

Matthew's Gospel, chapter 16

Natural vs Spiritual

*[Please note : sections in blue type are not broadcast on every radio station.
New King James Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]*

Recently, in my home city, we've been enjoying some excellent weather. After a cold winter, it's been nice to be able to go outside without even needing a jumper. One morning I woke up to what seemed another gloriously sunny day. It was very warm, and so without even thinking about it, I left the house for work without a coat. It was so warm that I didn't need one. My day went well until about half an hour before I was due to leave work to come home in the evening. What had previously been a perfect blue sky, without a cloud to be seen, turned an ominous grey. Sure enough, within a few minutes, the heavens opened, and it poured with rain for a couple of hours. Needless to say, I got drenched on my way to the bus stop and arrived home fairly soggy, much to my family's amusement! The thing is, if I'd looked at a weather forecast that morning, I'd have seen that rain was due late in the afternoon. If I'd known that, I'd have put a coat in my bag, and I'd have been prepared for the downpour. But I hadn't checked. And so I got wet. The warning was there if only I'd bothered to see it. I'd misread the signs early in the morning and missed the important fact that rain was coming.

Today we continue our series in Matthew's Gospel with chapter 16. In verse 23, the Lord Jesus says to Peter, "You are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men." Peter was looking at the circumstances around him. And he had a perception of what was going on. But Jesus had to say to Peter that although he saw some things, he was missing some important details. He was missing them because he wasn't watching out for warnings with spiritual eyes. He wasn't seeing things from God's view, but from man's view. This challenge to Peter to be mindful of the things of God, and not just the things of men, I think essentially summarises chapter 16. We'll see five sections that contain a warning to see things as God sees them and not miss important warnings because we only see things with our natural eyes. Let's keep our spiritual eyes open to heed the warnings given by the Lord Jesus. I missed the warning of coming rain because I only focused on the blue skies out the window in the immediate moment. Let's not make the same mistake as we look at Matthew 16 today.

Let's first read verses 1-4.

"Then the Pharisees and Sadducees came, and testing Him asked that He would show them a sign from heaven. He answered and said to them, "When it is evening you say, 'It will be fair weather, for the sky is red'; and in the morning, 'It will be foul weather today, for the sky is red and threatening.' Hypocrites! You know how to discern the face of the sky, but you cannot discern the signs of the times. A wicked and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign shall be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah." And He left them and departed."

The Lord explained to the Pharisees and Sadducees that there were some things that they were able to see and discern, but there was something that they were missing. They could discern “the face of the sky”, but they couldn’t discern “the signs of the times.” [Let’s dig down into this a little more.](#) The Pharisees had figured out a way of predicting the weather. If the sky was red in the evening, they were confident the next day would have good weather. But if the sky was red in the morning, that meant it was likely to be bad weather that day.

No doubt it’s not a perfect weather system, but it was good enough to be useful. The Pharisees and the Sadducees were quite happy to use the colour of the sky to help them know what the weather would be like on any given day and plan accordingly.

But in Matthew chapter 16 the Lord Jesus criticises the Pharisees and Sadducees because, although they could discern the sky, they couldn’t discern the times. They had come to Jesus to demand a sign from heaven. [I’m not sure that their request was genuine or that they would have believed Jesus had He turned round and performed a miracle there and then.](#) The Lord responds to the Pharisees and Sadducees that they already had a sign, the sign of the prophet Jonah. There were signs available to reveal to the Pharisees and Sadducees who Jesus was, if only they opened their eyes and saw them. But sadly, although they could read the skies and plan for the day ahead, they couldn’t read the signs of the times.

Interestingly, the Lord had been asked for a sign before by the Pharisees and Sadducees. And on that occasion, He gave an expanded version of the answer He gives in Matthew 16. We can read about that occasion in Matthew 12, verses 38-42.

[“Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered, saying, “Teacher, we want to see a sign from You.” But He answered and said to them, “An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three 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. The men of Nineveh will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and indeed a greater than Jonah is here. The queen of the South will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and indeed a greater than Solomon is here.”](#)

Jesus uses Jonah as a picture of what would happen to Him. [Incidentally, if you’ve never read the story of Jonah, it’s a thrilling story, full of useful lessons for us. It’s only a short book in the Old Testament. Why not read it today. It will help you reflect on the Lord’s words in Matthew 16.](#)

Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a great fish. And so, the Lord Jesus would die and three days later rise again. When Jonah came out of the fish and went to Nineveh to preach, the people of Nineveh were so challenged by his preaching that they repented immediately, and the city was spared God’s judgement. But standing right in front of the Pharisees and Sadducees was Someone far greater than Jonah. And they wouldn’t listen to His warnings and repent.

