

Matthew 16:1-4

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The Pharisees have teamed up with their rivals, the Sadducees, and greet Jesus in order to trap Him soon after He returns to the district of Galilee. They ask Jesus for a sign to prove that He is the Messiah. They hope to either make Him work for them, or to use His refusal to perform for them as evidence that He is not the Messiah.

The parallel Gospel account for this encounter is found in Mark 8:11-13.

As soon as *Jesus* returned to Galilee from His journey into Tyre and the Decapolis *the Pharisees and Sadducees came up*, probably from Jerusalem, to test *Him*. *The Pharisees* had tested Him several times already (Matthew 9:11-13, 12:1-45, 15:1-9). This time *the Sadducees came with them*.

The Pharisees and *the Sadducees* functioned as two separate parties, with different domains, beliefs, and visions for success.

The Pharisees were experts of the Old Testament and seen as religious leaders among the Jewish community. *They* controlled the synagogues, local gathering places, and centers of worship where God's law was studied every day and taught each Sabbath. Maintaining Jewish culture and traditions was important to *the Pharisees*, and their concern for the law was admirable. To this end *they* set up boundaries and a hedge around the law, condemning any who approached a possible transgression.

However well-intentioned their customs were in the beginning, they eventually became an oppressive law unto itself. *The Pharisees* had begun to supersede God's law which they originally intended to protect. Their traditions became not only their idol, but also a source of political power—which they abused hypocritically and oppressively. *The Pharisees* wielded their legalistic list of rules to crush anyone who dared defy them. However, they cloaked their approach in the morality of rigorous adherence to the Bible. They sought to control people through strict adherence to their rules. *They* sought to preserve and promote their Jewish heritage and way of life in the face of Roman domination. In this respect *the Pharisees* might be considered the “political and theological” conservatives. Their cultural rivals in the Jewish faith were *the Sadducees*.

The Sadducees were priests. *They* too were generally revered by the people. *They* performed sacrifices and carried out rituals in the Temple. And it was from their control of the Temple that *they* derived their prestige. *They* were largely Jewish aristocrats in and around the capital city of Jerusalem. Because of their wealth and power, *the Sadducees* tended to be more sympathetic to Rome than *the Pharisees* who cast a wary eye toward foreign influence. *The Sadducees* seemed to be content as long as the people came to offer sacrifices (and pay them to do so). It was *the Sadducees'* affiliates, the moneychangers, whose tables *Jesus* turned over when *He* came to the Temple (Matthew 21:12-13; John 2:13-22). In addition to being comfortable with Rome and its

excesses, the Sadducees were not biblical literalists, and did not believe in angels or the resurrection. In these regards *the Sadducees* might be considered the “political and theological liberals” of mainstream Jewish culture.

The Pharisees stressed legalism. The Sadducees stressed sacrifice. It was unusual for these two Jewish parties to collaborate. Typically, *they* viewed one another as political adversaries and rivals, if not enemies. But *they* worked together when *they* perceived a common threat to their oligarchy. *They* united against John the Baptist (Matthew 3:7). And *they* would unite to destroy *Jesus* (Matthew 21: 45-46, 26:59, John 18:3). Their joint *testing* of *Jesus* here in Magadan was a catalyst toward this wicked end, which will result in the crucifixion of *Jesus*, the Messiah. In doing so, they will both demonstrate that, notwithstanding their political and theological affiliations, their true interest is themselves, and their own power.

The Pharisees and Sadducees asked Jesus to show them a sign from heaven. Earlier some scribes and *Pharisees* made a similar request of *Jesus*: “Teacher, we want to see a sign from You” (Matthew 12:38). At first blush it appears as though these requests were *testing* to see whether or not *Jesus* was the Messiah. The requests seem straight forward enough. If *Jesus* shows them a *sign from heaven*, *He* proves that *He* is the Messiah. If *He* fails to *show them a sign*, then *He* proves *He* is fraud. As teachers of God’s law and as His priests it would have been very appropriate for *them* to sincerely investigate and ascertain if *Jesus* was the Messiah. But this was not what they were doing.

