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Matthew 16:1 - 16:12



Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

In this passage, Jesus' disciples were concerned about not having enough bread to eat, but Jesus reminded them to focus on important spiritual matters rather than material concerns. He used the metaphor of leaven to warn against the teachings of the Pharisees and Sadducees, emphasizing the importance of understanding spiritual truths rather than solely focusing on literal interpretations. The speaker suggests that while some Old Testament practices may have been perpetual ordinances, it is important to perceive spiritual matters in a spiritual light.

Transcript

Today we're turning to Matthew chapter 16 and verse 5. Now, in the opening verses of this chapter, Jesus and his disciples had come across the Sea of Galilee and landed in Magdala. And Magdala, really nothing happened there of record except a confrontation with the Pharisees and Sadducees when they demanded a sign. And he told them that they're not going to receive any sign from him except the sign of Jonah, which we know was that he would, as Jonah was three days and three nights in the heart of the fish, so Jesus would be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth and would rise again.

But having said that, Jesus left them and departed. Apparently he and his disciples got back in the boat and traveled across the Sea of Galilee again. It says, when his disciples, verse 5, had come to the other side, they had forgotten to take bread.

And Jesus said to them, take heed and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees. And they reasoned among themselves, saying, it is because we have taken no bread. But when Jesus perceived it, he said to them, O you of little faith, why do you reason among yourselves because you have not brought bread? Do you not yet understand or remember the five loaves and the five thousand and how many baskets you took up, nor the seven loaves of the four thousand and how many large baskets you took up? How is it that you do not understand that I did not speak to you concerning bread? But you should beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

Then they understood that he did not tell them to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the doctrine of the Pharisees and Sadducees. Now, here we have some interesting things going on. Jesus and the disciples are crossing the Sea of Galilee in a boat.

The disciples have forgotten to take bread. Now, we really haven't really read anywhere in the Gospels elsewhere of the disciples buying bread, but we must assume that someone had to obtain bread for the company. They had to eat once in a while.

We know there were certain women and probably other people too who contributed financially to Jesus and maybe even baked bread for them and so forth, but probably the disciples took the money that was given to the company and would go out and buy bread with it. Remember, Judas was the treasurer. He held the bag and there was money in that bag and they had to use it for buying provisions.

Remember, on the night that Jesus was betrayed, he was in the upper room with the disciples and Judas left the room and Jesus said, What you must do, do quickly and most of the disciples assumed that Judas was being sent out to buy some provisions for the Passover. So, we know that the disciples, maybe Judas primarily, but possibly all of them in rotation, had some responsibility for making sure that the company had some food. On this occasion, however, they probably had not anticipated such a short stay in Magdala.

When they came to Magdala, perhaps they thought that they would obtain some food there before they left, but Jesus actually had a brief encounter with the Sadducees and Pharisees and turned around and got back in the boat and left. And it's possible that this left the disciples no opportunity to go and buy food. They probably thought they were going to be around longer and hadn't taken the opportunity to get any.

And so now they're beginning to wonder, What are we going to eat? We don't have any food here. We're almost out of food and they might have some food, but they were almost out. And so their thoughts were apparently on this lack, on this thing that was missing.

And so when Jesus made a comment that ostensibly sounded like it might have something to do with bread, they immediately thought that's what he was talking about because that was on their mind, their lack of bread. Now, Jesus, as it turns out, had something entirely different in mind and wasn't even thinking about the fact that they didn't have bread with them. He said, Beware of the leaven of the scribes and Pharisees.

Now, when he used the word leaven, this is what sparked in the disciples. Oh, he's thinking about bread. Leaven is an ingredient in bread.

It's yeast. It causes the bread to rise. And sometimes I would imagine the disciples may have baked their own bread as they were maybe in a place where they had facilities to

do that.

And when they realized, OK, we haven't brought bread and Jesus is talking about leaven. Maybe he's saying that when we buy leaven, we need to watch out for that leaven that the scribes and the Pharisees have. Maybe he thinks they're going to poison us with some bad stuff.

Who knows what they thought? But when he mentioned something about leaven, of course, they were already thinking about the food problem, the bread deficiency. And so they thought Jesus was making a comment relevant to that. Now, of course, Jesus was talking about something spiritual.

