

Beware!

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[0 : 00] Our Father, we thank you that we can and do know you because you have spoken to us in and through your word.

So speak to us now through it by your Spirit. Speak to our minds that we might know you. Speak to our hearts that we might love you. Speak to our hands that they might do your will in all things. Do all this that Jesus might be glorified amongst us. In his name we pray. Amen.

Well, what do you do when people are heading for danger? What do you do when people are heading for danger?

In North Carolina, on the eastern coast of the United States, there is a town called Durham. People in America don't come up with any of their own names, do they?

[1 : 05] In the U.S. Durham, there's no cathedral, but there is a bridge. Right? Exciting, isn't it? A railway bridge over a busy road near the town center.

Now, that might not kind of sound that exciting yet on its own, but this bridge was built in the 1940s. It was a few decades before regulations were introduced, standardizing the minimum height for road bridges.

And so this particular bridge stands two foot lower, shorter than the now standard height for bridges across the country. You can probably see where this is going. Maybe you've seen it for yourself. It's one of the few bridges in the world with its own dedicated YouTube channel. It's known locally as the can opener, because every time a HGV or a tall van fancies its chances as it approaches, it finds itself de-roofed in an instant.

It's the kind of thing YouTube was made for. But what do you do when people are heading for danger? Well, you warn them, don't you?

[2 : 16] And if they don't listen at first, what do you do? You warn them again. The 11 foot 8 bridge, as it's called. I mean, I told you, not original with names, are they?

They began life with the usual kind of just height restriction sign on the side, and a turn right here for high vehicles. But people didn't listen to the warning sign, and so they added more signs further back on the roads.

And then they brought in a traffic light system to give people the chance to stop before the bridge and consider their actions. But crashes kept on happening. At least 180 in the last 10 years. Who knows how many before they started actually recording them? Now, you have between the traffic lights that hang over the roads, there is a massive LED sign that instructs high vehicles to turn off.

And then finally, just before the bridge, there's a big barrier, kind of like goalposts. The equal height of the bridge has been built to stop people from hitting the bridge and hitting the barrier instead.

[3 : 27] The approach is covered, littered with warnings. Because lots of warnings, isn't it, is what you've got to give people heading down a dangerous road.

There are countless signposts. There are lights and flashing signs. There's warnings on your right, on your left, above you and in front of you. There are lots of them, and they are in your face. And that's the whole point. If you want people to take notice, sometimes you have to say things, don't you, in such a way where they cannot miss the points.

The more in your face the warnings are, the more people will begin to take notice. If you wanted a one-word summary of what this section of Matthew is all about, I would simply say, beware.

If you want to pad out the word count, I can stretch out to watch out. In this evening's passage, Jesus offers two warnings.

[4 : 45] And both of them are quite in your face. But I hope we will see as we go on that that is no bad thing. Because the more in our face the warnings are, the more likely we will be to take them to

heart.

So we're going to look at each of those warnings in turn, beginning, first of all, with Jesus' warning to a faithless generation. To which he says, repent and believe.

Chapter 16 begins very similarly to chapter 15. Jesus feeds a great crowd in the previous verses. 5,000 in chapter 14, 4,000 in chapter 15. And then, next thing you know, the Pharisees show up to try and trip Jesus up. But this time, interestingly, they are accompanied by the Sadducees.

Now, this is a really unusual alliance. The Pharisees and the Sadducees, they were not friends. But it seems they've taken on board the saying, the enemy of my enemy is my friends.

[6:00] The Pharisees were zealous keepers of the law. And, as we saw a couple of weeks ago, the many laws they had made themselves on top of God's words. The Sadducees were kind of on the much more easygoing end of the spectrum.

They liked some of the Bible, but they weren't too fussed about believing at all. And yet, here they come together. It's like Saudi Arabia and Iran getting together for a pint at the pub so they can support the U.S. football team together.

Look and think, well, what's going on here? But here they are, and they have a question for Jesus. But Matthew hints immediately, doesn't he, what is going on here?

Because why do they come? Verse 1. They come to test Jesus. Not to find out more about him, but to test him.

It's the same word as tempt. This is exactly what the devil does back in Matthew 4.

[7:12] And the test is pretty similar too. Prove yourself. Show us something more. Make it obvious to everyone that you are who you say you are.

Show us a sign, they say, from heaven. But Jesus knows what they are up to.

And he knows it wouldn't achieve anything, even if he wrote his name in the stars. Because they interpret the heavens for themselves.

Verse 2 and 3. It's worth noting that the word for sky in those verses is the same as heaven in verse 1. It's the same word in the Greek, heaven and sky. So Jesus is saying, isn't he, signs in the heavens, verse 2.