Jesus immediately grasped their insincerity. Just as *He* did when the scribes and *Pharisees* asked *Him* to perform a sign at an earlier time. In that instance, *He* called *the Pharisees and Sadducees* “an evil and adulterous generation” (Matthew 12:39). If *they* had been sincere, *they* would have accepted the plethora of other miracles *Jesus* had previously done as a proof that *He* was the Messiah. But *the Pharisees*, with some exceptions, had already rejected *Jesus* as a conjurer and deceiver (Matthew 12:24). And *the Sadducees*, who only accepted the law of Moses, may never have fully embraced the hope that a future Messiah would come and lead Israel to glory (despite the Messianic promise of Deuteronomy 18:18, which is a part of the law of Moses).

What then, was their purpose in *testing Jesus to show them a sign*?

It was an “Either/Or” trap designed to give the religious establishment the appearance of having control over *Jesus*. If *Jesus* cooperated with them and agreed to prove Himself on their terms, *He* would legitimize them as having authority over Him. But if *Jesus* refused to *show them a sign*, as *they* expected Him to, they would plan to use His failure to pass their test against *Him* as evidence proving *He* was not the Messiah. Either way *He* answered *the Pharisees and Sadducees* expected to come out ahead. This type of “heads we win, tails you lose” framing is consistent across all the various tests of *Jesus* by the Jewish leaders which are recorded in the gospel accounts.

On the one hand, if *Jesus* accepted their offer and performed a miracle at their bidding, *He* would validate the corrupt systems of *the Pharisees and Sadducees*. *He* would be operating within the confines of their kingdom, where *they* were in charge. In exchange for His submission, *Jesus* would presumably be promised to be legitimized by the religious establishment. Or perhaps that

no matter what Jesus did, it would be followed by an endless string of demands, until Jesus was like a puppet with them pulling the strings. If this was their plot, then it was very similar to how the Devil tested *Jesus* in the wilderness (Matthew 4:8-10).

The Pharisees and Sadducees probably suspected by now that *Jesus* would not do what *they* asked *Him* to do. *He* had already refused a similar request from some scribes and *Pharisees* earlier (Matthew 12:38-45). Perhaps they were counting on a similar response, so that *The Pharisees and Sadducees* could in unison tell the people that *they* had looked into *Jesus*, had seriously considered if *He* was the Messiah, but when *they* tested *Him*, *He* failed to prove Himself. By uniting in this way, where there is “bi-partisan” agreement, they might turn the people against Jesus, and back to them, and their self-serving leadership.

Of course, this argument would have been completely untrue. But false pretenses would not bother *the Pharisees and Sadducees*; their entire livelihood was based upon hypocrisy. They had closed their eyes to the evidence, and were now only looking for what advanced their personal agendas.

But Jesus was aware of their trap. *He* did not come to earth in order to legitimize the kingdoms of man (John 18:36). *He* came to establish the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 6:10). *He* did not need to be legitimized by the religious establishment. His legitimacy came from God, His Father (John 5:37). Nor could *they* delegitimize *Him*. *They* were only blind men (Matthew 15:14). *Jesus* was God and *He* had already demonstrated that *He* was the Messiah through the numerous miracles *He* had already performed (Matthew 9:6, John 5:36).

Jesus first dismissed their trap with a strange observation and a rhetorical irony, before telling *them* what *sign* *He* will give to *them* that would definitely prove His true identity.

He replied with a puzzling observation: *When it is evening, you say, ‘It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.’ And in the morning, ‘There will be a storm today, for the sky is red and threatening.’*

This observation seems strange for several reasons. To begin with, it seems off-topic. And it throws His enemies off balance. What has the *weather* to do with miracles proving who the Messiah is? *The Pharisees and Sadducees* do not expect this reply and are unprepared for what *Jesus* says next.

Jesus connects this seemingly random observation to the matter at hand through a rhetorical irony. *Do you know how to discern the appearance of the sky, but cannot discern the signs of the times?* *Jesus* was shaming *them*. He was asking, *how* is it that *you* can *discern* from the color of the sky something as unpredictable as the *weather*? *You* can do this, yet *you* are unable to see that God’s kingdom is upon *you* despite the undeniable *signs* and wonders occurring all around *you*?

This irony is similar to what *He* teaches elsewhere.

