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Matthew 16:1-12

Beware the Poison of Unbelief

When I was in middle school, I began trying to read my Bible every day; it was a slow process, and I stopped and started again many times. But by the time I was in high school, I started trying to read through the entire Bible for myself. There was one book of the New Testament, however, that I consistently avoided; it absolutely terrified me. For so many years, I would just skip over and ignore the book of Hebrews. And that was because Hebrews has some very challenging passages in it; namely, it has some very sharp, provocative *warning passages* (such as in chapters 2, 6, and 10). These warnings can be unnerving, even scary, for some because they are directed against *believers*, and yet warn us against *falling away* from Christ, thus losing out on any hope for salvation. Now, the reason these passages are challenging is because many other passages of scripture make clear that *true believers never fall away, persevere to the end, and never “lose their salvation.”*

So what, then, do we do with warning passages of scripture - whether in the book of Hebrews or elsewhere? For starters, we have to make sure that we don't let promises of *assurance of salvation* completely *negate* scripture's warnings to us; that is, we can't read a biblical warning against falling away and then immediately think, “well, I know I'm a believer, and will never lose my salvation, so therefore, this warning doesn't really apply to me and I don't need to pay it any attention.” After all, God put them there for a reason; they're addressed *to believers*; we need them!

You see, the warnings of scripture remind us that our hearts are *susceptible* to the corrosive poison of sin and unbelief; they remind us that we must stand guard against the corrupting influence of our own sin, of false teachings, and any other force that would harden our hearts against the Lord - lest we have *unbelieving hearts* that cause us to fall away. Yes, by the Lord's grace, He has promised to hold us fast and never let us fall away! But He preserves us *through specific means* - including, for example, giving us warnings, through His Word and even through each other at times. We need to be warned against the danger of unbelief in our hearts.

Warnings of scripture remind us that we must keep a close watch on our own hearts (and each other's hearts), guarding ourselves against the corrupting influence of *sinful unbelief*, lest

our hearts become hardened against the Lord, we deceive ourselves, and we fall away. We cannot simply assume that we're OK and could never fall prey to the schemes of the Devil, the corrupting influence of others, or to the seeds of unbelief in our own hearts. We cannot be deceived by the false promise of *easy believism* - we can't simply say "once saved always saved," as if something we did decades ago (like walking an aisle, repeating a prayer, giving up an addiction, getting our life together, or even getting baptized) is all that matters, regardless of where our hearts are today. *Repenting and believing in the gospel* is not something we just do once, or even a few times throughout our life - it is a *lifestyle*; it is what we are called to do every second of every day.

A Christian understanding of life recognizes the deadly presence of indwelling sin in our hearts; it recognizes the temptations from without and from within; it recognizes the threat and danger of letting our hearts be hardened by unbelief, and *takes great care* to repent and turn to the Lord, trusting in the grace of Christ in the gospel *daily*. It is the cry of the classic hymn, "Prone to wander, Lord I feel it, prone to leave the God I love; here's my heart Lord, take and seal it, seal it for thy courts above" ("Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing")

We must take the warning passages of the Bible seriously. We must heed God's warnings, trusting that they are *for our own good, perseverance, and salvation*. We must take great care and keep a close watch on our hearts, lest they become hardened by unbelief.

Matt. 16:1-12

That's exactly what **Matthew 16:1-12** helps us to do. This passage is, in many ways, one such *warning passage*. As we saw last week, looking at chapter 15, Jesus and his disciples had left Israel and gone into gentile territory. In 15:39 they come back into Israel - only to be barraged once more by Jewish religious leaders that did not believe Jesus to truly be the promised Messiah. We see their example of complete unbelief and rejection of Jesus, along with his rebuke, in 16:1-4. But then Jesus turns this around as a *sobering warning* to his disciples - and therefore, to us. In vv.5-12, Jesus warns the disciples against the corrupting influence of *false teaching stemming from unbelief*. And to drive the necessity of such a warning home, we see that the disciples struggle even to understand Jesus's warning - they have faith, but it is weak, lacking understanding. And that is precisely why they need to be warned, so that they do not drift away into unbelief, but are instead strengthened by fixing their eyes on who Jesus is and what He has done. And this is exactly what *we* must be warned and reminded of today, as well.

