamed up with the Sadducees, working together to test Jesus. This is quite surprising. Historically and theologically, they were mortal enemies. The Pharisees were fundamentalists and legalists. The Sadducees were liberals. But notice how their mutual hatred for Jesus:

Binds them together...

The first is that the Pharisees and the Sadducees came together to test Jesus by asking him for a sign. That is remarkable. They would not normally be seen dead in each other's company! Their theological views and political ideologies were diametrically opposed. It was opposition to Jesus that drew these most unlikely partners together. It is like the occasion when Jesus was given a testing question about paying taxes to Rome. The Pharisees and the Herodians (again, sworn enemies) made a joint approach to him. It seemed impossible that he could avoid the trap set for him, but he did. A similar sinister combination met him here, and after giving his response he simply walked away. There are times when that is the best way to treat hypocrisy.

Blinds them to the obvious...

They simply cannot see their own hypocrisy. Somehow, they are pretending to be religiously superior to Jesus. They are going to test His authenticity. He must submit His credentials to them. Yet, they are deeply hypocritical in their approach and in their aim. This is not out of a real concern for truth. This is not an authentic seeking for what they say they want. This is the sheer hypocrisy of bureaucratic false religion.

A Request from Evil Intent (v.1)

They want Jesus to show them a miracle that is without question, proof of who He is and what He says. Prophets are authenticated by what they say coming to pass. But the Messiah will be authenticated by powerful miracles from heaven. They are seeking a sign from heaven.

But they are not poised to accept Jesus even if He could produce what they demanded. They actually are aiming to test Jesus so as to prove Jesus' claims are false. Since they do not believe His claims, they are sure the test will fail. Then everyone will see that Jesus is a fake.

What is wrong with this picture? What about all the miracles that have just happened? He has been healing people. He has been casting out demons. He has fed 5,000 from meagre supply. He has fed 4,000 plus from a little more. Notice that these are miracles here on earth. What they are requiring a sign that is "from heaven". What does this mean? What would Jesus now produce that would satisfy this requirement? A voice from heaven approving Jesus? Already did that. Instantly calm a storm with wind and a raging sea? Did that. How about being born from a virgin. Yup, that too. What more could they possibly be seeking?

Two things are underneath this which Matthew is warning the church about.

We must not test the Lord.

Believers are not to put God to the test. Yes, God does what He says. But we are creature. He is God. We are servants. He is Lord. What the Lord says, we are to believe by faith. It is false religion that demands that God do something supernatural to prove Who He is.

We can make no demands upon the Lord.

Believers are not to come to God and demand that He do something, particularly miraculous. Can and does God do miracles in our day? Absolutely. Will God answer our prayers even to doing something miraculous? Yes. Do we have the right to demand that God do something? No. It is false religion that demands God act in a certain way, even when citing the God's promises.

Matthew has shown over and over again how the Lord responds to humble, submissive faith. People address Him as Lord. They come requesting, seeking His favor. They ask for seemingly impossible things. But they believe without question that He is who He says He is.

But this is not what we have here. Not, at all.

A Response with Devastating Effect (v.2-3)

Jesus aims His response right into the heart of their hypocrisy and rebellion with devastating effect. They are completely self-deceived. They claim to be able to understand nature and thus predict what they have no control over - that is, the weather and the seas. And so, they think that they have the ability to interpret the signs of the times?

Notice that Jesus has turned their question in a different direction. Jesus is shifting the use of signs, at least in His response to the Pharisees. Jesus' works and wonders have been signs authenticating Him as the Messiah. But now, they are signs pointing to a great upheaval, a cataclysmic change that is about to transpire. They are the *signs of times*. Matthew is hinting at what is to come in His book.

A Denunciation with Puzzling Allusion (v.4)

Jesus denounces the kind of people they are. They are part of an evil and adulterous generation. Why does Jesus say this?

They are evil in their hearts, in their motivations. They are appearing to be earnest in asking Jesus for a sign. Yet they are not at all what they appear to be. Their outward appearance is masking the evil intent of their hearts.

They are adulterous because the Pharisees have allied with the Sadducees. This is spiritual adultery. This is the worst of co-belligerence. The Old Testament condemns those who believe in God's Law and who make alliances with those who do not. The Pharisees see themselves as the true religion. Why then are they getting into bed with the Sadducees who do not believe the Scriptures and do not uphold the Law?

This denunciation is not just of the two religious groups in front of Him. Jesus is condemning this whole generation of Jewish people. They are unbelieving. They are evil. They are allied with false teaching. They are rejecting the Messiah.

This is important to Matthew and to the churches he is writing to.

False teachers almost never appear to be as they truly are. They will look religious. They may conform to the standards of the church. They are sometimes winsome, well-spoken and popular. They carefully mask the evil in their hearts.

