

NOON BIBLE STUDY: MATTHEW 16 (PART 1)

Matthew 16:1-4 - Show Us A Sign

Who are Pharisees? Who are Sadducees?

The **Sadducees** were a small but powerful Jewish sect, active from around the 2nd century BC until the destruction of the temple in AD 70. They were priestly aristocrats, closely tied to the temple, politics, and wealth. The Sadducees accepted only the written Torah (Genesis–Deuteronomy) as authoritative. They rejected the Oral Law and traditions embraced by the Pharisees. This made their theology minimalist and rigid - no resurrection, no angels, no elaborate afterlife.

Acts 23:8 - The Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, and that there are neither angels nor spirits, but the Pharisees believe all these things.

The Sadducees were closely tied to the Jerusalem temple and its priesthood. Many high priests during the New Testament era were Sadducees (e.g., Caiaphas, Annas). Their power and influence depended on the temple's function and Rome's favor. Because of this, they would have been opposed to any person or movement that seemed to be stirring unrest.

Because of the stark contrasts between the Pharisees and Sadducees, it would have been unusual for them to be aligned - but here they are together because of their mutual skepticism and disdain towards Jesus.

Q - What was the intention of the Pharisees and Sadducees in their request?

“Weather patterns...” This was a common piece of folk wisdom in the ancient world (and even today!): *“Red sky at night, sailor’s delight. Red sky in morning, sailor’s warning.”* This means that a red sky at sunset usually signals good weather ahead, while a red sky at sunrise often means a storm is approaching. People in agrarian and coastal cultures paid close attention to the sky—it affected farming, fishing, and travel.

Q - What should the Pharisees and Sadducees have been seeing to know about what was happening?

v. 4 - “An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign” - What does this mean? Why does Jesus use these words?

Jesus calls the religious leaders “evil” because of their arrogance, pride, and hypocrisy. Even in their question of him, their motives are not pure but to “test”.

Jesus calls the religious leaders “adulterous” because they are not faithful to God. They are not obediently adhering to God and his word - instead they are doing their own thing and making their own religious system. This word was occasionally used of Israel in the Old Testament when they were worshipping idols and intermingling with the pagan practices of the world. The Pharisees and Sadducees are not worshipping Baal or Asherah, but they are creating a god in their own image and likeness with their traditions and human-made systems. They aren’t aligning with Babylon or Egypt, but they are not exclusively devoted to Yahweh, as much as they might think they are.

And thus...”evil and adulterous”...looking for a “sign” to confirm whether they should devote their time and energy into something other than their own plans. Jesus knows that even if he *did* do a miracle in their presence (which surely had happened at this point in his ministry), they would not believe. They weren’t looking for a reason to believe. They were looking for a reason to not have to.

“Sign Of Jonah” (v. 4) - This is now the second time Jesus has used this phrase as a reply to his opponents nefarious demand for a “sign” (also Matthew 12:38-41 answering scribes and Pharisees). For them the sign they will see and be forced to reconcile with is his death and resurrection.

Matthew 16:5-12 - Bread Of The Pharisees

It wasn’t about the bread. Jesus used the occasion of the disciples not having bread to teach them a spiritual lesson. Jesus challenges the disciples because they are worried about literal bread when he had recently shown that he knows how to make sure there is plenty of literal bread (feeding of 5000 & 4000)

Instead he is talking about the bread of these two groups and specifically the leaven - as we discussed previously in Matthew 13 - a small but impactful agent in bread.

v. 6 and 11 - “watch out” - <3708> ὁράω horao - to see, perceive, give attention to

Matthew 2:2 - "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we **saw** His star in the east and have come to worship Him."

Matthew 3:16 - After being baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened, and he **saw** the Spirit of God descending as a dove and lighting on Him,

Matthew 5:8 - Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall **see** God.

"Beware" - <4337> προσέχω prosecho - to give attention, be on guard, pay attention

The word used to bring a ship into land. Think about that mind picture of watching.

Acts 8:9-11 - Now there was a man named Simon, who formerly was practicing magic in the city and astonishing the people of Samaria, claiming to be someone great; 10 and they all, from smallest to greatest, were giving attention to him, saying, "This man is what is called the Great Power of God." 11 And they were **giving him attention** because he had for a long time astonished them with his magic arts.

Acts 16:14 - A woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple fabrics, a worshiper of God, was listening; and the Lord opened her heart to **respond** to the things spoken by Paul.

1 Timothy 3:8 - Deacons likewise must be men of dignity, not double-tongued, or **addicted** to much wine or fond of sordid gain,

Q - What does it mean to "beware". What does someone do when they are "beware?"

What are the things Jesus would have been concerned about for his disciples in light of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees?

Pharisees

1. Hypocrisy – Pretending to be righteous outwardly but being corrupt inwardly
2. Legalism – Adding human rules to God's law
3. Spiritual Pride – Loving status and recognition
4. False Teaching/Expectations about the Kingdom of God

Sadducees -

1. Neglect of God's Word (Beyond the Torah)
2. Rejection of Resurrection and Angels - this was directly related to their neglecting of the full Bible.
3. Political Compromise and Control of the Temple - they valued comfort, power and influence over honoring God, trusting God and longing for His Kingdom

Attributes of leaven: Small but impactful and subtlety

As we close this section, Jesus' warning about "the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees" still speaks loudly. It's easy to think false teaching only comes in the form of heresy or obvious error, but Jesus shows us it can be far more subtle, an attitude of pride, a reliance on rules instead of grace, a comfortable skepticism that drains the power out of faith. Whether it's the hypocrisy of external religion or the cold, calculating doubt that strips away mystery and eternity, Jesus calls His disciples to discern what is shaping their hearts. Leaven always spreads - and if we're not watchful, it will quietly redefine our understanding of God, faith, and ourselves.

I also wonder if this warning has an additional spiritual meaning relating to the fact that the disciples might have been hungry too. Perhaps they realized they forgot the bread only after the first disciple's stomach growled. When you're hungry, you're in a compromised situation. You might not think straight, you might settle for non-nutritious options simply because they are convenient (aka food that is fast?). You aren't thinking about the effects of fast food, you're thinking about how it meets the need. When we are spiritually hungry, we need to be on guard against the false food too - a quick fix, a quick answer, a shortcut that leaves us settling for less than God's best.

But Jesus doesn't just rebuke misunderstanding - he invites his followers to grow. He is patient with disciples who confuse spiritual warnings with grocery problems. He reminds them of his past provision to strengthen their present trust. He teaches them to see deeper, to think differently, to recognize that true discipleship means developing spiritual sensitivity. So the question we're left with is this: are we paying attention? Not just to what's happening around us - but to what's growing within us? Because Jesus doesn't want us just to avoid bad teaching - he wants to form in us a faith that is alert, humble, and rooted in the truth.