Leaven is in the Bible a symbol. More often than not, it is sometimes a symbol for hypocrisy. For example, over in Luke chapter 12, Jesus made a very similar statement.

And he identified the leaven as hypocrisy. Let me turn there. In Luke chapter 12, it says, In the meantime, when an innumerable company of people had gathered together so that they trampled on one another, he began to say to his disciples, first of all, beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy.

OK, so he identified the leaven of the scribes and Pharisees as hypocrisy there. Here, in the passage we just read in Matthew 16, verse 12, they understood that he was talking about the doctrine of the Pharisees and Sadducees. But the point is that the hypocrisy of the Pharisees and Sadducees and the doctrine of these men was like leaven in a certain sense.

You see, leaven is something that if you take a little bit of it and put it in a much larger quantity of dough, this leaven permeates the whole lump of dough and causes the whole lump to rise. Leaven is a small thing, but when it's put into an element greatly larger than itself, it has an impact on it. You see, dough is not alive, it's not changing anything, but leaven is alive.

And therefore, the life in the leaven can impact the whole shape and size of the dough and changes things. Leaven is a change agent. It's like a catalyst that makes something happen.

Now, you know, in a society or in a life, just a little bit of something that has dynamic power to influence can have a tremendous influence on a much larger environment. It says in 1 Corinthians chapter 5, a little leaven leavens a whole lump. And that was a saying, that was a proverb among the Jews.

And it wasn't talking about leaven specifically. Of course, it was based on the fact that a little bit of leaven in bread causes a whole lump to rise. But Paul in 1 Corinthians 5 was saying a little bit of sin tolerated in the church will corrupt the whole church.

It'll spread like leaven. An agent that can change things, or like our saying, one bad apple spoils a whole barrel. That'd be a similar saying in our culture.

A little leaven leavens a whole lump. Leaven, because of its ability to impact its environment so much, became an image for certain things spiritual. In fact, Jesus said in Matthew 13 that the kingdom of God is like leaven.

That someone put in three measures of meal until the whole was leavened. So that even God's kingdom can be likened to leaven. Because it has this impact, it's a change agent force.

Well, Jesus was talking about hypocrisy. He was talking about the teachings of the Pharisees and Sadducees. And he was likening them to leaven.

And he said to his disciples, beware of this leaven. Now what he means by that is don't even let a little bit of it into your life. Because if it gets in there, even a little bit, it'll change your whole life for the worse.

You see, hypocrisy. If you allow yourself a little bit of hypocrisy, then by stages you'll become more completely hypocritical. A hypocrite is one who's not honest.

A one who's pretending to be something he's not. If you allow yourself to have a little bit of guile, a little bit of non-transparency, a little bit of fakeness in your life on a few issues, then eventually you'll be fake on all the issues that's convenient for you to be fake about. Because you've broken down the basic barrier of your conscience against dishonesty.

And now you can be dishonest about many things. And Jesus was reflecting on how far the Pharisees and the Sadducees had drifted from their original roots by a little bit of hypocrisy coming into their lives. You see, the Pharisees and the Sadducees had their roots going back several hundred years.

But especially a couple hundred years earlier than this time, there had been a crisis in Israel. And the Pharisees are a group that came up out of a group of Jews in about 200 years prior to this who were called the Hasidim, the holy ones. And these were people who really stood for righteousness at a time when the culture was being corrupted by Greek culture.

And the Hasidim were loyal to God. Daniel spoke of them as the men who know their God and were strong and did exploits. Well, those are the people from which the Pharisees arose.

And so in the 200 years almost from the rise of the Hasidim to their descendants, the Pharisees, the spiritual descendants, the Pharisees, such a change had happened in them. Those men who had originally been very godly and very pious for God and willing

to die for their faith, their descendants spiritually were people who were just a bunch of hypocritical fakes at religion. And Jesus apparently was reflecting on the fact that it was like a little bit of leaven getting in a lump.

You know, somewhere along the line, people who had a passion for holiness, they got into the company of other people who had a passion for holiness. And whatever little bit of compromise or unholiness that was in them, they wouldn't want their companions to see because they would be perhaps thought not to be as holy as others in the group. And so they would begin to cover up areas of failure in their lives.