“And He was also saying to the crowds, ‘When you see a cloud rising in the west, immediately you say, ‘A shower is coming,’ and so it turns out. And when you see a south wind blowing, you

say, ‘It will be a hot day,’ and it turns out that way. You hypocrites! You know how to analyze the appearance of the earth and the sky, but why do you not analyze this present time?” (Luke 12:54-56)

Nothing *Jesus* could do would please the Jewish leaders, short of submitting to *them* and their corruption. No matter what He did, they were going to be against Him. *They* denied *Jesus*’s claimed authority (Mark 2:7). *They* denied that His miracles took place (John 9:18-21). And when *they* could no longer do that, *they* claimed *He* was demonic (Matthew 12:24). This is similar to how *they* dismissed *Jesus* and John the Baptist for opposite reasons (Matthew 11:16-18). *They* were so blinded by their conclusions that it did not matter what *Jesus* said or did, *they* would obstinately insist that *they* were right, and *He* was wrong.

After His off-balancing observation and rhetorical irony, *Jesus* finally gave *them* His answer. It was not one of the responses *they* were hoping to receive. As in all other cases, *Jesus* defeated their framing of an issue by swatting it aside and advancing His own framing. Accordingly, their attempt failed to advance a narrative that could be used to control Him. In fact, *Jesus*’s response was so thoroughly devastating to their desired end that they accomplished nothing that could be used against *Him*.

Jesus offered a condensed version of the response *He* gave to *the Pharisees* when they came to *Jesus* earlier without *the Sadducees*, and had asked Him for a sign. In that episode from chapter 12, *Jesus* gave an extended answer, condemning *the Pharisees* for not listening to someone greater than Jonah. In chapter 12 *Jesus* said, “The men of Nineveh will stand up with this generation at the judgment, and will condemn it because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and behold, something greater than Jonah is here” (Matthew 12:41). The “something greater than Jonah” was of course *Jesus*.

Here in chapter 16, *Jesus* answered *the Pharisees* much more abruptly, *An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign; and a sign will not be given it, except the sign of Jonah*. Then *Jesus* promptly *left them and went away*.

Jesus called *the Pharisees and Sadducees* “an evil and adulterous generation.” *They* were evil because they were opposed to the kingdom of God and viciously tried to destroy His Messiah. *They* were adulterous, because both parties were disloyal and unfaithful to God, despite their pretenses. *The Pharisees* were loyal to their traditions and the prestige it gave *them*, while *the Sadducees* were in love with the wealth and power they gained through compromising with the Romans, and extorting God’s people in the Temple.

We can assume that deep down they desperately wanted to hear from God, as all people have eternity placed in their heart (Ecclesiastes 3:11). *They* sought after a sign from Him. But *they* demand that God answer them according to their own terms. *They* refuse to listen to God on His terms. And so, *Jesus*, cleverly says, *no sign will be given them, except the sign of Jonah*. *Jesus* did not give them the answer they were hoping to get. *He* effectively said “I am not going to give you a sign [yet], but I will give you a sign in the future—the mysterious sign of Jonah.” *Jesus* refused to be controlled by His enemies and submit to their requests. And *He* did not give *them* the ammunition *they* were hoping to use against *Him*.

In His previous response, Matthew records *Jesus*'s explanation of what *He* meant by *the sign of Jonah*:

“for just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.”
(Matthew 12:40)

Jesus cryptically told *them* that the definitive and undeniable *sign* that would forever prove that *He* was the Messiah was His resurrection after being dead for three days. *Jesus* was telling *them*, “*You will know* that I am the Messiah when I rise from the dead after being buried for three days!” But no one understood what *He* meant by this statement until after this remarkable event had occurred. Even the disciples did not understand, even though *Jesus* told them plainly. Even after *Jesus* rose from the dead, most of these Jewish leaders continued to live in denial (Acts 7).

This is the third time *Jesus* has alluded to His own death as Messiah (Matthew 10:38, Matthew 12:39-40). And it is the second time *Jesus* foretold His resurrection.

After undermining *the Pharisees and Sadducees*' trap, *Jesus* left them and went away.

Biblical Text

16 The Pharisees and Sadducees came up, and putting *Jesus* to the test, they asked Him to show them a sign from heaven. ² But He replied to them, “When it is evening, you say, ‘*It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.*’ ³ And in the morning, ‘*There will be a storm today, for the sky is red and threatening.*’ You know how to discern the appearance of the sky, but are you unable *to discern* the signs of the times? ⁴ An evil and adulterous generation wants a sign; and *so* a sign will not be given to it, except the sign of Jonah.” And He left them and went away.