

Matthew 16A

- A man once said:

Let us begin by committing ourselves to the truth to see it like it is, and tell it like it is, to find the truth, to speak the truth, and to live the truth.

- That's a noble statement, and it's nothing surprising, since I'm sure we all agree with it
 - But what IS surprising is who said it: Richard Nixon
 - Whatever your politics, it's easy to see the irony
- Nixon championed the truth, until the truth came into conflict with his re-election campaign
 - And we do the same thing in our own ways...
 - Like Nixon, we all say we want to know and live by the truth but in reality we all have our own preferred view of truth
 - And when our preferred view comes into conflict with reality, our commitment to finding, speaking and living the truth falters
- Both Jesus' enemies and His disciples faced that challenge
 - And in today's passage that opens Matthew 16, we find illustrations of both
 - As we always do, let's start by revisiting our setting
- At the end of Chapter 15, Jesus was in the Decapolis; the region of ten Greek cities on the eastern (or Gentile side) of the Sea of Galilee
 - He had healed and miraculously fed a large crowd of Gentiles
 - Through that experience, Jesus was trying to train His disciples on the true nature of shepherding during the Kingdom Program
 - That miracle, and the ones that preceded it, had exposed how far Jesus' disciples had to go to learn that lesson
 - They kept asking Jesus to send the needy away rather than appreciating that they are the point of ministry

- Their ignorance, especially at the beginning of their training, is often a source of humor in the Gospels, and we'll see some of that today
 - But the story of the disciples' bumbling is also a source of conviction and encouragement for us
 - On the one hand, it's convicting to see that even those who walked closely with Jesus can still struggle at following Him well
 - That reminds us that we too have a long way to go in learning to be Jesus to the world
- On the other hand, it's encouraging to see how Jesus eventually elevated those men to lead the church in His absence
 - They may have begun their work confused and absorbed in petty, selfish concerns, but in the end they grew to be godly examples
 - So if they could begin their walk with Jesus so poorly yet finish so well, then there is hope for all of us by the grace of God
- But let's move on, as Jesus returns by boat with His disciples, sailing to the western shore of the Galilee, where our story resumes today

Matt. 15:39 And sending away the crowds, Jesus got into the boat and came to the region of Magadan.

Matt. 16:1 The Pharisees and Sadducees came up, and testing Jesus, they asked Him to show them a sign from heaven.

Matt. 16:2 But He replied to them, "When it is evening, you say, 'It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.'

Matt. 16:3 "And in the morning, 'There will be a storm today, for the sky is red and threatening.' Do you know how to discern the appearance of the sky, but cannot discern the signs of the times?

Matt. 16:4 "An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign; and a sign will not be given it, except the sign of Jonah." And He left them and went away.

- Leaving Chapter 15, Matthew tells us that Jesus came to a region of Magadan, but Mark says Jesus went to the district of Dalmanutha
 - Well, Magadan is the ancient name of Migdal (also known as Magdala), and Dalmanutha was the name for Magadan's harbor

- This place is perhaps best known as the home of Mary Magdalene
- It's located directly across the Sea of Galilee from the Decapolis
- And as Jesus and the disciples land there, once again they are met by a delegation of the Pharisees
- The Pharisees normally stayed in Jerusalem, which was a three-day walk south from here
 - They had traveled up to the Galilee earlier to confront Jesus over His claims to be Messiah
 - Then when Jesus traveled to the Diaspora with His disciples, these men stayed behind not wishing to enter Gentile territory
 - Yet when Jesus returned to Jewish soil a few days later, there they were, still in the Galilee, waiting for Him
- That shows us how determined the Pharisees were to disrupt and discredit Jesus' ministry
 - They aren't there because they admired Jesus or because they had a sincere interest in knowing more about His ministry
 - They simply wanted to tear Him down
 - They were hypocrites...they were the opposite of who they pretended be in front of the crowds
 - And we can see that plainly in this passage
- They again ask Jesus to perform another miraculous sign to prove His claims to be Messiah
 - But notice Matthew says they were testing Jesus by their question
 - By "test" Matthew means they were looking for a way to discredit Jesus in front of the crowd, if they could
 - And the test was to ask specifically for a sign from Heaven, as Matthew says in v.1
 - Pharisees knew that the devil and his agents could perform miraculous signs on earth, in the physical realm