And they begin to act like they're a little holier than they really were. And that was hypocrisy. And once they began to do that, eventually fake holiness replaced real holiness.

You know, once you can convince people you're holy without actually having the pain of resisting sin in your life, without doing the work, without the discipline, it gets a lot easier just to have the facade of holiness. And once a person has decided to do that a little bit, eventually it can become the total character of their life. And in Jesus' day, the Pharisees had been totally permeated, totally leavened with hypocrisy.

And he said to his disciples, don't let that happen to you. One of the saddest things is that as we look at the church today, or even the church just a few centuries after Christ, we can see that that leaven did get into the church. The disciples may not have had it in themselves, but their spiritual descendants, like the Pharisees who were the spiritual descendants of the Hasidim, the leaders of the churches a few centuries after Christ, there was a great deal of hypocrisy.

There was a lot of pretense, especially after Constantine made Christianity acceptable and promoted it in the Roman Empire. A lot of people pretended to be good Christians who weren't. And eventually this kind of hypocrisy, this leaven, spread within the church, even as it spread among the Pharisees.

And yet Jesus saw what had happened to the Pharisees, and he said to his disciples, don't let that happen to you. Beware of that leaven of the Pharisees. Now, because the disciples were preoccupied with a physical concern, the lack of bread, they missed his point.

There was just enough similarity in what he said to what they were thinking about, because leaven is a common denominator in his comment and in their thoughts about bread. His comment probably, I'm assuming that Jesus and the disciples didn't talk the whole, I mean they weren't always talking when they were traveling, and probably Jesus had been in a reverie thinking about this. He'd just been in a conflict with the Pharisees, and he was thinking about this.

And probably there had been some silence, and maybe the disciples were thinking about how little bread they had. Maybe they'd even whispered among themselves, you know, we don't have any bread. Suddenly the silence is broken by a comment about leaven, as Jesus states what's going through his mind about the Pharisees.

And the disciples, you know, they've been thinking all this time about bread, so they assume that that's what he's talking about. Now, Jesus' answer to them was, don't you remember when I fed the 5,000 and how many baskets were left over, and when I fed the 4,000, how many baskets were left over? How then could you think that I'm concerned about you not bringing bread? Now, what he's saying is this. You think that I'm worried about food? You know, you've seen what I can do.

Just give me a crumb, and I'll make a feast out of it. You know, I can take a little bit and feed a multitude. And you would be concerned about not having enough bread? And you think that I would be concerned about that? You think that I'm stating some kind of worry about not having enough food, and you need to be careful where you buy your leaven and your food from? He says, haven't you learned yet? Now, what he means by that, are you still without understanding? He means, listen, I have no lack of ability to provide food and other natural things that are needed.

That's not a problem. You shouldn't think that I'm worried about those things just because you are. You need to realize that I'm talking about something more important than that, something spiritual.

When I talk about the leaven, I'm not talking about bread leaven. I'm talking about something more important than what we're going to eat in our next meal. Now, you know, there's a lesson here for us, as there is in most of these stories of Jesus and his disciples.

A lot of times we get preoccupied only with our immediate natural needs. You know, how am I going to pay the rent? How am I going to pay the phone bill? You know, am I going to be able to make this insurance payment on my car? Where are we going to get groceries? You know, these are the things that we tend to be more aware of because the lack of them confronts us in a dynamic way. And we think, you know, how are we going to take care of these things? And that's like the disciples, you know, we don't have any bread.

What are we going to do? We're going to have, you know, next time we have a meal, Jesus is going to say, well, let's serve up the food. Then we're not going to have any. Now, that's not the stuff that Jesus worries about.

Paying your rent, paying your payments, meeting your obligations, feeding your face and your family, those things God can take care of effortlessly, just like he fed the multitudes effortlessly. We shouldn't think that those are the things worthy of worrying about or

thinking about deeply. God will take care of those things.

Remember what it says in Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, just seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added unto you. And the context shows that all these things refers to food and clothing. God will take care of those things.

Those things are incidental to life. I mean, when you're thinking in terms only of natural survival, those things are not incidental. Those things are essential.

But Jesus said there's other things more important. Remember when he said in John 6 to the people, he said, Do not labor for the food that perishes, but labor for the food that endures to everlasting life. Jesus was concerned about spiritual things.

