

Let's keep our Bibles open right there at Matthew 16 as we continue our journey through this Gospel together. Like last week, we have three scenes from Jesus's life to explore today. And as I studied these scenes this week, I found myself thinking about phoropters. Raise your hand if you know what a phoropter is. If your hand isn't up, that's ok! I only learned that word this week when I googled, "What is that complex device that eye doctors use to determine the prescription for my glasses?" Well, that's a phoropter. And if you've been to the eye doctor because your vision isn't great, and you've leaned into the phoropter, you know that everything starts out blurry. Then, the eye doctor makes a bunch of adjustments to the machine, has you look again, and you can see with greater clarity. The doctor continues to adjust the device until your vision is as clear as possible. You move from blurry, to better, to best.

And that's a bit how these three stories go. Sight is a common theme in these three stories, but not physical sight. These stories are all about spiritual sight, about the ability to see who Jesus is that we might believe in him. In the first story, the Pharisees and Sadducees have very blurry vision. In fact, blurry is too generous. The reality is, they are blind. And as we consider their interaction with Jesus, we'll see the peril of spiritual blindness. In the second story, the disciples have better vision, but there's something getting in the way. And as we consider their interaction with Jesus, we'll see the problem of spiritual forgetfulness. Finally, in the third story, the light breaks through! Peter sees the truth clearly. And as we watch his interaction with Jesus, we'll see the source of spiritual sight.

These stories move from bad, to better, to best. And as we work our way through them, I'm praying that we will walk away with a fresh sense of gratitude for the spiritual sight we have, and a desire to see Jesus with increasing clarity. I'm also praying that this will be a special encouragement to keep praying and keep sharing the gospel with those who don't yet believe. Let's start with...

1. The Peril of Spiritual Blindness

Let's pick up the story in Matthew 16, verse 1: *And the Pharisees and Sadducees came, and to test him they asked him to show them a sign from heaven (Matthew 16:1).*

The scene begins with some of the key religious leaders of the day—the Pharisees and the Sadducees—coming out to see Jesus. But they are not just coming to see him, they are coming to test him. That word "test" is only used negatively in Matthew. It was the same word used in Matthew 4 to describe how Satan came to tempt Jesus. It is a word that communicates some kind of malicious intent. So, whatever reason they have for requesting a sign, it isn't positive. Perhaps they hope Jesus will fail to perform a sign so they can mock him. Or maybe they're just interested in seeing a show of his power without any real desire to submit to his Lordship. Whatever their intent, Jesus isn't interested in playing along.

Look at verses 2-3: *He answered them, "When it is evening, you say, 'It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.' And in the morning, 'It will be stormy today, for the sky is red and threatening.' You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times (Matthew 16:2-3).*

You've probably heard the expression: "Red sky at night, sailors delight. Red sky at morning, sailors take warning." It's not a flawless prediction of the weather, but there is science behind the saying. When the sun's light reflects off dry, stable air, it makes a reddish color. So, if the sky is red at sunset, it likely means that the clear, calm air of a high-pressure weather system is in the west, moving toward you. But, if the sky is red at sunrise, it likely means that the clear, calm air is past you in the east, and a low-pressure system is moving in with a storm. That's as far as my meteorological knowledge can take me... so back to the Bible! Jesus is saying to the Pharisees and Sadducees, "You can look at the sky and understand the weather." "So, why can't you look at what's happening through me and understand what's going on? You've seen, or at least heard, about the miracles I've already performed. What more do you need?"

Then look at verse 4. Jesus says, *An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah.* So he left them and departed (Matthew 16:4). Jesus explained the sign of Jonah back in Matthew 12. He said, just as Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days, he will spend three days in the heart of the earth. It's a reference to his death, his burial, *and* his resurrection. Because, just as Jonah was delivered from the fish, Jesus rose from the grave! And his resurrection is the ultimate sign of his power and authority. Yet tragically, many people in Jesus's day refused to believe, even after he rose again. The question is, why? Was it simply because resurrection was too far-fetched for them to get their heads around? Was it because they lacked evidence that would compel them to believe? No. I'll give you an example.

At the very end of Matthew, the Roman guards who saw the angel of the Lord descend upon Jesus's tomb and roll the stone away, went to tell the chief priests what had happened. And Matthew 28:12-15 says, *And when [the chief priests] had assembled with the elders and taken counsel, they gave a sufficient sum of money to the soldiers and said, "Tell people, 'His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.' And if this comes to the governor's ears, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble." So they took the money and did as they were directed. And this story has been spread among the Jews to this day* (Matthew 28:12-15).

