

## Two Steps to Maturity. Matthew 15:32-16:12

### The Patient Teacher

One of the great encouragements of reading the gospel is seeing Jesus' patience with His followers.

By the time of the conversation between Jesus and the disciples you heard this morning from Matthew 16:5-12

The disciples have been with Jesus for a while

They've witnessed healings, Jesus' power over nature and evil spirits, his confrontation with the religious authorities. They've most recently seen him feeding 4,000 men plus women and children with seven loaves and a few small fish.

And they've heard his teaching – about righteousness, about the kingdom, and most recently about the source of sin, our rebellion against God, being in our hearts [15:18-20]

But as you've heard, they still don't quite get it, they're not on His wavelength

They hear Him say

<sup>6</sup> Then Jesus told them, ***"Watch out and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees."***

And their discussion v. 7 focuses on bread

<sup>7</sup> They were discussing among themselves, *"We didn't bring any bread."*

It's a response that shows they are pretty clueless and in danger of drawing the wrong conclusion from Jesus' comment, of thinking that Jesus is calling on them to practice segregation in their shopping.

And Jesus is clearly a little exasperated by their obtuseness, their failure to understand. He says

<sup>8</sup> *Aware of this, Jesus said, **"You of little faith, why are you discussing among yourselves that you do not have bread?"** <sup>9</sup> **Don't you understand yet? Don't you remember the five loaves for the five thousand and how many baskets you collected?"** <sup>10</sup> **Or the seven loaves for the four thousand and how many large baskets you collected***

He's exasperated, but Jesus doesn't give up on them

He keeps teaching them, nurturing their faith by reasoned rebuke and repeated warning

He keeps helping them to grow, to mature as His followers

In fact, as we see at the end of the gospel, He doesn't even give up on them when they all abandon him when he is arrested

He is patient

As someone who has found over the years that I can also at times be very slow to understand,

slow to change my thinking and acting to be in tune with our Saviour's life and teaching

I am encouraged by our Saviour's patience with His disciples, and grateful to have been shown that same patience throughout my life

And I'm also grateful that in his patient teaching of His first followers – He is also teaching us, in His maturing their understanding He is maturing ours.

That is what is happening here in Matthew 16

In the rebuke v. 8 and warning v. 6, 11 He gives them here so that they can keep growing as His followers – we have our Lord’s instruction that will help us keep growing

In understanding, in faith, in fruitful obedience

Growing to maturity.

So – if a follower – tune in to this passage, for Jesus is teaching you how to keep growing as His follower

Not yet a believer in Jesus – you might find Jesus addressing here some of the attitudes that are holding you back from committing to Him, especially in what He says of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

### **Hear the Rebuke**

As you heard Jesus has just been challenged by the Pharisees and Sadducees – the two main religious parties of the day – for a sign 16:1

The Pharisees, who we have met before in the gospel were biblical legalists, people who believed their diligent conformity to Old Testament law, a conformity that was ensured by their keeping their traditions, would earn God’s favour and cause Him to send His Messiah to rescue them

The Sadducees you could think of as rationalist conservatives, a party of the wealthy elite.

The Pharisees and Sadducees were opposed to each other on many things, but they are united in their concern about and opposition to Jesus’ teaching – so they test Him by asking Him

To ‘show them a sign from heaven’

And it is after they have left that confrontation behind them that Jesus says to His followers

*“Watch out and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.”*

The disciples, aware they have forgotten bread, and probably starting to feel hungry – they’ve just sailed or rowed across the sea of Galilee - v. 5 – have bread on their mind,

<sup>7</sup>*They were discussing among themselves, “We didn’t bring any bread.”*

They seem to think Jesus is giving them shopping advice, perhaps telling them that because of the mutual animosity between the religious parties and Jesus they shouldn’t get bread from those aligned with the parties of the Pharisees and Sadducees

That Jesus is encouraging segregation, a boycott – like the kind religious Jews practiced with the Gentiles

But this discussion just shows to Jesus their complete failure to understand

A failure to understand that has its origin in their ‘little faith’

<sup>8</sup>*Aware of this, Jesus said, “You of little faith, why are you discussing among yourselves that you do not have bread?*