It is never right to partner with unbelievers or false teachers in order to accomplish a common shared aim. I know this is not popular to say now. It is nevertheless true. We oppose abortion. We oppose same sex marriage. We oppose many things that both Catholics and Muslims would oppose. But it would be adulterous to join with these false, unbelieving religions in order to try to promote what is a righteous cause.

Interestingly, Jesus does give them a sign. He says there is only one sign that He will give them *in response to their demand*. That is the sign of Jonah. Well, Ok. What does that mean?

It is from the Old Testament. The story of Jonah is *in the Scriptures*. The Pharisees are supposed to believe the Scriptures. The Sadducees make no pretense to believe the whole Old Testament. This is putting both groups to the test. This is severing their partnership.

It is about Jesus' death (3 days in the whale = 3 days in the earth.) The sign of the times, the event that will change the flow of redemptive history, is Jesus' death and resurrection. They want a sign from heaven? He gives them a sign from the depths of the earth. All that they believe and trust in is about to go into the grave as the Old Covenant ends. All that Matthew is helping us to hold dear came to pass in the resurrection.

The Old Testament prophecies and stories are sufficient for doctrine, for life and for godliness. The Scriptures are to be believed. They are God's Word from heaven.

They are the manna given for God's people. If they will not believe the Scriptures, they will not believe in miracles on earth or signs from heaven.

We understand then that Jesus' miracles are signs, but they will not cause belief. Belief responds to the signs, not unbelief. The same is true today. Signs, wonders and miracles *do not cause a person to believe*. True salvation comes to those who believe what the Scriptures are saying, not what miracle workers claim to be doing.

The Scriptures will cause belief. We are born again by the Word of God. It is the Scriptures that attest to who Jesus is and what He has done. Without them, the unbeliever will go into judgment and die in their sins. This is why we go into all the world. We go with the Word and our words, not with winders. We proclaim Jesus through the Scriptures even when people ask for or even demand some kind of supernatural proof. That is not faith. That is unbelief.

Its Exposure (v.5-12)

Once again, Matthew puts stories back-to-back, not because they happened one after the other, but because he has a thematic purpose.

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." 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." ¹² 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.

Some background:

Matthew 15:32-16:1

³² Then Jesus called his disciples to him and said, "I have compassion on the crowd because they have been with me now three days and have nothing to eat. And I am unwilling to send them away hungry, lest they faint on the way." ³³ And the disciples said to him, "Where are we to get enough bread in such a desolate place to feed so great a crowd?" ³⁴ And Jesus said to them, "How many loaves do you have?" They said, "Seven, and a few small fish." ³⁵ And directing the crowd to sit down on the ground, ³⁶ he took the seven loaves and the fish, and having given thanks he broke them and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. ³⁷ And they all ate and were satisfied. **And they took up seven baskets full of the broken pieces left over.** ³⁸ Those who ate were four thousand men, besides women and children. ³⁹ And after sending away the crowds, he got into the boat and went to the region of Magadan. And the Pharisees and Sadducees came, and to test him they asked him to show them a sign from heaven. ...⁵

When the disciples reached the other side, ***they had forgotten to bring any bread.***

A Misplaced Concern (v.5)

The disciples had 7 bushel baskets of bread. In a previous miraculous feeding, there had been 12 baskets left over. In the earlier feeding, Jesus is the manna, the satisfying supplier for the nation of Israel, enough for each disciple, each tribe, to have leftovers. In the most recent, Jesus is the bread of life, satisfying supplier for the world. Having met Israel's need, he now has met the need of the world and there is a perfect number of baskets left over.

But this is more than just a mental lapse, an inattention to common human need. The disciples had forgotten to bring all the bread that Jesus had provided for them. There it sat on the beach. Forgotten.

It is a terrible thing to forget what God has done for us. It is incredibly easy, as one writer put it, "for us to forget what God has done in our lives *and* in salvation history! Our generation so little values two essential components of the Christian faith – history and eschatology. That is, instead of looking backwards at what God has done in history and looking forward to what God will do in due time (that's eschatology, having a longing for the last things, the culmination of God's kingdom), we live instead in the ahistorical/existential *now*."

Physical amnesia is a difficult and frightening thing. Spiritual amnesia is much more common and very often, just as debilitating. Frankly, I find many (maybe, most) Christians have developed spiritual amnesia during COVID.

A Misunderstood Warning (v.6-7)

Ah, but Jesus speaks and the disciples mishear. So common for people to do. Like so many people, the minds of the disciples are on the temporal needs of this world. Therefore, they do not hear the Word of God as clearly as they ought.

They really have no excuse. Jesus is very clear. "Look out for the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees." And they look at one another and think, "Ah, we forgot to bring the bread." Now that they didn't bring all 7 is understandable. Those were huge, bushel baskets. IT would be a lot to put in the boat. But, not one?

But why is Jesus talking about leaven?

