

Matthew 16:5-12

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As Jesus and the disciples cross the Sea again, Jesus bids his disciples to beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees. They mistake his meaning and think they are in trouble because they forgot to bring bread. Jesus explains to them that He meant to beware of their teaching.

The parallel Gospel account of this event is found in Mark 8:13-21.
A parallel Gospel account of this teaching is found in Luke 12:1 and Luke 12:54-56.

It seems *Jesus* left Magadan, which was along the northwestern shore of the sea of Galilee (Matthew 15:39), in the district of Galilee, shortly after *He* had arrived. It appears that *The Pharisees and Sadducees* had been there waiting for Him. Now *Jesus and the disciples* crossed to the other side of the Sea of Galilee again. But instead of returning to the Decapolis on the southeastern shore, *they* seem to have arrived at Gaulanitis, the district on the northeastern shore of the sea. This looks to be the case because Matthew soon reports that *Jesus and the disciples* “came into the district of Caesarea Philippi,” just north of Gaulanitis (Matthew 16:13).

Apparently, the following conversation occurred while *Jesus and the disciples* traveled to Caesarea Philippi, just after *they* arrived on the other side of the sea. The journey to Caesarea Philippi would have been about 25 miles, but a difficult 25 miles, since that path ascends roughly 1800 feet in elevation.

When *they* arrived on shore and began the walking portion of their journey, *the disciples* realized that *they had forgotten to bring any bread*. This may have slipped their mind because *they* left in such a hurry to get away from *the Pharisees and Sadducees* or *they* may have *forgotten* for some other reason.

After they realized this, *Jesus said to them*, “*Watch out and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.*” *Leaven* is a substance used to convert flour into *bread*. And *the disciples* were confused by what *He* meant by *leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees*. But instead of asking *Jesus* to explain His statement, *they* supposed the reason *He said that* was because “*we did not bring any bread.*” By this *they* likely assumed that *Jesus* was going to be upset or disappointed in *them* because *they* forgot to bring something to eat. And *they began to discuss this among themselves*, apparently in such a way that *Jesus* would not overhear *them*.

But Jesus was aware of what *they* were saying and interjected. *He* addressed *them* as *You men of little faith*. This was a playful term that *He* occasionally used to describe His disciples (Matthew 6:30, 8:26, 14:31, Luke 12:28). The Greek word is “*Oligopistoi*” and it means “*Little Faiths.*” *Jesus* used this term as a humorously-sarcastic way to point out His *disciples’* immaturity.

He then asked His *disciples*, “*why do you discuss among yourselves that you have no bread?*”

It appears that none of *them* were willing to give *Jesus* an answer. So, *Jesus* continued to ask *them* more questions to rhetorically lead their minds to better understand what *He* meant. *Jesus* asked *them* to recall His miracles and consider if their speculations about what *He* meant aligned with what *He* actually meant.

Do you not yet understand or remember the five loaves of the five thousand, and how many baskets full you picked up? Or the seven loaves of the four thousand, and how many large baskets full you picked up?

These questions recalled the recent events when *Jesus* miraculously fed the multitudes, not once but twice (Matthew 14:15-21; 15:32-38). As the disciples considered these things and *Jesus*' ability to miraculously provide food, *He* asked *How is it that you do not understand that I did not speak to you concerning bread?*

Instead of talking about physical *bread* or food *Jesus* was warning them to *beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees*. It was only after *they* considered these things, that *the disciples then understood that He did not mean to beware of the Pharisees and Sadducees literal leaven of actual bread, but of the "leaven" of their teaching.*

Jesus used the term *leaven* not to describe the physical substance that is used to make flour and dough rise. *He* used it as a metaphor to describe *the Pharisees and Sadducees' teaching*. As *leaven* permeates flour and causes it to rise and take form into bread, *the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees* had a permeating effect upon life. *Leaven* is only a small portion of the volume of bread dough, but has an outsized effect on its substance. In a similar way, the teaching of the Pharisees had an outsized effect; however, unlike with bread dough, their *leaven* was harmful.

What exactly was *Jesus* warning of when *He* told His disciples to *beware of their teaching*? It likely was not a rule or point of doctrine, so much as it was their way of thinking. The perspective they had adopted. There are at least two possible answers to what *He* meant by *leaven* in this context.

1. Beware of falling for effective tactics used for evil purposes.
2. Beware of legalism, where the power to enforce, compare, and judge is elevated above the spirit and purpose of the law.

The first possibility is that *the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees* referred to their self-seeking, but highly effective approach to life. This was aptly demonstrated by their subtle tricks and traps they set when trying to corner an opponent, as they did with *Jesus*. Just as *leaven* is nearly invisible but has a decisive impact on bread, so too did *the Pharisees and Sadducees'* definitions and presuppositions have an enormous impact in determining the outcome of an argument.

