

THE KING OF KINGS: A STUDY OF MATTHEW

The King's Ministry: A Study of Matthew 14–20

STUDY SEVEN

Testy Critics and Dull Disciples

Matthew 16:1–12

The Pharisees and Sadducees were always looking for another argument, especially when dealing with Jesus. But Jesus knew they would not believe, regardless. He knew them better than they knew themselves.

—Pastor Charles R. Swindoll

DURING Jesus' earthly ministry, He attracted unique kinds of people just like He does today. Back then, there were the critics, whose flinty tongues sparked aflame one argument after another. No matter what Jesus said, they wouldn't listen. No matter what miracle He performed, they wouldn't believe. Nothing would make them open their hard hearts to the love of Christ.

Then there were the disciples, who had open hearts but often dull minds. They didn't attack Jesus . . . they simply misunderstood Him. Their preoccupation with life's pressing concerns drew their attention away from perceiving Jesus' profound spiritual teachings.

As we will see in this study, Jesus dealt differently with both groups. He rebuked and walked away from the testy critics who wouldn't listen to Him. But He patiently walked with His disciples, who were eager to believe but slow to understand. Let's see how Jesus responds to each in Matthew 16:1–12.



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Testy Critics and Dull Disciples

Matthew 16:1–12



PREPARE YOUR HEART

Unlike the disciples prior to Pentecost, we have the Holy Spirit to “guide [us] into all truth” (John 16:13). As you open God’s Word, invite the Spirit to give you spiritual insight into the meaning of Christ’s teaching. Write your prayer below:



TURN TO THE SCRIPTURES

According to Pastor Chuck Swindoll’s chart of Matthew, chapter 16 launches the next section in the gospel, *Opposition and Rejections of the King* (Matthew 16:1–25:46). Take a moment to review where we are in our journey through Matthew:

MATTHEW

	Announcement and Arrival of the King Main Emphasis: His Credentials Birth Baptism Temptation CHAPTERS 1–4	Proclamation and Reception of the King Main Emphasis: His Message Sermon on the Mount Miracles Discourses Parables CHAPTERS 5–15	Opposition and Rejection of the King Main Emphasis: His Suffering and Death Spread of opposition Preparation of disciples Final predictions Crucifixion CHAPTERS 16–27	Resurrection and Triumph of the King Main Emphasis: His Conquest God’s power Great Commission CHAPTER 28
The King	His identity: Israel’s promised King		His destiny: “Crucify Him!”	
Scope	Teaching the vast multitudes		Teaching the Twelve	
Location	Bethlehem and Nazareth	Ministry in Galilee	Ministry in Judea	
People’s Reaction	Increased popularity		Increased hostility	
Theme	Jesus is the King, Israel’s long-awaited Messiah.			
Key Verses	16:16–19; 28:18–20			
Christ in Matthew	Jesus, the Messiah, fulfills the prophecies, promises, types, and expectations of the Old Testament Scriptures (16:16–19; 28:18–20).			

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In this new section, Jesus' enemies hound Jesus as they drag Him to the cross, where He offers Himself as a sacrifice for the sins of everyone—even for the very enemies who kill Him. Although constantly attacked, Jesus continues to meet the needs of the masses, to teach vital lessons on discipleship, and to prepare His followers to continue the kingdom ministry He started.

Jesus' chief enemies included: the Herodians—such as Herod Antipas who beheaded John the Baptizer for confronting his corruption, the Pharisees—who hated Jesus for critiquing their traditions and denouncing their hypocrisy, the Sadducees—a priestly class with political influence whose wealth had multiplied due to their corrupt temple trade.

Let's now turn to Matthew 16:1–12 to see how Jesus handled the offense of the newly teamed-up Pharisees and Sadducees.



Observation: Rebuke for Critics, Warning for Disciples

In the observation phase of *Searching the Scriptures*, we examine the passage as a detective might look for clues to solve a mystery.¹ By linking the Sadducees with the Pharisees, Matthew dropped an important clue regarding the *extent* of opposition. Read [Matthew 16:1–12](#), paying special attention to the actions of these two groups and Jesus' response to them.

According to [Matthew 16:1](#), what brought together these two groups? How did their alliance create a formidable power block against Jesus?



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The Jewish leaders demanded a sign from heaven, implying that all those miracles Jesus had performed were *not* from heaven. *How insulting!* By referring to signs in the sky, Jesus responded with a twist of irony. What rebuke did He make against them in *Matthew 16:2–4*?

Jonah—a walking miracle—was sign enough for the wicked Ninevites to turn to God. Similarly, Jesus was a living “sign.” The Father sent Him to earth to inaugurate the kingdom of heaven, and He revealed His royal authority through His miracles. What more proof did the Pharisees and Sadducees need? Giving them no more signs, Jesus “left them and went away” (Matthew 16:4).

Jesus was saying, “I’m the sign that you must believe in, but you miss the truth altogether because you will not believe.” Let’s face it, for some people, we can never give enough evidence. Jesus could have brought all kinds of evidence, but He walked away.
—Pastor Chuck Swindoll

What did the disciples argue about on their journey, according to *16:5–7*?