I. Jesus's Person, Life, Death, and Resurrection are All the Reasons We Need for Faith (Matt. 16:1-4)

The passage begins in verse 1 with a direct challenge from a party of the “Pharisees and Sadducees” against Jesus. These two groups represent two different “parties” of the Jewish religious leaders and teachers of the day. They had very strong disagreements with each other - the Pharisees being more legalistic, the Sadducees more liberal - yet they were united in a common cause: their common enemy was *Jesus*, whom they all disbelieved and viewed as a threat to their own belief systems and authority.

So, they “*test him*” (v.1): “they asked him to show them a sign from heaven.” Now, this question is not that of someone who’s seeking the truth and is just seeking greater confirmation; rather, it betrays that they have already decided that Jesus is not who he says he is - they have already rejected Jesus as the Messiah, the promised King and Savior, and they demand that he give them a sign that is “good enough,” according to their own expectations and standards. Jesus’s entire ministry of teaching and miracles was to show that He is, indeed, the promised Messiah - God’s true Prophet, Priest, and King, the promised Savior for all the world! Yet here the Pharisees and Sadducees are declaring that *it’s just not good enough for them*. They demand further proof; they demand Jesus give them a sign that *convinces them* and *compels them* to accept his claims that he is truly from heaven, or else they will not believe and will continue to reject him. In other words, their question reveals that their hearts are hardened; they are dead-set on opposing Jesus; they are fundamentally opposed to believing in Jesus, lest he can convince them otherwise on *their own terms*.

But Jesus does not conform to their demands; he responds with a scathing rebuke. “He answered them,” in verse 2, “When it is evening, you say, ‘it will be fair weather, for the sky is read.’ and in the morning, ‘It will be stormy today, for the sky is read and threatening.’ You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times.” Jesus gives a metaphor, drawing on the simple skills of reading the weather that his audience would have been so used to. Today, many of us equate “interpreting the weather” with looking at an app on our phone or turning on the weather channel, rather than sticking our heads outside. But for thousands of years before such technology, it was common knowledge that you could learn to read certain signs and weather patterns for your particular climate. So, for Israel, as it is

in many other areas, a “red sky at night” is a “sailor’s” or “shepherd’s” delight, while a red sky in the morning foreshadows a storm.

Jesus’s point is this: these Pharisees and Sadducees were supposed to be leaders of GOD’s people, teaching them about the Scriptures; yet though they could read and interpret the weather, they could not see and understand the “signs of the times” - the signs that GOD’s Word and promises were being fulfilled, that the Kingdom of God was at hand! And what were these “signs of the times”? *Jesus Christ himself*; Jesus’s life, ministry, teachings, and works. Jesus is saying here that *these signs* are sufficient - all that they need to believe in him.

Yet they reject him; they refuse to believe and harden their hearts in unbelief. Therefore, Jesus Pronounces judgment on them: “An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah.” In other words, he tells them that his life and ministry are the only signs and proof we need; he will not give any new sign, except one: *the sign of Jonah*. AND this is exactly the sign that all of his life and ministry were building up to.

So what is this “sign of Jonah?” It refers to Jesus’s *death and resurrection*. Matthew doesn’t unpack it for us here because he has already done so, back in chapter 12:40-41. As we saw there, the Pharisees very similarly demanded a sign from Jesus, and he refused - except to give the “sign of Jonah.” He explained: “For just as Jonah was three days and nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” (12:40). This refers to Jesus’s coming *death on the cross and resurrection from the grave*. Just as was prophesied in the “sign of Jonah,” so would it be fulfilled in Jesus’s life, death, and resurrection - the fullest picture of who Jesus is and what he has done in the gospel, securing salvation for all who believe in him by grace.