You say it will be fair weather for the sky or the heaven is red. You already see the heavens and come up with your own interpretation of them. I don't think Jesus here is giving kind of an authoritative word on how to forecast the weather.

[8:29] However, I think what he's doing is making clear to the Pharisees and Sadducees that when it comes to the heavens, they already do their own interpreting. We'll decide for ourselves what the heavens are saying.

So if Jesus was to put a sign in the heavens, well, they'd come up with their own way of interpreting that too. Constantly reasoning away every bit of proof that Jesus might offer.

That's the attitude of some, isn't it? Not taking the gospel at face value, but constantly looking for reasons to explain it away. Or waiting for just one more sign.

But if that sign came, then it would be one more sign after that. That's what the heart of a Pharisee and a Sadducee does.

People who want to save themselves, people who don't want to believe what the Bible says, they'll come up with their own interpretations of everything, no matter how much proof you give them.

That's who Jesus has in front of him here.

[9:42] And so he gives them a strong warning. Not quite the final warning he's going to give them in this gospel, but we're heading in that right direction.

Right? These are kind of the traffic lights before the bridge. The big flashing LED sign saying, you need to turn round. There will be even more warnings down the road, but this is an in-your-face warning, isn't it?

Verse 4. An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah.

An evil and adulterous generation. Strong words, perhaps uncomfortable words.

But if you were driving down that road towards the 11 foot 8 bridge in a lorry, what would you rather? Right?

[10:46] Would you rather a kind of a small white signpost on the side of the road that said, please think about turning left maybe if you'd like to? Or would you rather a big neon flashing sign right in front of you saying, you're heading towards destruction, you need to change direction?

The answer is obvious, isn't it? We come to another passage this evening where Jesus' words might at first seem pretty jarring. And they are.

But far better to shout an uncomfortable truth to someone heading off a cliff than politely ask them to consider their options. We might not think Jesus' words here are gracious or kind or loving as we so often like to think of those things.

But they are all those things. Because if he didn't speak so strongly, it would really show a lack of care for the fate of the people in front of him.

You need to change direction and you need to do it now. That's part of what he is saying by addressing them as an evil and adulterous generation.

[12:07] You are heading towards destruction. And the response of turning around is part of, I think, what we are supposed to get from the sign of Jonah. Because this isn't the first time in Matthew's gospel that the sign of Jonah has been mentioned.

And previously, he put a little more flesh on the bones, which I take it we are meant to carry forward into this instance as well. Two things significant about Jonah that Jesus mentions back in chapter 12.

He spent three days and three nights in the belly of the fish, just as Jesus will spend three days and three nights in the belly of the earth. Before coming out alive.

Rising again from the dead. And there's part one of the sign that you are going to get. A sign from heaven. How about a sign from the depths of the earth?

A dead man coming back to life. But I think part two of the sign of Jonah is how the audience responds.

[13:18] Not to his miracle, but to his message. To the message that was proclaimed after his three days in the depths of the earth.

Because Jonah then went, didn't he, to the people of Nineveh. An evil and adulterous generation. As evil as they came.

And the people of Nineveh were not wowed, were they, by Jonah's impressive miracles. They were wounded ultimately by the state of their own hearts.

They didn't see a miracle. They heard a message. And that message was, your heart is unclean. Your heart is unclean.

And when they heard that message, they didn't need ever more proof from Jonah that his message was true, did they? They didn't demand he gets swallowed by a fish again to prove himself.

[14:20] They didn't demand that he did something in the heavens. No, they heard his message of the need to turn to God because of their unclean hearts. And they responded. By repenting.

And asking for forgiveness. That is what an evil and adulterous generation does or should do in response to Jesus.

Not ask for more proof. But beg for more mercy. It is a strong warning.

But strong warnings come from people who want to see you kept safe. And what Jesus has shown us, even just through the last chapter or so, isn't it, is that while this here is an evil and adulterous generation, who will hang the Messiah on a cross, we all have evil and adulterous hearts.

And if we want to be safe from destruction, we need to heed the warning. Heed the warning signs and repent, turn around, come to Jesus.

[15:42] Repent and believe. Let me just say really specifically to those of you here who have not yet given your life to Jesus.

Watch out. Beware. Check by all means the evidence we have in the Bible.

Check by all. But once you've done that, there is nothing wise about waiting for more. About wanting another sign.

If you were sitting in the passenger seat of someone driving past sign after sign that said, Cliff edge ahead. What would you think if they turned to you and said, I'm just going to wait for one more sign before I put my foot on the brake?