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According to Jesus in *16:8–10*, why was the lack of food the least of the disciples' problems? What was the more insidious threat to the disciples and their fellow Jews (*Matthew 16:6, 11–12*)?

Why do you think the disciples couldn't get past the missing bread to comprehend Jesus' point?

It wasn't that the disciples wouldn't believe; it was that they were so preoccupied with the everyday stuff of life. Jesus finally had to spell it out for them. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Interpretation: Fitting the Response to the Audience

Jesus' different responses to the testy critics and dull-minded disciples give us insight into the meaning of the passage.

The joining of the Pharisees and Sadducees would have startled the Jews more than we may realize. Usually, these two factions came into conflict over their different responses to Roman rule over Judea. The Pharisees sought God's blessing through strict observance of the law, while the Sadducees hoped to garner favor with the Romans by cozying up with local political leaders.



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Look at their differences in the following chart.²

The Pharisees	The Sadducees
Were traditional and religious separatists	Were cultural and political compromisers
Taught God’s sovereignty and predestination	Taught free will
Believed in angels	Denied the existence of angels
Affirmed life after death and a resurrection	Renounced life after death and a resurrection
Equated oral tradition with Scripture	Rejected oral tradition
Saw all 39 Old Testament writings as inspired	Saw only the five books of Moses as inspired
Emphasized rewards in the afterlife	Emphasized prosperity in this life

Despite such drastic differences, their seething hatred of Jesus brought them together and blinded their spiritual eyes.

Jesus pointed out that His critics refused to interpret the “signs of the times” to perceive God’s doings (Matthew 16:3). To what “signs of the times” was Jesus referring? Why did they neglect to accept these signs? For help with the answer, read page 15 of Pastor Chuck’s commentary, *Insights on Matthew 16–28*, or for an online resource, consult *Constable’s Notes* at netbible.org.



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What reasons might Jesus have had for referring to Jonah as the *only* sign He would give? Look at His explanation of the “sign of the prophet Jonah” in *Matthew 12:38–41* for a broader perspective on His meaning.

Refusing to submit to His critics’ demands, Jesus simply walked away. What principle can you draw from His actions about dealing with hard-hearted critics? Why is this principle still relevant for citizens of the kingdom of heaven today?

The disciples’ hearts weren’t hard—just distracted by the growling sound in their empty stomachs! Why was their fear about going hungry a sign of weak faith? Also, how did their argument cause them to miss a bigger issue (*Matthew 16:5–12*)?



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Jesus' reminders helped the disciples to focus on His words and to refocus their faith. What principle can you conclude from His actions about dealing with argumentative or distracted believers?

Jesus patiently worked with the Twelve. It was worth the effort since a day would come when they would have to carry on without Him. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Correlation: The Yeast of Legalism

The “deceptive teaching” of the Pharisees and Sadducees posed a serious threat. Like yeast in dough, their legalism had permeated the good teaching of God’s Word, and if not removed, it would spoil the disciples’ pure faith in Jesus.

Paul warned the Galatians about the “yeast” that false teachers were kneading into the doctrines of the early church. They were telling new Gentile believers that faith in Christ was not enough and that they must submit to Jewish rituals like circumcision to be right with God!

What did Paul say about the dangers of legalism, and what we should do about it, according to [Galatians 5:1–10](#)? See especially verses 3–6.



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New forms of legalism live on today in many churches, causing some to stray from the freedom we have in Christ. As Jesus warned His disciples, “Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees” (Matthew 16:6).

Pharisees and Sadducees are gone, but false teaching proliferates. Spiritual deception is at hand. Turn to Christ. Open His Word. Go deeper in your walk with God.
—Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Application: Crucial Questions

As we look into the mirror of this passage, do we see any aspect of ourselves in the types of people around Jesus? Do we at times get testy like the critics, stuck in a skeptical mind-set and seeking more proof before we can trust Christ? Or, like the disciples, have everyday worries and fears kept our faith dull and caused bickering with one another?

Have you fallen into any pits recently on your journey of faith? If so, which one(s)?

Imagine yourself with the disciples—wrapped up in worry and quarreling over unimportant things. What patient reminders from Scripture might Jesus offer you to help you see His truth and grow your faith?

In time, the Holy Spirit would come at Pentecost to indwell the disciples and remind them of those things they so easily forgot while Jesus was with them. Today, walk in the power of the Spirit, who will lead you to treasures of truth that will deepen your faith in Christ.



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A FINAL PRAYER

Father, in a world of critics who continually attack Your Son, guard me from the pitfall of skepticism. Remind me of what's truly important when I get distracted by lesser things so that my faith remains sharp. Keep my eyes fixed on Jesus, and help me see beyond the deception of false teachers. Guide me in Your path of truth. In the name of Jesus I pray. Amen.

ENDNOTES

1. To learn about Pastor Chuck Swindoll's *Searching the Scriptures* method of Bible study, go to the Web page, "[How to Study the Bible for Yourself](#)."
2. Adapted from Charles R. Swindoll, *Swindoll's Living Insights New Testament Commentary: Insights on Matthew 16–28*, vol. 1B (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2020), 7, 13–14.