Here’s what this means for us today: Jesus doesn’t need to do anything else to *prove himself* to us or earn our belief, faith, and trust; if we think Jesus needs to meet *our expectations*, satisfy our desires, or do something further to convince us to believe, trust, and follow him, then we are *doomed from the start* - this is approaching Jesus with the arrogance of disbelief! We must approach the Lord on *His terms*, not ours. We cannot put God on trial; we cannot demand that Jesus live up to our dreams, expectations, desires, or demands. We must simply submit in faith to who He has revealed Himself to be.

Now, I think most of us would readily claim to believe that - to believe that Jesus doesn't have to do anything more to *prove* or *earn* our faith and trust. However, I think we're more susceptible to such thinking than we might realize or admit at first.

How many times have we heard someone say something like: "I'll believe if God ___" fill in the blank. Such thinking comes in all sorts of shapes and sizes: "God, if you really are who you say you are, then take away my cancer,," "if you really love me, then give me a better job," or "more income and financial security." When we come at God with the air of accusation, bringing a list of expectations we demand he fulfill, we are *putting God on trial*, making ourselves judge; this is not the heart of faith seeking understanding and comfort, but the heart of unbelief.

Perhaps you know someone - a friend or a family member, maybe even someone who used to attend our church here - who used to claim to be a believer, maybe even was baptized and lived an outwardly Christian life for a time, but then fell away from the faith, because of *something that happened or didn't happen that they blame God for*; God didn't answer their prayers the way they wanted Him to, and so, they no longer want anything to do with him. Maybe their sickness or suffering never went away; maybe they expected their lives to improve with "health, wealth, and prosperity" in exchange for their faith, only to be disappointed when it didn't come; maybe they lost a loved one. Whatever the reason, God did not meet up to their own expectations; and so, they fell away. But this reveals that they never had a true faith to begin with; they simply approached God in some sort of *contractual business relationship* - "I'll believe, provided you live up to your end of the bargain and do X, Y, Z." But that's not how this works. God doesn't conform to our understanding, desires, or expectations - we're called to submit to His.

And there are still other examples of those in our day who *test* God and want Him to *prove* Himself, meeting their predetermined demands and expectations. I've heard many people say that they believe God - but only on their terms; they believe in a God of love - but *they define the definition of love much differently than God does*. They will believe in God so long as he meets their expectations of *absolute tolerance*, boiling "grace" down to permission and acceptance for all sins and lifestyles, removing all moral judgments and need for repentance whatsoever. Therefore, they tell me, they refuse to believe in a God who sends anyone to Hell, or

who makes moral demands on marriage, divorce, gender, sexuality, or any other aspect of how we live our lives.

We cannot demand that God meet our cultural values and expectations; we cannot demand that God prove Himself to us on our terms. If we do so, then it shows that we *do not truly believe, but have unbelieving hearts, rejecting Jesus and His gospel*. Jesus doesn't have to do anything further to demand or earn our trust. His person, life, death, and resurrection are *more than sufficient*. We must simply believe in the gospel and trust Jesus.

II. Be On Guard Against the Corrupting Influence of False Teaching and Unbelief (16:5-6, 11-12)

These Pharisees and Sadducees, who are supposed to be leaders of God's people, able to rightly interpret and teach God's Word, *completely miss* the fulfillment of God's Word and reject the promised Savior because of their hardened unbelief. After rebuking them, Jesus leaves them (v.4); he and his disciples climb into a boat and cross the lake once more. And drawing on the scene that just occurred, Jesus gives his disciples - and therefore, us, as Jesus's followers today - a *stark warning*: "Watch and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees" (v.6). The disciples don't understand the warning at first, but we'll come back to that later; for now, let's skip down to vv.11-12; Jesus repeats the warning again, and we're given an explanation in v.12: "Then they understood that he did not tell them to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees."