<sup>9</sup>*Don’t you understand yet?*

They have a preoccupation with their material needs – that distorts their understanding of Jesus’ teaching, a preoccupation that stems from their little faith

How could they think that when they were with Jesus, were serving Jesus, provision of bread would ever be an issue

<sup>9</sup>*Don’t you understand yet? Don’t you remember the five loaves for the five thousand and how many baskets you collected? <sup>10</sup>Or the seven loaves for the four thousand and how many large baskets you collected? <sup>11</sup>Why is it you*

*don't understand that when I told you, 'Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees,' it wasn't about bread?"*

Jesus had demonstrated not once, but twice, that He had the power to meet all their material needs, especially for bread, the power of the Creator God to multiply the provision of His creation to sustain them.

How could they think He would be concerned about where they might obtain bread?

More, he had already taught that where His followers sought His kingdom and righteousness God would provide all they needed

Back in chapter 6 Jesus, again referring to their little faith, had said

*Matthew 6: <sup>30</sup> If that's how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and thrown into the furnace tomorrow, won't he do much more for you—you of little faith? <sup>31</sup> So don't worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' <sup>32</sup> For the Gentiles eagerly seek all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. <sup>33</sup> But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be provided for you.*

Their pre-occupation with their immediate material needs – with bread – meant they misunderstood entirely what Jesus was getting at. He was talking about, warning about, the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees

Not about whether or not they might buy bread from them

And Jesus says this pre-occupation that distorted their thinking, that frustrated their engagement with Jesus' teaching – had its origin in their little faith

In the inadequacy of Their trust in Jesus and His power, in this case to provide for His followers engaged in serving Him

Their Little faith meant they still had a back to front discipleship. Jesus had taught them to be concerned first, up front, with His Kingdom and righteousness, with seeking to live by Jesus' rule and teaching, and trust God to provide

But they were Worrying first about food – and how theirs would be provided

And that preoccupation showed they were still thinking of an outside in obedience, not an inside out one

They were still thinking that somehow who they might buy bread from and the food they would then eat, could affect their belonging to Jesus' people, could perhaps defile them. Yet Jesus was talking about the attitude of their hearts, what was going on inside.

We should listen to Jesus' rebuke

And ask ourselves – is my problem in understanding what Jesus is teaching, in getting on to Jesus' wavelength, to know what He is calling us to do in His word, in growing as His disciple

Because of my pre-occupation with the material needs of this present life – with food and clothes, jobs and housing.

A pre-occupation that comes from my little faith,

From An anxiousness about those things that has its roots in not trusting the Lord Jesus, His capacity to know and provide all I need where I give myself to do His will – as He has promised

Does my little faith, a little faith that means my mind is full with this world's concerns and my immediate needs, mean I am missing what Jesus is saying?

And Does it mean I am Always wanting Jesus to be talking about my pre-occupations – how I can have a happier, more secure, more materially prosperous life, and so fail to hear what He is actually saying?

Now I know those are pretty general questions.

But that pre-occupation with our worldly needs and wants that comes from little faith is like cataracts in the lenses of our eyes.

A cataract doesn't just distort our perception of this object or that object – blur cars, but not trees

All the light coming into our eyes goes through our lenses and so a cataract

distorts, clouds, everything we look at in every situation – cars, trees, people's faces

So that preoccupation effects our understanding of Jesus' will generally.

It can effect our understanding of the love we are called to show, placing severe limits on it out of fear of not having enough for ourselves, when Jesus calls us to love as He has loved us – as greatly as any can love, laying down His life for us. Does our little faith stop us from really grasping what it means to lay down our lives for others?

And does it stop us from understanding what we are called to when we are called to go and make disciples of all nations – our little faith making us think – that is just for the keen. Can't be for me because I am not financially secure yet

Does it stop us engaging with what Jesus might want us to do when He says

*Luke 16:<sup>9</sup> And I tell you, **make friends for yourselves by means of worldly wealth so that when it fails, they may welcome you into eternal dwellings.***

All just examples for you to consider

But we know that little faith can, as with the disciples here, blind us to the importance of being discerning about the teaching, the ideas, that you allow to enter your mind, your heart – the thinking, willing, feeling centre of our being from which all our talking and acting flow [15:18-20]

