

**Text:** Matthew 16:5-12

**Title:** Doctrinal Leaven

**Truth:** Beware of false teaching: it is deadly.

**Date/Location:** March 30, 2022 at FBC

## Introduction

The first thing I noticed is that my NKJV MacArthur study Bible had a title above this section which was “Withdrawal of Jesus—Mark 8:13-21.” This is a bad heading, and I believe in this case it is the responsibility not of MacArthur, but of Thomas Nelson’s editors of the Bible text and reference material. (These headings are not part of the original text.)

The errant heading reflects only the narrative of the immediately prior verse, both in Matthew 16:4 and in the parallel passage of Mark 8:13. It does not reflect what is taught in the section that follows. In the upcoming three paragraphs, there is no mention there of Jesus withdrawing, no details of his departure, and no reasons are explained as to why he left. Instead, the section is all about the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees. The section heading should at least reflect *that* if not also include what is being said about this leaven. At Mark 8:14, the heading is “Disciples Do Not Understand Matt. 16:5-12.” This much better reflects what the section is about.

Lesson? Take the headings in your study Bible with a grain of salt. Compare them carefully to the text the follows, and see if you agree with the heading or not. In this case, the NKJV editors get a failing grade.

## **I. Forgetful Disciples, v. 5**

- A. The disciples forgot something very important—food for their journey. You cannot be so excited to get on with Gods’ work that you forget your head!
- B. The Lord used the forgetfulness of the disciples as an opportunity to teach them something that was, in terms of wording, similar to the topic at hand, namely something related to bread. He wanted to teach them to be very wary of the Pharisees and Sadducees in terms of their doctrine.

This was not necessarily a warning against all contact with them, but then again, Jesus himself just now had departed from the false religious leaders after yet another confrontation from them where they unbelievably asked for a miraculous sign from heaven. Putting distance between oneself and false teachers is important. In John 7:1, the Scripture records that Jesus moved about in Galilee, but not in Judea, because the Jews sought to kill Him. This warning though was not about the danger they posed to one’s physical life. It was a teaching opportunity about something else.

## **II. The Lord’s Veiled Warning and the Disciples’**

### **Interpretation, v. 6-7**

- A. Jesus takes the opportunity about bread to give a warning with a sort of “play on words.” Bread requires leaven, the disciples forgot all the ingredients, and the Lord said that they need to avoid the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees. What is that?!

- B. The disciples misinterpreted what Jesus said by overthinking it. Verse 7 says they reasoned among themselves, overlooking the fact that Jesus would not rebuke them about leaven when they forgot bread and when He could make bread for them if need be (see the feeding of the 4,000 just a few verses earlier at the end of chapter 15). But how was it possible that it was “bread of the Pharisees”—in other words, how could “leaven of the Pharisees...” refer to bread? They should have stopped to realize that does not make any sense. Furthermore, for the Lord to warn them “take heed and beware” about bread does not make any sense either. You do not beware of normal bread. It must be something far worse than bread.
- C. The Lord could not be talking about literal leaven, for it was the leaven *of the Pharisees and Sadducees*. Leaven is an additive used in the process of making bread. To the Jewish mind steeped in Scripture, it is something that often represents sin. In this case, it comes from the religious leaders of the day.

### **III. The Lord Corrects the Disciples, v. 8-12**

- A. The Lord’s rebuke is once again this way: “O you of little faith.” The reasoning that they were doing exhibited that they did not have very strong faith. They were focused on a worldly or material matter about food, which showed their non-faith-based thinking. So singular was their focus that they could not think outside of that box and get to another thought about how bad the Pharisees’ false teaching was.
- B. The Lord brings out specifically that *they* should not have been concerned about the bread, and that they should

have known that the *Lord* was not concerned to teach them about bread. His words *had* to have another significance than that. This is especially true because when they had observed the miracles of the feeding of 5,000 and 4,000, they took up more leftovers than they had to start with. A lack of bread was no problem for the Lord.

- C. What was more dangerous was that the Pharisees and Sadducees could inject their false ideas into the disciples' heads. This would mix around with all the other sound doctrine that they had received from Jesus and mess it all up. "A little leaven leavens the whole lump" (1 Cor. 5:6, Gal. 5:9).
- D. The idea of leaven in this context is obviously a reference to a bad thing. This bad thing comes from the Pharisees and Sadducees. They are the source and purveyors of this leaven. And what is it that they do? Verse 12 tells us that it is their doctrine. I believe the Lord refers to the entire package of their wicked teachings and actions. They:
1. Did not believe in Jesus.
  2. They taught their traditions over the word of God, nullifying God's word.
  3. Blasphemed the Holy Spirit by attributing His works to the Devil.
  4. Taught what was in effect a works-based salvation.
  5. Were arrogant, believing they were better than "the people" who were accursed and un-educated in the things of God.

6. Refused to believe John the Baptist or repent at his urging.
  7. Despised Jesus for eating with tax collectors and sinners.
  8. Criticized Jesus' disciples and Jesus for not following the traditions such as hand-washing and fasting.
  9. Repeatedly claimed Jesus and his disciples were Sabbath-breakers, when they themselves did not understand the true nature of the Sabbath.
  10. Continued to ask for signs from Jesus while they refused to believe what He had already shown them.
  11. They were hypocrites (Luke 12:1). They taught one thing, but did another. Their "doctrine" was "do as I say, not as I do." This is bad doctrine, un-Christian doctrine.
  12. The external was the most important to them. They concerned themselves with tithes of mint and anise and cumin, but neglected the more important matters of the law, like justice, mercy, and faithfulness (Matthew 23:23). Internal matters of the heart did not matter to them, but this is what God is most concerned about.
- E. Finally the disciples got it. In verse 12, they realized that Jesus was not talking to them about *bread* but about dangerous doctrine.
- F. The Sadducees were bad. Acts 23:8 tells us that they believed there was no such thing as resurrection, angels, nor spirits. They denied basic Bible teaching and gave their disciples no hope whatsoever. They were the

atheists of their time—somehow religious but secular at the same time. I'm not sure how that is possible, but their belief system was doomed to failure anyway.

G. The Pharisees, though right on some things (Acts 23:8), were making disciples of Hell (Matt. 23:15).

## **Conclusion**

You and I too need to take heed and beware of false doctrine. It is all around, it is subtle, and it is deadly. The ways of our world today, including tolerance and promotion of all forms of wickedness, follow-your-heart beliefs, etc. are leavens that we need to get out of our lives. A little of that goes a long way to make a mess of your thinking and consequent behavior.

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