"Leaven" is often used as a symbol of the pervasive spread and influence of wickedness in the Bible. A little bit of leaven, like "yeast" for example, will leaven the whole lump of dough it is mixed into, causing the whole lump of bread to rise, transforming it from flat bread into a full loaf. The point of the metaphor is that the leaven *effects and influences* the dough around so thoroughly that the little bit *transforms* the larger amount completely. In the same way, Jesus says, the false teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees has the power to so negatively *effect and influence* the disciples so as to *pull them away* from Jesus. Why is this so? Because the *teaching* of the Pharisees and Sadducees stems from *unbelief*. The Pharisees and Sadducees held radically different views on most things, but their point of commonality was that they both taught *disbelief, opposition to, and rejection of Jesus Christ* as the Messiah. It is false teaching *precisely because* it is built upon the foundation of *rejecting who Jesus is and refusing to believe*.

We have just seen this, in vv.1-4; they refuse to believe that Jesus is truly the promised Messiah; and therefore, they completely misunderstand and misinterpret the entirety of GOD's Word - the Scriptures, the Bible. Even though they are viewed as teachers of the scriptures, they have it *completely wrong* - and anyone who is influenced by their teaching to also disbelieve, test, and reject Jesus and his gospel will also face God's judgment and miss out on the salvation of his kingdom.

Therefore, Jesus warns his disciples - he warns *us* - not to be corrupted and influenced by false teachings of unbelief. Jesus is warning us here that the *unbelief* of others can be contagious. This is especially true if they have great influence, authority, or teaching opportunities within a church or community. Any teaching that rejects God's authority, twists his Word, or undermines who Jesus is and His gospel of grace, is a *false teaching of unbelief*. The false teacher approaches Jesus, the gospel, and the entire Word of GOD not by humble faith, but in *unbelief*; and unbelief makes us say, "I know what's right; I'm the judge of what's right and wrong, and I'm only going to accept and believe what the Bible says *if it sounds good to me; if it makes sense in my mind, or satisfies my own standards, values, and desires.*"

This means *we must guard our own hearts from unbelief*. This means asking ourselves: What is most influencing your heart, your faith, your mind and beliefs? What voices are you listening to? Are you being more shaped by the Bible or by the unbelieving world? Are you being influenced towards a greater love for Jesus and trust in God's Word and the gospel? Or is your heart being weighed down, discouraged, hardened, and corrupting by the influences in your life?

And this means we must also *guard our church from the false teaching and influence of unbelief*. We can't assume that such unbelief could never infect and poison our own church. Most people today, even many who claim to be Christians, think it is completely unloving and arrogant to evaluate someone else's beliefs and values as wrong. We might be tempted to think it's barbaric and unloving to tell someone they aren't allowed to teach or lead within the church; but if they undermine the gospel and the Word of God, that's exactly what we must do! We might think it's unloving and exclusive to bar someone from church membership; but if they aren't believers but are hardened in unbelief, then that's exactly what we must do - for their own good, and for the good of the church, lest their unbelief leads others astray!

We, as a church community, must take great care that the corrupting influence, the “leaven,” of unbelief does not invade, deceive, or destroy our flock. We must guard the gospel; we must guard the beliefs and teaching ministry of our church.. We must take our beliefs seriously and all forms of teaching in our church seriously. In fact, we must *take very seriously* the belief of *each and every member* - to be a part of the church, we must first be *part of the body of Christ, as believers*. This is part of why church membership is so important; why we have a process of making sure each person joining our church *first and foremost* gives a credible profession of faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ!

We must take great care that we are not corrupted by the influence of unbelief. So how do we fight against such unbelief, even *in our own hearts*? We must...

III. Remember Who Jesus is and All That He Has Done for Us (16:5-12)

Jesus warns the disciples against the corrupting influence of unbelief; but the disciples don't get it at first. Jesus warns against the “leaven” of these false teachers, but the disciples don't understand - they think he's just talking about literal bread. Verse 5 tells us, as they're crossing the lake, they realize that they didn't pack enough food - “they had forgotten to bring any bread.” When Jesus issues his warning, they miss the metaphor completely and fixate on the fact that they have no *real bread* to eat. This shows both a *lack of understanding* and a lack of *faith* on their part. They're missing the larger spiritual significance of what Jesus says, on their bellies. And they're fixating on their lack of food because they *lack understanding and faith* about the person in the boat with them: Jesus.