- The devil can counterfeit a physical healing or the manipulation of physical material like water or food
- But they said that only God could perform a sign from Heaven
- The problem is, what constitutes a sign from Heaven vs. one of earth?
 - Virtually any miracle that we could see here on earth would be, by definition, an earthly sign
 - So it was an ambiguous distinction that they could manipulate to suit their purposes
- And in this case, it was how the Pharisees intended to trap Jesus
 - They ask Jesus for a sign from Heaven knowing that any sign Jesus performed could be called a “sign of the earth”
 - And in that way they could accuse Jesus of doing miracles by the power of Satan as they did before in Chapter 12
 - Now to the crowds, this careful investigation looked as if the Pharisees were simply doing their due diligence
 - In reality they were hypocrites working to discredit Jesus and diminish His authority and influence
- Jesus knew their hearts, so in v.2 He doesn’t address their request directly, but instead He points out their hypocrisy and ignorance
 - He makes a comparison between reading weather signs and understanding the meaning of Jesus’ miracles
 - Men could look at and read the signs in the sky and make conclusions about the coming weather
 - If they saw a red sky at night, they would know the weather would be fair while a red sky in the morning meant a storm
 - You may have heard the old adage, “Red sky and night, sailor’s delight; red sky at morn, sailor be warned.”
 - But reading weather signs by looking at the clouds isn’t easy...it takes skill and experience
 - Even today a modern weatherman is often wrong

- In fact, it's the only job where being wrong 50% of the time is considered a good record
- So if these men could discern the weather with such ambiguous signs, then they should have recognized their Messiah by His obvious signs
 - As Jesus asks in v.3, how can they discern the signs of the sky, yet not know the signs of the times?
 - Signs of the times simply refers to the miracles Jesus performed in their day
 - Those signs marked the first coming of the Messiah
- Yet in the face of such overwhelming proof, the Pharisees continued to maintain that they needed more signs from Jesus
 - They were both hypocrites and ignorant
 - First, these men were hypocrites, because they weren't sincerely seeking to know whether Jesus was the Messiah
 - They had false motives...they were pretending to be seriously considering the possibility that Jesus was the Messiah
 - In reality, Jesus simply wasn't the kind of Messiah they imagined or desired
 - They expected the Messiah to look just like one of them...a super Pharisee, not a poor manual laborer from the Galilee
 - After they got one look at Jesus, they were committed to refuting and denying His signs, not understanding them
 - The irony is they tried to judge whether Jesus was truly the Messiah, when in reality they didn't possess the ability to recognize the Messiah
 - That's why Jesus chose the example of predicting weather as His illustration
 - These men were smart and they were learned, but all their smarts and learning were centered on the natural world
 - When it came to spiritual truth, they knew nothing of God, which was particularly ironic considering their profession
 - They knew their Mishnah backwards and forwards, and they memorized the Scriptures

- But they couldn't recognize the Messiah when He came for them
- So it was ironic they asked Jesus for a sign from Heaven, when the only kind of signs they could understand were signs of earth
- Our world is literally filled with people like the Pharisees, people who are incredibly smart and accomplished in the ways of this world
 - Yet at the same time, they are ignorant of spiritual truth, of the truth of what lies beyond this world
 - Truth about God's realm, about heaven, hell, judgment and of the eternity that stretches out beyond the grave...
 - The understanding of those things lies beyond their comprehension, if they even give them a thought at all
 - And this is true even for "religious" people, because being religious isn't the same thing as understanding spiritual truth
 - Consider the Pharisees again...they were the most religiously observant members of Jewish society you could find
 - Yet they were completely missing Jesus
 - Meanwhile, untrained, uneducated crowds recognized Jesus as Messiah
- How was that possible? It's possible because no one *discovers* the truth about God...not by their own intellect or education
 - We come to know the truth about God only because the Lord chooses to reveal Himself to us in a moment
 - As Jesus performed signs, some understood and others didn't
 - Some were receiving the revelation of God and others weren't
 - That's still the case today...the Lord reveals Himself through the testimony found in the word of God
 - But without the Spirit teaching us what Scripture means, we can't understand it, Paul told us
 - Understanding the meaning of spiritual truth requires that God make it known to us