When Jesus said 'Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees' He wasn't talking about who makes or where you buy your bread – which is why, by the way, Christians are good for the unity of a multifaith society

We don't say – you can only shop, only engage in commerce, with people like us because others will make you unclean

Whether we can eat the food on sale isn't effected by whether they said Muslim prayers over the meat they've slaughtered or have a little Buddha in the corner of the Thai takeaway

In Chapter 15 Jesus has just said

*Matthew 15:<sup>11</sup> **It's not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth—this defiles a person.***

<sup>17</sup> "Don't you realize that whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach and is eliminated? <sup>18</sup> But what comes out of the mouth comes from the heart, and this defiles a person. <sup>19</sup> For from the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, sexual immoralities, thefts, false testimonies, slander. <sup>20</sup> These are the things that defile a person; but eating with unwashed hands does not defile a person.

Jesus is not talking about where or from whom we can buy our food

But He is giving a very serious warning about taking in, ingesting, the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees, as v. 12 makes clear

<sup>11</sup> *Why is it you don't understand that when I told you, 'Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees,' it wasn't about bread?"* <sup>12</sup> **Then they understood that he had not told them to beware of the leaven in bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.**

### Heed the warning

Jesus likens their teaching to leaven – something that spreads to affect the whole, that can't be petitioned of into a safe compartment but, though starting small, will pervade everything – in this case every part of our relationship with God

What was the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees?

And why is it so dangerous?

The place to start in answering that question is the encounter at the beginning of this chapter

*Matthew 16: The Pharisees and Sadducees approached, and tested him, asking him to show them a sign from heaven. <sup>2</sup> He replied, "When evening comes you say, 'It will be good weather because the sky is red.' <sup>3</sup> And in the morning, 'Today will be stormy because the sky is red and threatening.' You know how to read the appearance of the sky, but you can't read the signs of the times. <sup>4</sup> An evil and adulterous generation demands a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah." Then he left them and went away.*

This is not the first time the Pharisees asked for a sign.

They had asked for a sign earlier having just attributed Jesus' casting out demons to the power of Satan. They had said

<sup>24</sup> *When the Pharisees heard this, they said, "This man drives out demons only by Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons."*

And then we read

*Matthew 12: <sup>38</sup> Then some of the scribes and Pharisees said to him, "Teacher, we want to see a sign from you."*

And then as here Jesus had pointed to Jonah as the only sign that will be given

<sup>39</sup> *He answered them, "An evil and adulterous generation demands a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. <sup>40</sup> For as Jonah was in the belly of the huge fish three days and three nights, so the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth three days and three nights. <sup>41</sup> The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at Jonah's preaching; and look—something greater than Jonah is here.*

Now, What is wrong with their request for a sign – or better, what is wrong with the attitude that demands a sign from heaven, from God, before they will believe?

Firstly, recognise they are asking for a sign despite all the signs they had seen.

That's the point of Jesus' remarks in vv. 2-4 about their weather knowledge

<sup>2</sup> *He replied, "When evening comes you say, 'It will be good weather because the sky is red.' <sup>3</sup> And in the morning, 'Today will be stormy because the sky is red and threatening.' You know how to read the appearance of the sky, but you can't read the signs of the times.*

With the weather they can draw, and do draw, correct conclusions from their observations

Why not with Jesus?

Jesus has given them many signs, much to observe, that tells them what kind of time they are living in

It is the time when the King of God's Kingdom is amongst them

He had said back in 12:28

*Matthew 12: <sup>28</sup> If I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.*

And that is the obvious conclusion from what Jesus has been doing – that God's reign is present with Jesus because He is God's King

And since that encounter Matthew records Jesus working many signs of the kingdom

14:14 – healed the sick in the crowd

14:20-21 fed five thousand men with five loaves and two fishes.

14:33-36 – had healed in Genessaret, just by letting people touch the hem of his garment

15:28 healed the SyroPhoenician's daughter

And just before feeding the 4,000 we read that

*Matthew 15: <sup>29</sup> Moving on from there, Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee. He went up on a mountain and sat there, <sup>30</sup> and large crowds came to him, including the lame, the blind, the crippled, those unable to speak, and many others. They put them at his feet, and he healed them. <sup>31</sup> So the crowd was amazed when they saw those unable to speak talking, the crippled restored, the lame walking, and the blind seeing, and they gave glory to the God of Israel.*

Jesus' ministry wasn't being conducted in the dark or undercover.