Let’s jump to our own day for a moment. How might we make a similar mistake to the Pharisees and Sadducees? Sometimes, as I speak to people who aren’t Christians, they make a comment along the lines of, “If God exists, why doesn’t He show Himself to us in some way?” Other times, when I talk to Christians who are trying to make plans for some aspect of their lives they say, “I just wish God would give me some kind of sign to show me what to do.” I’d like to credit both of these examples with better motives than the Pharisees and Sadducees in Matthew 16. But they

are both asking for signs. The unbeliever as a request for proof in order to believe, and the believer as proof of direction for life. God has already given a sign. Someone greater than Jonah really did come to this Earth. Jesus really did die for our sins and after three days rise again. Have you responded in faith to that sign yet? If you're listening today, and you're not a Christian, do you realise the signs that you already have about who Jesus is and what He has done for you? If you've got a Bible, instead of asking for new signs from God, why not read that and discover how much God loves you? [If you don't have a Bible, why not get in touch with us through the truth for today website and we'll be glad to send you one.](#) If you are a Christian but hoping for signs to guide in some area of life, are you already acting in faith upon the things God has already revealed to you? Don't be like the Pharisees and Sadducees, who asked God for more signs whilst a plain sign was right in front of them.

In the next section of Matthew 16, we move on to a warning from Jesus for His disciples. Let's read verses 5-12.

“Now when His disciples had come to the other side, they had forgotten to take bread. Then 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 Jesus, being aware of it, said to them, “O you of little faith, why do you reason among yourselves because you have brought no bread? Do you not yet understand, or remember the five loaves of 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 you do not understand that I did not speak to you concerning bread?— but to 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.”

Once again in this section there is confusion about what Jesus was saying. The disciples had gone sailing without any bread. The Lord was trying to teach them a spiritual lesson and says, “Beware the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees.” Leaven is the yeast that you put in bread. I know almost nothing about baking bread, but I do know that you put in a little bit of yeast, and it spreads out and rises to make the bread dough expand as it bakes.

The disciples heard the Lord talking about leaven, and immediately thought He must have been rebuking them for forgetting to bring bread. But they should have known that this was no problem for the Lord. This was at least the third time that the disciples had had a problem of having no bread in the Lord's presence. On one occasion previously, when the disciples had no bread, the Lord took five little loaves from a young boy and used them to feed over 5000 people. You can read about that in Matthew 14:15-21. [Miraculously twelve baskets of leftovers were collected up that day after everyone had eaten enough to be filled.](#) Then, on a second occasion, Jesus had fed over 4000 people with seven loaves and a few little fish. [That time, seven baskets of leftovers were collected.](#) You can read about that in Matthew 15:32-39. On both occasions the Lord had shown that He could miraculously feed huge numbers of people. Did the disciples really think that Jesus would have any problems providing bread for the twelve of them if it was required?

They had missed the Lord's point because they were mindful only of the things of men and not the things of God. The Lord wanted to teach them to avoid filling themselves up with the doctrine of the Pharisees and Sadducees. Like yeast spreads and causes bread to rise, if they allowed themselves to take in even little bits of the Pharisees' teaching it would spread in them and cause them problems. The Pharisees taught a system of strict religious rules. The Sadducees over emphasised human intellect and reason and used it to justify ignoring what God had revealed in

His word. Both would be devastating to the disciples and so the Lord warned them to beware of such doctrine.

The apostle Paul dealt with both these dangers in his letter to the Colossians. In chapter 2 verse 8, Paul wrote:

“Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ.”

This is essentially the same as the Lord’s warning to beware of the leaven of the Sadducees. Later in Colossians 2, Paul essentially warns against the leaven of the Pharisees, writing:

“So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ. ...Therefore, if you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world, why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations—“Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle,” which all concern things which perish with the using—according to the commandments and doctrines of men?”

Paul finishes this section of his letter to the Christians in Colosse by writing at the start of chapter 3:

“If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth.”

This sounds very similar to the Lord’s instruction to be mindful of the things of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things of the earth. So once again, let’s jump to our day, and ask how we might need to beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees? How can we heed this spiritual warning from the Lord? Let’s make sure we are careful to avoid forms of teaching that focus on adding religious-sounding rules on top of what the Bible says. And let’s beware of any teaching that tries to use intellectual reasoning to negate the plain statements of Scripture. Neither approach will help us to live faithfully for the Lord. For us to do that, we need to follow Paul’s advice and hold fast to Christ, who is the Head of his church. Follow Jesus’s teaching. Cling to that. Set your minds on what He said, and where He is. That will help us!

The next section of Matthew 16 runs from verse 13 to verse 20. [They involve a crucial question about who the Lord is.](#) Let’s read the verses together.

“When Jesus came into the region of Caesarea Philippi, He asked His disciples, saying, “Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?” So they said, “Some say John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter answered and said, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Jesus answered and said to him, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” Then He

commanded His disciples that they should tell no one that He was Jesus the Christ.”