- And this isn't just true of unbelievers like the Pharisees, it's also true of believers like the disciples themselves
- Later in v.15 of this chapter, Jesus will ask the disciples who they say He is, and Peter will say You are the Christ, the Messiah
- Naturally, we assume Peter came to that understanding by reasoning it out having seen the signs and heard the teaching
- Certainly that's what Peter assumed
- But as we will learn next week, that's not how it actually happened
 - Jesus tells Peter that His faith wasn't the result of human intellect or reasoning but was the result of the Father revealing it to him
 - That's how everyone receives spiritual truth, and self-evidently the Pharisees had not received such a revelation
 - Which is why they continued to seek for signs
- That's why the church is called to go out seeking for the lost, declaring the Gospel for the ears that will hear
 - We can't argue a closed heart to open, nor can we bring spiritual insight to the blind
 - Only God can do those things...but hallelujah that God *does* do those things!
- We are God's messengers whenever we share the truth of Jesus
 - But whether a heart receives our message or not depends on whether the Lord is at work revealing Himself to that person
 - Without the revelation of the Spirit, the word of God will be nonsense to them...they can't understand it, Paul says
 - So in place of the word, they will seek for signs, and the enemy is more than happy to give them signs to distract them
 - Notice in v.4 Jesus refused the Pharisees' request for more signs repeating what He said in Chapter 12, that there would be no more signs
 - Only one final sign would be given, the sign of Jonah, which is Jesus' term for His resurrection after three days in the grave

- The time for convincing Israel that Jesus was their Messiah ended back in Chapter 12, so He wasn't playing their game
- That's the danger of unbelievers seeking for signs...they perpetuate the myth that we find God and that the search is never ending
 - The Bible says that God has revealed Himself to us in His Son Jesus, so we do not need to search on our own
 - And even if we tried, we couldn't go to Heaven to find the truth nor will spiritual truth be found in searching the natural world
- As Paul says in Romans:

[Rom. 10:6](#) But the righteousness based on faith speaks as follows: "DO NOT SAY IN YOUR HEART, 'WHO WILL ASCEND INTO HEAVEN?' (that is, to bring Christ down), [Rom. 10:7](#) or 'WHO WILL DESCEND INTO THE ABYSS?' (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead)."

[Rom. 10:8](#) But what does it say? "THE WORD IS NEAR YOU, IN YOUR MOUTH AND IN YOUR HEART" – that is, the word of faith which we are preaching,

[Rom. 10:9](#) that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved;

- The word of faith, our confession in Christ, brings us to God, yet that confession itself isn't something we go searching for
- God brings it to us, it's near to us Paul says, ultimately His divine revelation of Jesus as Messiah enters our heart and leaves our mouth
- So for an unbeliever, seeking for signs is not a means to the truth, it's a dangerous distraction...and the same can happen to the believer too
 - And Matthew shows us the danger of signs for the believer in the second half of the story today

[Matt. 16:5](#) And the disciples came to the other side of the sea, but they had forgotten to bring any bread.

[Matt. 16:6](#) And Jesus said to them, "Watch out and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees."

[Matt. 16:7](#) They began to discuss this among themselves, saying, "He said that because we did not bring any bread."

Matt. 16:8 But Jesus, aware of this, said, "You men of little faith, why do you discuss among yourselves that you have no bread?"

Matt. 16:9 "Do you not yet understand or remember the five loaves of the five thousand, and how many baskets full you picked up?"

Matt. 16:10 "Or the seven loaves of the four thousand, and how many large baskets full you picked up?"

Matt. 16:11 "How is it that you do not understand that I did not speak to you concerning bread? But beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees."