It was out in the open, with many witnesses to the power of His presence

So this demand for a sign is not a request from curiosity or uncertainty. It is a request from unbelief, from a refusal to see, that seeks to support unbelief, support a refusal to acknowledge what is plain.

Jesus says He will not pander to unbelief

He repeats that the only sign is the sign of Jonah, and Jesus specified in chapter 12 what aspect of Jonah's story was meant

*<sup>40</sup> For as Jonah was in the belly of the huge fish three days and three nights, so the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth three days and three nights*

That sign – is something no-one will witness just as No one witnessed Jonah in the whale

All that brought Nineveh to repentance was the prophet's preaching, not witnessing a sign.

And all that the generation of Jesus' hearers will receive is the report of a sign, the report of the resurrection after he had been in the tomb three days and three nights – that is three days by the Jewish reckoning where part of a day is counted as a whole day – the report of the resurrection in the apostles preaching that Jesus is Lord. Like the Ninevites, they will hear the word, not see a sign.

Jesus does not pander to unbelief

And he does not pander to unbelief because Secondly, what this request reveals is their determined pride, their determination to be the ones in control

They are demanding that for them to believe God must prove Himself to them on their terms – the sign they specify, when they demand it. The signs God has already given, and given abundantly in the ministry of Jesus are not enough

For Jesus to be the Christ He must be the Christ of their expectations, a Christ who will reinforce, not challenge, their views. The word He preaches is not enough

In the request for a sign they are demanding to be dealt with on their terms. It is a demand that says they and their judgments and protecting their interests and position are what is most important, and must remain so.

There is no acknowledging God as God in this request, no recognition that the holy almighty Creator God must have the initiative in relating to us and He is to be related to on His terms alone.

They are demanding to dictate the terms of their belief

And even though asking for a sign may sound pious, look like they are giving Jesus a go, it makes genuine repentance impossible – for believing will only happen on their terms, leave them calling the shots in their relationship with God

To believe on the basis of a sign they demand while rejecting all the signs given means that Right at the core of their being there would be no humbling themselves – just self congratulation for having their demand met.

The leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees is unbelief, determined unbelief in the face of the evidence

An unbelief that has its origin in, and is designed to protect, their sovereignty

Their being the boss, staying in control, holding on to the lie Adam believed that they can be God's equals

And that unbelief and determination to stay in control runs through their teaching

We have seen it already expressed in chapter 15, in their criticism of lack of handwashing by Jesus' disciples

What does Jesus say in response?

*Matthew 15:<sup>3</sup> He answered them, "Why do **you break God's commandment because of your tradition?**<sup>4</sup> For God said: **Honor your father and your mother; and, Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must be put to death.**<sup>5</sup> But you say, 'Whoever tells his father or mother, "Whatever benefit you might have received from me is a gift committed to the temple,"<sup>6</sup> he does not have to honor his father.' In this way, **you have nullified the word of God because of your tradition.**<sup>7</sup> Hypocrites! Isaiah prophesied correctly about you when he said:*

*<sup>8</sup> **This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me.***

*<sup>9</sup> **They worship me in vain, teaching as doctrines human commands."***

They put their word over the word of God, insisting that what they think God should be pleased with is more important than what God says He is pleased with.

This priority given to their teaching over God's word is the natural consequence of thinking they are the ones who know best what God should say or do if He is to be really God, that they can dictate to God the terms of how God should be served.

When you think about it, the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees, what they teach and the attitude it embodies, is not that uncommon,

It's not just these first century religious groups that have a stubborn unbelief in the face of God revealing Himself clearly – in creation and then in the gospel of the incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus

An unbelief that is motivated by staying in control

An unbelief that demands God prove Himself to them on their terms

That unbelief can come in religious or irreligious dress

Those who openly say I'll only believe in God if He proves himself to me

From the mocker who says If God is real let Him prove it by striking me dead/ with lightning

To the Dawkins who says I will only believe if God leaves unmistakable evidence of His presence that I can detect by my scientific investigations [and so relate to as an object of my scientific discovery]

Or those who say that they won't believe unless God answers their prayer in the exactly the way they want

An unbelief that wants to dictate to God the terms on which He might be worshipped, that wants God to accommodate His expectations to our retaining control over our lives.