Think about that! The chief priests and elders of Israel do not think these soldiers are making up a story. They knew Jesus rose from the dead. But still, they will not believe in him! And they bribe the soldiers to tell a lie so that no one else will believe in him either! Why? Why would that happen? Because the source of unbelief is deeper than a lack of evidence. The ultimate source of unbelief is spiritual blindness. Like the Pharisees and Sadducees in Matthew 16, who cannot see the significance of the times in which they lived, these chief priests and elders could not see the truth. And that is true of everyone who does not believe. They may not be malicious in their unbelief like these religious leaders. But they are just as blind.

2 Corinthians 4:4 says, *the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ* (2 Corinthians 4:4). This is the peril of spiritual blindness. It might sound hopeless. Satan is blinding the minds of unbelievers? Then what hope is there for the person I love who doesn't believe? Or, what hope is there for me if I don't believe? Well, hang with me because in our third scene, we're going to see how God heals spiritual blindness and imparts spiritual sight. But before we get there, as we look at our second scene, I want you to see...

2. The Problem of Spiritual Forgetfulness

Remember, these stories move from bad to better to best. And the disciples are in a better position than the Pharisees and Sadducees. They do believe in Jesus. But their vision is blurry. Look at verse 5: *When the disciples reached the other side, they had forgotten to bring any bread* (Matthew 16:5). The disciples have traveled with Jesus across the sea of Galilee. They are hungry after the long journey, but then they realize they forgot to pack bread. And as they realize this *Jesus said to them* in verse 6, *“Watch and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees”* (Matthew 16:6).

Now, clearly, they miss his point. They think Jesus is talking about physical bread, maybe that he’s just as hungry as they are, and they’re worried. Verse 7: *And they began discussing it among themselves, saying, “We brought no bread”* (Matthew 16:7). You can imagine the conversation. They realize they have no bread. Jesus says something about bread. And they start muttering among themselves,

“Whose job was it to pack the bread? Andrew? Didn’t you say you would get some?”

“Well, way to go! We’re all hungry and we’ve got nothing to eat.”

Then Andrew fires back, “It’s not my fault, Thomas said he would get some.”

“No, I didn’t!” Thomas replies...

Verses 8-10: *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 yet perceive? Do you not remember 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?”* (Matthew 16:8-10). You see Jesus’s point. “Why are you guys worried about bread? I’m here! You just watched me provide bread for thousands of people. Why is your faith so little?” Why is their faith so little? Because they are not remembering what Jesus has done. They are slipping into the problem of spiritual forgetfulness. And we know what this is like.

We face some lack, some need, and we get worried. Maybe we start to mutter and argue with others because we’re all stressed out. But our angst would be kept at bay, and we would see things more clearly, if we would simply remember how Jesus has taken care of us in the past. This is why remembering is a crucial component of the Christian life. This is why we read and re-read the Scriptures. So that we can reflect on God’s past faithfulness as a way of stirring up present faith. This is why we come around the Lord’s table. So that we can remember that God so loved us that he gave us his Son. And as Paul says, *if God has given us his Son, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?* This is why we share testimonies, as a way of encouraging one another with the truth of what Christ has done, so that we will bolster our belief in what he will do. I could list many more examples, but brothers and sisters, let’s watch out for the problem of spiritual forgetfulness. Let’s make every effort to remember what our Lord has done for us.

Then, very briefly, look at verses 11-12. Jesus says, *How is it that you fail to understand that I did not speak about bread? 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 teaching of the*

Pharisees and Sadducees (Matthew 16:11-12). He's saying, "I wasn't talking about physical bread, I was talking about the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees, which is spreading like leaven, like yeast, in our time." Beware of them... they are blind guides... and they will lead you astray. And that brings us back to spiritual blindness, which again, was not unique to the Pharisees. It is our common condition as fallen human beings. On our own, we cannot see the glory of Christ. So what hope is there? Well, let's look at what this last scene teaches us about...

3. The Source of Spiritual Sight

Look at verse 13: *Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?"* (Matthew 16:13). It's a simple question. Jesus has been engaged in public ministry for some time now, serving massive crowds through his teaching and his healing. And he wants to know, "What are people saying? Who do people think I am?" So, he asks his disciples. Verse 14: *And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets"* (Matthew 16:14).

Some may have thought Jesus was one of these heroes of the faith, returned from the dead. Or, they may have thought he was simply carrying out ministry like that of John or Elijah or Jeremiah. But the important thing to notice is that these are positive descriptions. These were all people whom the Israelites held in high esteem. So, while the religious leaders are growing in opposition to Jesus, the popular opinion remains very favorable. Jesus is one of the prophets! But that doesn't capture the whole truth. Calling Jesus a great religious teacher, or even a prophet sent from God, falls far short of his real identity. So, Jesus asks the question again, only this time he wants to know what the disciples think. Verse 15: *He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?"* (Matthew 16:15).