Matt. 16:12 Then they understood that He did not say to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

- In v.5 we're told that they set sail again, and Mark tells us they landed in Bethsaida, the place where Jesus fed the five thousand earlier
 - And that detail makes the conversation that followed all the more ironic
 - As they set sail, the disciples realize they hadn't packed enough food for the trip
 - Mark tells us that they had only one loaf of bread for the group
 - I can imagine the conversation and finger-pointing that took place in the boat...
 - Now while the disciples are fretting over lunch, Jesus tries to turn their minds back to more important matters
 - He says beware the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees
 - And Mark records that Jesus also said the leaven of Herod
 - Leaven in the Bible is a picture of sin in any form, but Jesus makes it more specific in this case
 - The sin of the Pharisees was seeking the Kingdom by self-righteousness, legalism in the form of Pharisaic Judaism
 - They pursued external piety absent inward godliness
 - So they opposed Jesus because He rejected the rules of the Mishnah and threatened to tear down Pharisaic Judaism
 - The sin of the Sadducees was seeking the Kingdom in worldliness, in wealth and power

- The Sadducees exploited their role as overseers of the temple to enrich themselves
- They turned religion into a money-making enterprise and they worshipped the wealth it gave them
- So they opposed Jesus because He said it was wrong to make the temple into a place of business and a den of thieves
- And the sin of the Herodians was in seeking the Kingdom through the government and social order of the Roman Empire
 - Herodians supported Roman rule and sought to bring the Kingdom to the earth through the institutions of government
 - So they opposed Jesus because of His claims to being Israel's Messiah, the King coming to offer a new Kingdom
- So Jesus tells His disciples to beware of those negative, sinful influences in their own ministry
 - In other words, don't fall for the temptation to substitute easier, earthly goals for the higher spiritual goals of the Kingdom Program
 - Don't substitute self-righteous legalism for the grace of the New Covenant
 - You didn't find righteousness by doing good works and you can't make yourself more righteousness now by inventing new rules
 - And don't try to obtain your Kingdom reward in this world by pursuing earthly pleasures
 - If you trade pursuit of God for pursuit of wealth, you're trading eternal riches for things destined to burn up
 - It's a fool's bargain and it's a distraction
 - And don't put your trust in government or any institution of this world hoping to obtain things that will only be found in the next world
 - Social justice, equality, and the like are noble goals and worthy of our support and involvement...
 - But not if that support comes at the expense of investing our time, talent and treasure in building the Kingdom to come

- So Jesus says beware the leaven of these groups, but the disciples hear something completely different
 - In v.7 Matthew says the men assume that Jesus was making some oblique reference to their error in not bringing bread
 - Here's what they thought...they knew they didn't have bread, so that meant they would have to buy bread from someone
 - And they thought Jesus was pointing out their mistake when He warned them not to buy bread from Pharisees and Sadducees
 - So they probably started arguing over whose fault it was
 - Jesus hears this argument and reacts in disgust over their ignorance
 - In v.8 He says they are men of little faith

Mark 8:16 They began to discuss with one another the fact that they had no bread.

Mark 8:17 And Jesus, aware of this, said to them, "Why do you discuss the fact that you have no bread? Do you not yet see or understand? Do you have a hardened heart?"

Mark 8:18 "HAVING EYES, DO YOU NOT SEE? AND HAVING EARS, DO YOU NOT HEAR? And do you not remember,

Mark 8:19 when I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces you picked up?" They said to Him, "Twelve."

Mark 8:20 "When I broke the seven for the four thousand, how many large baskets full of broken pieces did you pick up?" And they said to Him, "Seven."

Mark 8:21 And He was saying to them, "Do you not yet understand?"

- In the past couple of weeks or so, they have witnessed Jesus provide bread for thousands of people on two separate occasions
 - And yet here they are worried about where their next meal was going to come from
 - It's a display of little faith, and the irony is they are doing much the same thing that the Pharisees had just done
- Those miracles were intended to be a message for these men...among other things it showed that the Lord they serve will be their provider
 - But they missed the sign because their hearts were hard, they were resistant to receiving spiritual truth