Whether that is the demand He accepts my desire for wealth and security, or my sexual sin, or my understanding of reality developed from my own particular experience

My sense I can only be myself if God places no restraint on my self expression

Or that if I do work for God he owes me a good life

The teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees that demands God prove Himself to them on their terms and that they can dictate to God how He should be God – is common

And Jesus warns us against it because it is destructive of any relationship with God

Ingesting this bread won't just give indigestion, but kill you.

Think what the effect of their teaching would have been on the apostles at this time in Jesus' ministry

Never confess, as they are about to, that Jesus is the Christ 16:16

Never accept Him being the Lord He is, who conquers through suffering and dying. They had enough trouble with that anyhow, But if you are determined you know better, that you are the judge of how God is to work in the world, you could never accept the cross

And they could never be disciples on Jesus' terms, accept his call for followers to take up their cross and follow Him, for you have to stay in charge

Think of what happens to our relationship to God where their teaching takes root

trusting dependence on your Lord is destroyed – for you have to stay in charge

faithful obedience is destroyed, for the last word on what God can require of you is your own

Growing in knowledge of God is destroyed, for God can't be anything other than you have already decided He can be

And you can never grow in knowledge of His will, for you won't hear what you don't already approve of.

The teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees really is poisonous, effecting every part of a person's relationship with God, frustrating any possibility of a real relationship with the living God.

We need to heed Jesus' warning, and act on it for their teaching is the spirit of our age

So how do we act on Jesus' warning, how do we resist the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees, the unbelief that says we can dictate to God the terms on which we trust and serve Him?

Remembering is the way to resist, just as remembering is the way to grow our little faith

Remembering specifically the sign given to an unbelieving generation, the sign of Jonah

Remembering that the Lord who was three days in the earth is risen



The Pharisees and Sadducees sought to prove their determined unbelief right, to show they really are in charge, to prove their teaching true – by killing in the death of Jesus the Son of God the God who won't be god on their terms, who won't cede rule of the world to them.

Just as those who are determined to show their unbelief right are still trying to kill God, with their words if not with nails

But on the third day, after those three Jewish days and nights in the ground, God raised Jesus from the dead

Raised in the body in which He died

And to remember that is to know that our refusal to believe, our demand that God cater to our unbelief, our rejection of God's rule over us

Does not stop God being God, who will be who He chooses to be – not what we demand Him to be

Who will be related to only on His terms, never on ours

To remember that death and resurrection is to know that the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees is a lie, a lie that kills – like the devils lie that we would be like God, God's equals

We are not in control

We don't dictate to God, but can only receive what HE gives, receive the relationship He invites us to

And that is good news

For God being God, not pandering to our proud unbelief

Sending His Christ to do His will, to be the Lord and Christ He wills Him to be and not what people wanted, a Christ who would die and be buried

Means we have a Saviour

A patient Saviour of those with little faith

For He has died for all our sins – including for the little faith that does not honour Him as He deserves

Does not honour His love or power, or His faithfulness to His promises

A patient Saviour who wants us to grow in our faithful, fruitful following, and provides us with His true and sure word so that we can.

### **Keep Growing**

So – if you are not yet a believer in Jesus

Consider what is holding you back

Is it a pride that wants to dictate to God the terms on which you will believe, that wants to stay in control of your life?

Recognise it, and turn from it

It has no future but death

The Lord Jesus has given you in His death and rising abundant proof of both God's power and goodness

And also that God won't accommodate to your dictates

He offers life

But only on His terms

But they are good terms

Repentance and faith in Jesus

Acknowledging the truth that you are not God and not in charge

And confessing that the crucified and risen Jesus, the Son of God, is in charge

With the authority to forgive you and give you life

And if you are a believer

Hear Jesus' rebuke of our little faith that frustrates our understanding of His will by not trusting Him for our needs

And Heed Jesus' warning

And grow in faith and resist the lies that say we can dictate to God

By remembering

Remembering His love and might

Remembering His death and rising