A Penetrating Correction (v.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."

Why is this evidence of little faith? Wouldn't we say that it is an easy mistake or misunderstanding? Jesus says that because they have little faith, they don't understand what Jesus is saying. They don't perceive. They don't understand.

Don't they remember what Jesus did? Don't they remember the Lord's miracle? Don't they believe that He is who He is? Don't they understand that He is the giver of bread, the provider of all that is truly satisfying? What is the answer to the question, "How did you fail to understand...?" The answer is that their faith is yet weak, small, not fully formed. And so, they don't understand.

We have explored this before. Matthew is very concerned that the church understand something. This simple scene with Jesus' penetrating correction must be heard, must be pondered by God's people. Here is the important principle:

Believing goes before understanding. Understanding follows upon believing.

What then are the implications that are clear here for the disciples and for us?

An important part of faith is remembering, not forgetting, what God has done for us.

Faith is the eye of the soul. In the Scriptures, faith is not a hand that reaches out and gets; it is an eye that sees, perceives.

If you want to understand truth, you must believe it first. If you wait until you understand, then you rarely will. But when a truth is taught or perceived in your soul and you affirm it to be true, you trust in it, you do what it requires, then you have begun to go down the path of understanding. The reason why so many believers have so little understanding? They simply don't believe and are waiting for understanding so that they can believe. We do not walk by understanding. We walk by faith. And there will be some things we believe which we will never understand, possibly ever. Can you understand the incarnation? Can you understand the sovereignty of God? Can you understand how Jesus as an infant in the crib is upholding all things by the Word of His power? But they are true. We believe them, right?

A Repeated Warning (v.11b)

"Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees." What then is Jesus actually warning them about? What is the unholy, hidden, but evil idea of the Pharisees and Sadducees? It is that Jesus is not enough. They want more. They want more than He has provided. They want more than the teaching He has given. They want more than the miracles He has done. They want these, not because they hunger for Jesus, but because in their hearts, they fear Him and hate Him. He is about to upend their whole world. Their understanding of the Mosaic Law and how to relate to God is simply wrong.

Why does Matthew highlight this to the early church? From the beginning, the church struggled to break out of the Old Covenant. The early believers were Jews. They were being told to reject what they had always believed and had been delivered to them by

God. Their cultural identity: circumcision, the Law, the Temple were all fulfilled. Their way of life handed from their forefathers was now fading away. They were no longer the center of God's universe (well, they never were). Even deep into the ministry of Paul. Jewish leaders in the church were still trying to impose the Mosaic Law on believers.

A Final Comprehension (v.12)

Now they get it. Jesus' words have been received and believed. Now they perceive, see with the eyes of faith and understand what Jesus was warning them about. Jesus was not talking about human bread, but rather about false religion and error.

Matthew is writing about this because false religion and false teaching were infecting the church. Please don't talk and act as though the early church was somehow pure. It was not. It struggled with almost everything the modern church does. The Jewish believers kept trying to drag in the Law. The Gentile believers kept trying to drag in their cultural and religious beliefs. The result was often debilitating. How do we know that? The letters to the seven churches were written about 40 - 45 years after Matthew wrote his book. Look at what had happened to those churches. Think about 2 Peter and Jude with their scathing denunciations of false teachers and false teaching.

Reflect and Respond

What is the vaccine against the virus of false religion?

Read, study and learn your Bible. You cannot believe what you do not know.

Believe what you read, study, and learn from the Bible. Carefully apply yourself to the teaching here.

Obey what you know by faith through grace. Disobedience cripples the effectiveness of Bible study.

Remember and reflect on what God has taught you and what God has done for you.

Be satisfied with Jesus and what He has chosen to provide for you. Faith, remembers.

Live your life in the context of your church community. Seek help. Give counsel. Talk through the Word of God with learner's heart.

What J. C. Ryle wrote is most fitting:

Let us remember that we live in a world where Pharisaism and Sadduceeism are continually striving for the mastery in the church of Christ. Some want to add to the Gospel, and some want to take away from it; some would bury it, and some would pare it down to nothing; some would stifle it by heaping on additions, and some would bleed it to death by subtraction from its truths. Both parties agree only in one respect: both would kill and destroy the life of Christianity if they succeeded in having their own way.

Against both errors let us watch and pray and stand on guard. Let us not add to the Gospel, to please the modern Pharisee; let us not subtract from the Gospel, to please the modern Sadducee. Let our principle be “the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth”: nothing added to it, and nothing taken away.¹

You are warned about two dangers:

False teaching and spiritual dissatisfaction that leads to spiritual decline.

Spiritual amnesia where you forget God’s Word, God’s truth, and God’s good provision for you.

Is your religion real?

¹ J. C. Ryle, *Matthew: Expository Thoughts on the Gospels*, Crossway Classic Commentaries (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1993), p. 138.