Once again there are two ways of seeing described in this section. Some thought the Lord Jesus was John the Baptist or Elijah, Jeremiah or one of the prophets. But Peter saw things differently. In fact the Lord reveals in verse 17 that Peter wasn't seeing with natural eyes, described by the Lord as flesh and blood. No! Peter was seeing with spiritual eyes. He saw something that the Father had revealed to Him. On this occasion, he was mindful of the things of God. Peter saw that Jesus was “the Christ, the Son of the living God.” This truth about Jesus is so crucial that the Lord describes it as the rock upon which He would build His church. It's so certain a truth, and so solid a foundation, that the gates of Hades will not be able to ultimately destroy the church.

[There is a lot more we could say about these verses and the implications they have for the church, but we'll have to leave that for another time and keep going in our study of Matthew 16. For now, we should again ask ourselves how we need to be mindful of the things of God in this area?](#)

What warning does the Lord want us to heed? Surely the answer is clear this time. Who do you think Jesus is? Don't miss the truth, by believing the peoples' claim that Jesus was just a prophet, or just a good man, or a good example. He is a prophet. He is a good man. He is a good example. But He's so much more. He's the Christ, the Son of the living God. The Lord described Himself in these verses as the Son of Man. If you trace that title through the Gospels, you'll see that the Son of Man came with the authority to forgive sins. The Son of Man came to give His life as a ransom for many, to save all who trust in Him. The Son of Man would rise from the dead. That's who Jesus is, and that's what He's done for you. Please don't be in any doubt about that today! Jesus is the Son of the living God.

Let's move on to the next section as it's related to what we've been thinking about in verses 13-20. We'll read from verse 21-23.

“From that time Jesus began to show to His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised the third day. Then Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, “Far be it from You, Lord; this shall not happen to You!” But He turned and said to Peter, “Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offence to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men.””

In verses 13-20, we saw that Jesus was the Son of the living God. Peter had seen that truth because God had helped him to see with spiritual eyes. But Peter's understanding was still limited. In the verses we've just read, the Lord taught His disciples that He must suffer, and die and rise again. Peter couldn't understand this. He was back to being mindful of the things of men, and not of God. He was expecting a Christ who would deliver Israel from Roman rule, and set up His kingdom there and then. But that wasn't what the Lord had come to do. He had been rejected by Israel on the whole. The Lord had come to suffer and die. We know from reading the rest of the New Testament that this was necessary to deal with the problem of our sins, and to allow God to justly offer us salvation and forgiveness of sins. But Peter hadn't realised this yet, and so the Lord had to rebuke him. Thankfully, Peter soon realised that the Lord's death and resurrection was absolutely crucial. In Matthew 16, Peter didn't like the idea of a rejected Saviour. But by the time he writes his first epistle, he had changed his mind. He wrote that Jesus was “rejected indeed by men, but chosen by God and precious.”

As we think about these warnings for our own day, we must be careful to realise that the Lord Jesus is a rejected Saviour who suffered for our sakes. Most of the world does not want anything to do with Him. Maybe you have your doubts as you're listening today? But can I tell you that

those who do follow Him, and realise that He suffered and died for them, realise like Peter that the Lord Jesus is uniquely precious? We'll miss that if we only see with natural eyes and see Jesus as someone who was rejected and died. But if we're mindful of the things of God, we'll see that His suffering, death, and resurrection were necessary for us to have eternal life.

Let's finish off by reading the last few verses of the chapter, from verse 24-28.

“Then Jesus said to His disciples, “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul? For the Son of Man will come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and then He will reward each according to his works. Assuredly, I say to you, there are some standing here who shall not taste death till they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom.””

The warning here is to be aware of the real value of things. On one level we might be impressed by accumulating possessions or experiences, or positions of authority. That might be impressive to look at with man's eyes. But God views things differently. Jesus says it's possible to gain the whole world but lose your soul. You could enjoy all the good things the world has to offer. But if you set your sights on them, and not the things of God, then you'll risk losing your own soul. And that means you'll miss out on the blessings of eternal life when Jesus comes in the glory of His Father to reward each one according to their works. So how do you think about life? What are you aiming to gain? Following Jesus will involve self-denial. It will involve taking up your cross. He suffered and was rejected. You will be too. That's part of following Jesus. But it's worth it all because He is precious, and He will reward His followers when He comes.

I started off today telling you about a time when I missed the warning signs and got wet as a result. I was only looking at the immediate circumstances and missed the bigger picture. In Matthew 16 the Lord warns us not to do the same thing in important areas of life. Don't miss the signs that show us who Jesus was. Don't get side-tracked in your life of faith by being drawn aside by religious regulations or purely intellectual reasoning. Don't make the mistake of thinking that Jesus was just a prophet like many others. Don't miss the fact that Jesus suffered and died for you. Don't spend your life chasing after things at the cost of your soul. Five very searching challenges!

May the Lord help us to be mindful of the things of God.

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