

Leaven and Faith
Matthew 16:5—12

All through Matthew there is a stark contrast between physical thinking and spiritual thinking. The Disciples were continually being challenged to put aside the normal, worldview and think spiritually. When Jesus fed the 5,000 He was teaching them that physically it was impossible to feed that many people with the little bit of food available but that it could be done by completely depending on Him for their sustenance. When the 4,000 were in need of food the first thing the Disciples should have thought is that Jesus can supply their need. Instead, they couldn't see past the normal physical constraints they were so accustomed to.

Israel experienced this same issue while in the wilderness. When they were hungry they complained to Moses that they should have stayed in Egypt where they had so much good food available to them. When they were thirsty they complained that they were all going to die in the desert. Even after seeing the 10 plagues that came upon Egypt, the Red Sea opening up to allow them to pass to safety, the Egyptian army being drowned in the same body of water they had just passed through, the supply of manna and having enough water for over one million people, they still did not trust God.

Numbers 14:11 And the Lord said unto Moses, How long will this people provoke me? and how long will it be ere they believe me, for all the signs which I have shewed among them?

The same thing was happening as Jesus was going from city to city within Israel. Although many signs were shown only a few truly believed. Israel rejected God's call for them to go into the Promised Land and 1,500 years later rejected His call for them to come into the Kingdom.

Leaven of the Pharisees

Here is another example of how the Disciples saw the physical and missed the spiritual. When Jesus warned the Disciples about the leaven of the Pharisees they immediately thought He said it because they had forgotten to bring bread to eat. You can imagine them talking amongst themselves, wondering what Jesus meant by the leaven of the Pharisees and thinking He was pointing an accusing finger at them when He was actually warning them not to listen to what the Pharisees say.

Leaven usually symbolizes two things in Scripture, sin and bad doctrine. The idea that leaven relates to sin goes back to Exodus 12:15—20 when God instructed Israel to get rid of all leaven from their houses and not to eat anything with leaven in it for one week immediately after Passover. We now know that Passover and Unleavened Bread commemorate Christ's death and burial. Israel understood the Feast of Unleavened Bread to be a memorial reminding the Jews of how quickly they would need to leave Egypt. There would be no time to bake bread with yeast. However, We have a historical and prophetic perspective that connects the Feast of Unleavened Bread to the sinless Christ buried for three days. Christ emphasized this at the last supper when he broke the bread and equated it to his body (Matthew 26:26). The broken, unleavened bread pointed to the broken, sinless body of Christ.

When Jesus warned the Disciples of the leaven of the Pharisees He was warning them of the bad teachings they were spreading. The reason leaven is used to picture sin or bad doctrine is that a little bit of leaven will grow and grow until the whole lump of dough is overtaken by the action of the yeast. Sin and bad doctrine also tends to grow overtaking even those who are saved. It never seems to work the other way around (1 Corinthians 5:6—8). Their doctrine was contrary to Scripture and would lead people away from a faith in Christ.

Jesus specifically says the doctrine of the Pharisees was hypocrisy (Luke 12:1). They may not have actually taught the people to be hypocritical but everything about them was hypocritical. The people would

learn how to act by looking to their leaders. The teaching was probably more informal and unintentional but nonetheless dangerous (Matthew 23:2—3).

Men of little faith

It is interesting to see how often the Disciples are accused of having little faith. After Jesus told them how they should pray during the Tribulation (usually known as the Lord's Prayer) He told them not to worry about the things of tomorrow since God will take care of them and added that they had little faith (Matthew 6:6—34). When the ship they were in was being tossed by a strong wind, Jesus woke up, told them they had little faith then calmed the sea (Matthew 8:23—27). When Peter stepped out of the boat and started to sink when he took his eyes off Christ, He lifted him up and said he had little faith (Matthew 14:23—33). In each case their faith was questioned and their need to grow in faith was the implied directive.

Everything Christ did with His Disciples was an exercise to help them grow in faith. He did this by giving them a better and fuller understanding of exactly who He was and how He was able to supply their every need. Their faith in Jesus began to grow when they saw Him being baptized and the Holy Spirit descended and the Father's voice declared Him to be the Son of God. It continued to grow when they saw Him perform an abundance of miracles. Every time their knowledge of Christ increased their faith grew.

Faith is nothing more than belief, confidence or trust. Scripture says we are saved by faith. This is a faith that is based on what God said in Scripture. By faith I only need to believe in Jesus Christ and His death, burial and resurrection in order to be saved (1 Corinthians 15:1—4). If I add something to the Bible's condition of my faith then I don't really have faith in God and in the work of His Son, Jesus Christ. My faith would then be in Christ and in myself. This is not a biblically based faith.

A distinction needs to be made between two types of faith. One is based on nothing or lack of proper knowledge. Many people had faith (believed) that the Sun and stars revolved around the earth. Once a proper knowledge was gained people put their faith in the new knowledge. The same can be said of the flat earth.

A proper faith is always based on proper knowledge and a proper knowledge can only come from God. The more I understand Scripture, the stronger my faith will be. This is why Scripture says that faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God (Romans 10:17). The more we learn and understand the stronger our faith will become. Faith must be built on a proper knowledge (Romans 10:2).

We can apply this to the Disciples. They had little faith because they had little knowledge. Notice how verse 8 says they had little faith because they were reasoning between themselves. In other words, instead of going to Scripture they were trying to reason it out among themselves—shared ignorance. If the Disciples had gone back to Scripture and seen how God supplied Israel with everything needed while in the wilderness they should have connected the dots and thought that Jesus could do the same for them. They would, of course, need to fully understand that Jesus was God.

Romans 14:1—4 connects the person who is weak in faith with one who does not have proper knowledge. He does not understand that he is free to eat all things and by reading what Paul says he would see that he is free in Christ to eat those things and by so doing would strengthen his faith. 1 Timothy 4:1 says that in latter times some shall depart from the faith. They do this because they listen to (give heed to) seducing spirits and the doctrines of devils. Instead of holding fast to what they were taught, they turn away to other doctrines that lead them away from their faith.

This is why we are told to hold fast to the faithful Word (Titus 1:9) and hold fast to the word that Paul was teaching (1 Corinthians 15:2). These are things that build a strong faith.

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