Jesus rebukes them in verses 8-11: “But Jesus, aware of this, said, ‘O you of little faith, why are you discussing among yourselves the fact that you have no bread? Do you not remember the the five loaves for the five thousand, and how many baskets you gathered? Or the seven loaves for the four thousand, and how many baskets you gathered? How is it that you fail to understand that I did not speak about bread?’”

In the last two chapters of Matthew (14 and 15), the disciples have *just seen* Jesus perform two incredible miracles, multiplying bread to feed tens of thousands! It is bewildering, then, that they are still worried about their lack of food supplies! Jesus's rebuke shows that their anxiety over their bread reveals a *lack of understanding* about who Jesus is, and a *lack of trust in Him*. And so, Jesus's rebuke calls them to *remember* all that Jesus had done. It's a call to *remember and understand who Jesus is, to believe, and to truly trust Him - in all of life!*

It would be far too easy to beat up on the disciples and judge their lack of faith here as stupid and ridiculous. But then we remember: *we do the same thing, don't we? We battle our own temptations, our own doubt and unbelief.* We far too easily forget who Jesus is and what He has done for us. We forget everytime we become bogged down by worry and anxiety; everytime we erupt with complaints and grumble about our lives, instead of trusting the Lord with it. We forget every time we think our standing before God is *really* based on how good we've been this week; when pride sets in because we compare ourselves to the more visible sinner; when shame and guilt keep us from prayer or from church because we think we've finally sinned one too many times. Every time we disobey; every time we give in to self-reliance - we far too easily forget who Jesus is and fail to truly grasp His grace, don't we?

So how do we guard our hearts against the corrupting, poisoning influence of unbelief? We fortify our hearts with faith by *remembering* who Jesus is and what He has done. We must remember His incredible grace, His glorious love, His persistent works of redemption and provision in our lives. We battle unbelief not by looking at ourselves, but by *fixing our eyes firmly on Christ!*

Practically, then, we all need to have some basic, healthy rhythms built into our lives; rhythms the Lord has given us to battle unbelief, fix our eyes on Jesus, and firmly believe in Him.

First, there is just no substitute for *personally knowing and spending time with the Lord daily* in Bible reading and prayer. The Bible truly is the Word of God. We each need to immerse ourselves in the Bible, feasting on this Word as our daily bread! We can only *know Jesus* through His Word. By reading, studying, and reflecting on the Bible, we learn, understand, and remember *Who Jesus is and what He has done.*

Second, there's no substitute for *being a part of the local church community.* God gives us the church so that we can receive *the influence of faith*, receiving right teaching about Jesus, the gospel, and the Bible. We get this from preaching, from Sunday School, from Bible study classes (such as our Tuesday and Wednesday nights here). But we also get this *from each other.* Seeing each other's examples; holding one another accountable; speaking biblical truth and encouragement into each other's lives. This even includes sharing our testimonies with one another of how the Lord has worked in our own lives and experiences! We need each other's help to guard one another from unbelief and persevere in faith!

Finally, we need to *remind ourselves and each of the truth of the gospel daily*. After all, this is the central truth we're reminded of every time we read our Bibles and come to church, isn't it? The antidote for unbelief is not some *vague, general faith*, or even *just* belief that GOD exists - its *believing and trusting in the gospel of Jesus Christ*: firmly trusting that Jesus is the God-Man, the promised Savior, and that by His life, death, and resurrection, He has done everything necessary to forgive and save us from all of our sin, guilt, shame, and even death - even the eternal wrath of God in Hell! So let us remember and believe, every day, that we stand before the Lord as righteous and blameless, not because of anything we could ever do, but simply by resting in the grace of God through Christ Jesus! Let us remember and remind each other, day by day, who Jesus is and what He has done!

If you have any questions about this gospel, about how to become a Christian, or about baptism or church membership, I would love to talk with you. You can come now and wait on the front row, or you can find me after the service. Let us pray.