They were very skilled at framing arguments in such a way to arrive at the outcome they desired. But they were not seeking what was true, or beneficial to anyone but themselves. They were simply oriented toward maintaining their own status, and were willing to twist, bend, and justify

themselves to advance that end. Of course *Jesus* was savvy to their tactics, and they were unable to beat Him.

They had just failed to corner *Jesus* into an unwinnable Either/Or when they demanded that *He* give them a sign (Matthew 16:1). A more famous example of another treacherous Either/Or set for *Jesus* was when they would later ask Him whether it was lawful to pay taxes to Caesar (Matthew 22:15-22). *Jesus* knew if *He* accepted their definitions and their terms of the debate, that they would win the argument and *He* would lose, possibly with deadly consequences.

Jesus shrewdly rejected *the leaven* of their faulty assumptions and shifting definitions from the outset. And in this remark, *He* may have been warning *the disciples* to do the same in their future dealings with *Pharisees* or *Sadducees*. That tells us that it was not the tactics that were the problem, it was the intent. Their purpose was self-seeking, rather than God-seeking.

The Bible clearly teaches dire negative consequences for those who are selfishly ambitious (Romans 2:8). *Jesus* might have been warning the disciples to follow His example of shrewdness, and recognize the underlying evil intent, and know how to defeat it (by being better at framing than they). The disciples did advance in this manner. We will see in the book of Acts, after *Jesus* rose from the dead and ascended, that the disciples ask the Jewish leaders “Should we obey God or you?” (Acts 4:19). That is devastatingly good framing, when asked of a group of religious leaders!

A second possibility for what *teaching Jesus* was describing as *leaven* was the heart of legalism in which *the Pharisees and Sadducees* taught. This was similar to a warning *He* gave His *disciples* to *beware of* during the Sermon on the Mount.

“Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes nor figs from thistles, are they? So every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. So then, you will know them by their fruits.”

(Matthew 7:15-20)

It wasn’t that the doctrines or rules *of the Pharisees and Sadducees* were overtly wrong or evil. If they were obviously against the Law, *Jesus* would not need to warn *the disciples* to *beware of* them, because they could easily see the folly for themselves and avoid it. But the heart of legalism behind their system was subtle and dangerous. Their moral rules were rigged to make them look good, often at the expense of others. They set themselves up as the judge of others. They used comparisons only as it suited them. Their system produced self-righteousness, but did not produce harmony with God or others. As we will see in Chapter 23, their legalistic system became a moral justification for exploitation. It became the opposite of the intent of the Law of Moses.

God gave the Ten Commandments in order to shift culture away from “the strong have a right to exploit the weak” as with the pagan cultures of Egypt and Canaan (see Leviticus 18 for a list of

common practices in those cultures). Instead of “strong exploit the weak” God elevated a law where “Neighbors love one another, and pursue what is of mutual benefit.” The purpose of the law was to allow everyone an opportunity to grow, prosper, and benefit. As *Jesus* pointed out in Matthew 23, *the Pharisees* had, through their application of the oral tradition, turned the law into an instrument of exploitation.

Embracing their moral system with its seemingly good rules would make one proud and arrogant. It would also provide a moral cloak of justification to cover a lifestyle of exploitation. It could make one look good, but it would not make someone be good. Embracing their moral system may bring about an earthly reward, but it would not lead them into God’s kingdom (Matthew 6:1). God’s kingdom is about loving others, and seeking the benefit of others. In God’s kingdom, serving others is the path to our highest and best self-interest.

Embracing their moral system would lead to missing out on the infinite rewards of the kingdom of God, and throwing one’s inheritance into Gehenna—the fiery city dump just south of Jerusalem (Matthew 23:15).

In summary, *the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees* could *leaven* the heart of a man into a lover of rules and prestige, instead of a lover of God and people.

It is likely that *Jesus* meant both of these warnings as well as much more when *He* told His *disciples to beware of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees*.

Biblical Text

⁵ And the disciples came to the other side of the sea, but they had forgotten to bring any bread. ⁶ And Jesus said to them, “Watch out and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.” ⁷ They began to discuss this among themselves, saying, “He said that because we did not bring any bread.” ⁸ But Jesus, aware of this, said, “You men of little faith, why are you discussing among yourselves the fact that you have no bread? ⁹ Do you not yet understand nor remember the five loaves of the five thousand, and how many baskets you picked up? ¹⁰ Nor the seven loaves of the four thousand, and how many large baskets you picked up? ¹¹ How is it that you do not understand that I did not speak to you about bread? But beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.” ¹² Then they understood that He did not say to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.