Who do you say that I am? That's the most important question you'll ever answer in your life. Who do you say Jesus is? Do you think he was a fraud? An imposter who deceived many people? Well, then you're as blind as the Pharisees. Do you think he was a simply great teacher? A powerful religious leader? An example to follow? Well, then you still do not see the truth.

But Peter sees! Look at verse 16: *Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."* (Matthew 16:16). The book of Matthew has been building toward this moment for fifteen and a half chapters! Finally, someone has clearly seen what the angels declared at Jesus's birth, what his powerful miracles and authoritative teaching have demonstrated, that Jesus is the Christ—the Messiah—who has come to deliver God's people. *And* Jesus is not merely a human Messiah; he is the Son of God! He is God and man. Lord and Savior. He is Jesus the Christ.

Now, here's the crucial question: How did Peter come to see that? Was he like Sherlock Holmes, perceptively gathering the evidence while following Jesus, waiting for this climactic moment to reveal his conclusion, solving the mystery? No. If that were the case, Jesus would have applauded and said, "Way to go, Peter! You figured it out!" But that's not what he says. Verse 17: *And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood*

has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 16:17).

Jesus doesn't say, "Peter, you're brilliant!" Jesus says, "Peter, you're blessed!" "Because you have seen something that flesh and blood could not reveal to you." He's saying, Peter, you were blind. And neither you nor any other person had the power to open your eyes. But my Father who is in heaven, he has revealed the truth to you! Spiritual sight is a gift of grace. Remember that verse in 2 Corinthians we read earlier? *The god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ (2 Corinthians 4:4).*

Well, here's what Paul goes on to say about all who do believe. 2 Corinthians 4:6: *God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.* Let this sink in. If you believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, here's what happened: Though you were spiritually blind, lost in the darkness of sin, incapable of believing in him, God, who said, "let there be light!" at the beginning of creation, said, "let there be sight!" in you. And he opened the eyes of your heart, so that you could see the glory of his Son. This is why you believe!

As we read throughout the Bible that faith is a gift from God. Brothers and sisters, that should fill us with humble gratitude. And that should fill us with confidence that God is able to save the ones we love who do not yet believe. He can shine light into their darkness no matter how deep that darkness may be, he can open their eyes and give them faith. So, keep praying, keep asking him to do it! And if you don't yet believe, if you cannot see the glory of Christ, ask God to open your eyes. He is the source of spiritual sight. Seek this gift from him. He will not hold it back from you!

Conclusion

Now, look at what Jesus says next in verses 18-19. He has told Peter why he is blessed. And then he says... *"And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Matthew 16:18-19).*

Well, these are straightforward, non-controversial verses, and we're out of time so we'll just end there... I'm kidding! These verses have been a catalyst for disagreement about Peter's role in church history, as well as disagreements about the power entrusted to church leaders more broadly. And we simply do not have time to get into all of that now. But here's what I can do. I can tell you what I believe to be the most straightforward reading of these verses, which will lead to an important concluding application. As you may know, the Greek word for Peter is *petros*. And the Greek word for rock is *petra*. So, Jesus is using a pun. He's saying, you are *petros*, and on this *petra* I will build my church. He's saying, "Peter, you are a foundational rock in the construction of my church, which nothing—not even the powers of hell itself—will stop me from building."

"And I'm going to put the keys of my kingdom in your hand. You will have power to open and

shut the access to the kingdom here on earth. And what happens here in this world will reflect heavenly realities.” That is what Jesus is saying. And that is precisely what happened. You can read all about it in the book of Acts. In Acts, the growth of the church begins with a sermon from Peter. He proclaims the gospel, declaring that access into the kingdom of heaven is open for all who believe in Jesus, and shut for all who reject him. And thousands of people believe. Peter was the first to engage in this kind of preaching, making him a rock in the foundational days of the church, but he was not the last. This same work was carried out by the rest of the disciples, and the expanding group of believers, who have continued to lead others into the kingdom through gospel proclamation to this day. That’s what Jesus is promising here in Matthew 16.

And church, do you see how the promise has been fulfilled, and is being fulfilled in us? We are now responsible to take up Peter’s work and proclaim the good news that the access to the kingdom is open for all who turn to Jesus in repentance and faith. We are to proclaim the truth so that the blind might see, so that the unclear might gain understanding, always praying in dependence upon God, who alone can give the gift of spiritual sight. But an astute reader might ask, “What about verse 20?” The disciples are finally beginning to see the truth, and then...

Then he strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ (Matthew 16:20).
Why would Jesus say that?

Because they don’t yet understand what kind of Christ—what kind of Messiah—Jesus is, or the mission he came to fulfill... But more on that next week.