- They apparently gave little thought to the spiritual significance of what happened in each case
- So that now when their food supplies run low, they are caught thinking of earthly things
- Jesus points out their foolishness in vs.9-11...didn't they notice how the two miraculous feedings ended?
 - They had baskets left over following each event
 - In the case of the five thousand, there were twelve baskets left over, one for each man
 - And the number 12 represents God ruling through human government
 - So He was saying I will work through your hands and care for you in the process
- And in the case of the four thousand, there were seven baskets remaining
 - Obviously, the twelve shared the bread from those seven baskets
 - And seven is the number of perfection or completion (like 100%), indicating God's perfect plan
- Were those results purely random? What are the odds that after feeding thousands of people, the leftovers numbered exactly 12 and 7?
 - Does that sound like a coincidence to you? Or does it sound like God's calling card, something to remind us that He's in charge?
 - The answer is easy, and it should have been easy for the disciples too
 - Which is why Jesus says in v.11 that they should have known Jesus wasn't worried about physical bread
 - That was the least of His concerns, and it should have been the least of their concerns too
- The disciples were suffering from the same problem as the Pharisees, though in an opposite sense
 - The Pharisees couldn't make sense of the signs Jesus performed because they lacked divine insight to understand them

- So instead, they kept looking for signs to fill that gap
- And signs and wonders can't substitute for spiritual insight... they are merely a distraction
- The disciples couldn't understand Jesus' teaching because they weren't accustomed to using the spiritual insight made available to them
 - Back in Mark 8:18 Jesus told them they had eyes but did not see, they had ears but did not hear...
 - In other words, by their faith in Jesus, they had received divine insight to know spiritual truth, but they weren't using it
 - God had given them spiritual eyes and ears, so to speak, and yet they were still thinking in worldly ways
- So when Jesus says beware leaven, He's speaking of the great spiritual battle every believer faces against sin
 - It's a continual struggle to avoid temptations of self-righteousness, greed and the pride of life in this world
 - But rather than hear it in those terms, they think He's upset at not having bread for the trip
 - Yet all they needed to do was remember the events of the previous two weeks to know that couldn't be Jesus' concern
- So if the Pharisees were too interested in Jesus' signs, the disciples weren't giving Jesus' signs enough thought
 - They took His miracles for granted, it seems, and in the process they missed the meaning of them
 - And that too is a danger for all of us
 - Just like we can repeat the mistake of the Pharisees by seeking for too many signs, we can also ignore the ones we do receive
- Do you remember the story of Elijah in 1 Kings 19? Let me remind you of it briefly, because it's an excellent illustration of this problem
 - The prophet is upset at God for failing to bring a great revival in Israel through Elijah's ministry
 - So the prophet demands an audience before God at Mt. Horeb, the mountain where God met Moses

- During that audience, God chastises Elijah for abandoning his post in Israel
- And to teach Elijah a lesson about how God works, the Lord gives the prophet a demonstration
 - He placed Elijah in a cleft of the rock so Elijah could witness the glory of God passing by as Moses did
 - But first, God causes earthquakes, fire and great wind to appear before Elijah, but the Lord was not present in these moments
 - Then the Lord brings a soft breeze and the text says His presence was found in that breeze
- God's point to Elijah was that He didn't usually work through great signs and miracles
 - Neither in the course of world events nor in our own lives
 - Only rarely does God part a Red Sea or call fire down from Heaven
- Instead, the Lord usually works in quiet, almost undetected moments, like a soft breeze we barely notice
 - In the hearts of people around us, in the subtle ways He directs our steps throughout the day
 - Most of all, through simple lesson from His word that changes our outlook and causes us to live differently
- If we're paying attention closely, if we train ourselves to think spiritually, we can follow and serve Him now
 - But if we're seeking God in big displays of power like Elijah, then we're going to miss the work of God happening all around us
 - If our eyes are on this world...thinking about our next meal, our next business deal, our next purchase, or our next conquest...
 - Then we won't recognize spiritual truth when it crosses our path
 - We can't follow Jesus like Pharisees, demanding sign after sign from God without understanding what they mean
 - And all the while, the word of God is right here ready to reveal spiritual truth to us

- Neither can we think like the disciples in that boat missing spiritual truth because we're preoccupied solving problems of this world...problems that Jesus has already solved for us
- Live in the light of the counsel of God's word, train yourself to see and hear spiritual truth, and don't let the world pull you off the goal
 - Serve Jesus with eyes for eternity, not dependent on signs, but resting in His work and His truth