The disciples were hung up at that point on natural issues. And he's saying to them, listen, why do you think there's anything to worry about there? Don't you remember what I can do with a little bit of food? We'll take care of dinner. Don't worry about that.

I've got something more important I'm trying to warn you about. And they then realized that he wasn't speaking literally about leaven. He was speaking figuratively about something spiritual.

Now, let me just say something here about that. I think that this shows us something that it illustrates something that Paul said in 1 Corinthians 2 in verse 14 or 15. Paul said, The natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God because they're spiritually discerned.

And there are times when our minds are caught up in the natural thinking to the point where we cannot discern the spiritual nature of what God is saying. Jesus made a comment about leaven. Well, strictly speaking, leaven is an ingredient of bread.

The disciples took him quite literally. But their mind was on carnal things. Their mind was on physical things.

They were worried about where they're going to eat next. Jesus had his thoughts at a higher plane. He was thinking about spiritual things.

But they couldn't discern what he was talking about because they were thinking like natural men about natural things, concerns about natural things. And I think it's possible for us to make the same mistake. You see, Jesus was not speaking literally when he spoke of leaven because leaven is literally yeast.

And he was not talking about yeast. He was talking about something else that isn't literally leaven. He's talking about hypocrisy.

He's talking about the doctrine, the teaching, the behavior. Of the scribes and the

Pharisees. He was using symbolic language, in other words.

You know, doctrine is not literally leaven. He was using a figure of speech. And it's important that we be spiritually minded enough that we can recognize when God in his word is using figures of speech.

When he's not speaking literally. There are some who believe that the only way to really do justice to the study of the word of God is to take everything literally. And I think we should take things literally that are meant to be taken literally.

But we find in the scripture God also uses figures of speech. He speaks in parables sometimes. There are metaphors.

There are similes. There is hyperbole. But really there are many figures of speech.

Which if a person is unspiritual and they insist on taking it literally. They get themselves into trouble. When Jesus said if your hand or your eye caused you to sin, cut it off and pluck it out and throw it from you.

There are people who have taken Jesus with a strict literalness in that. And did not understand the spiritual thing he was saying. Even when Jesus talked about turning the other cheek.

There are times when that is the thing we literally should do. But there is a spiritual thing there too. And that can be applied even when someone doesn't physically strike you on the cheek.

There is such a thing as deferring to your enemies and so forth. A lot of things Jesus said we can understand them not only literally. But as having a spiritual lesson in them.

The prophets in the Old Testament often spoke figuratively. And we find that the New Testament writers would quote things from the Old Testament. That we might be inclined to take literally.

But the New Testament writers took them figuratively. They understood spiritual meanings behind them. In passages in the Old Testament about Israel.

Where the Jews naturally would understand that to be about natural Israel. We find the apostles quoting those passages and applying them to the church, the spiritual Israel. There is a time, many times actually, when God speaks non-literally.

And Jesus was speaking non-literally when he spoke about leaven. But the disciples took him literally. And because their minds were on natural things, not spiritual.

They didn't get his message until he corrected them. And I think that we need to make sure that when we read the scriptures. And we read the words of God.

That we are able to recognize when he is speaking literally. And when he is speaking spiritually. There are times when he speaks about the temple.

Or about the Sabbath. Or about the land. Or about circumcision in the Old Testament.

As things that are perpetual ordinances. And yet we know that the only sense in which they are perpetual is in their spiritual sense. Circumcision of the heart, for example, is perpetual.

But it is spoken of as if it's literal. But in the New Testament we find that it's meant spiritually. So, Jesus speaks about leaven.

And he is speaking spiritually. He is speaking about spiritual things. The disciples take him literally and miss his point altogether.

And the reason they do so is because their minds are on natural things. Their minds are on earthly things. The spiritual things have to be spiritually perceived.

The natural man cannot receive them. Therefore, it is essential that we allow the spiritual nature of the teachings of Scripture to have their proper impact upon us. And to recognize when they are there.

I'm not saying that many things are not to be understood literally. Because, of course, there are many literal passages in Scripture. But we need to recognize Hebrew poetry and figuratism and figures of speech and so forth too.

As the disciples apparently failed to do initially here. And we, as they, might miss his point entirely. If we don't recognize when he is speaking to us in figures and speaking spiritually.