You're not going to think, are you? Oh, that seems like a good idea. Better just to make sure. And if they did see another sign, why are they going to believe that one? Hear Jesus' warning and repent and believe.

[17:05] That is Jesus' first warning. It is a warning to all to listen to his message, not demand his miracles, so that we would find ourselves safe and secure in him.

Turn around and trust Jesus before it's too late. That is Jesus' first warning. Let's turn now to Jesus' second warning in verses 5 to 12.

And this warning focuses specifically on the disciples. So let's look at our second point, to forgetful disciples. Jesus says, remember and beware.

Remember and beware. After the interaction with the Pharisees, the disciples land on the other side of the Sea of Galilee.

The good news is that this time they've got there safely. There's no storm. The bad news is that they've got no bread. You can imagine the situation, can't you?

[18:12] They get off the boat and John's like, oh, it's time for lunch, guys, isn't it? Matthew, get out the sandwiches. Matthew looks around and he's like, I thought Judas had the sandwiches. Judas, no one asked me about the sandwiches.

John pulling his hair out. Who's got the sandwiches? And then into the conversation steps Jesus, verse 6. And he says, watch and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees.

Now, how would you react? Honestly, how would you react if you were one of the disciples? I'm pretty sure I know how I'd react. Middle of the conversation about where's our lunch?

And Jesus says this. I think I'm kind of looking at Jesus with forward eyebrows thinking, huh? You kind of look around the side. Anyone know what Jesus is talking about here?

What's he saying? That there aren't even any Pharisees around to buy bread from. That would be a good start at least, wouldn't it? No idea. Weird thing to say. Anyway, back to important matters, verse 7. Strange interlude, but let's get back on track.

[19:28] Verse 7. What are we going to do about lunch? We've got no bread. To illustrate what's going on here, I'm going to shamelessly run a whole load of biblical imagery around exactly the kind of theme that Jesus is about to be speaking on here.

Imagine a field full of sheep. And every day at 4 o'clock, the shepherd comes into the field and fills up the food trough.

Every day at 4 o'clock, the sheep are fed. Every day the shepherd provides for them without fail.

But then one day, a pack of wolves starts circling around the fields, snarling and baring their teeth, salivating at the thought of some lamb for dinner.

And the good news for the sheep is that the fence is secure, that the gate is locked and the wolves can't get in. But then, at half past three, the sheep gather together because there's a crisis.

A problem that needs dealt with. The food trough is empty. It's a disaster. And so the sheep kind of gather together and think, oh no, what are we going to do?

[20:53] We've got no foods. And so together they think, you know what? We can't sit here and starve to death. What if we just get out of the field and start looking for food somewhere else?

What's happening there? The sheep are worried about a problem, aren't they? And it is a problem. They've got no foods. But they're forgetting two things. They're forgetting their shepherd feeds them every day.

And they are forgetting that wolves are much more dangerous than rumbling stomachs. It may be a strange illustration, but that's kind of what's going on here with disciples.

They are so fixated on a problem that Jesus has taught them and has shown them he has no problem of remedying.

And so the result is they are in danger of becoming blind to a far bigger, much more serious problem. And so Jesus offers them a warning too that again comes with some pretty strong language.

[22:10] Oh, you of little faith. We just forgot the bread, Jesus. Oh, you of little faith.

Why are you discussing amongst yourselves the fact you have no bread? Jesus doesn't deny, does he, that they don't have bread. But he does admonish them for worrying about it.

It's a lack of faith. Matthew 6, what did Jesus say in the Sermon on the Mount? He says, Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on, is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing.

It goes on, If God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, oh, you of little faith?

The hungry disciples are worrying. But they're worrying about, well, the externals. It is what the Pharisees had got wrong at the start of chapter 15, worrying about clean hands, not worrying about a clean heart.

[23 : 33] The disciples were more focused on the state of their stomachs than they were on the state of their souls. They were anxious about what God had promised to provide, and so they missed the warning that Jesus gave to guard themselves against a far greater danger.

And so Jesus says, Remember and beware. Remember and beware.

I think he's doing two things in verse 9 and 10. Right, first he's reminding the disciples, I think, that the less he had, the more he did. Seven loaves fed 4,000, five loaves fed 5,000.

How much do you think I can do with the zero loaves you have? Stop worrying about bread. But he also reminds them, doesn't he, how many loaves were left?

And in that he is saying, I think there is something much bigger going on here than bread.

Remember 12 baskets for the 12 tribes of Israel, seven baskets for a full feast for all the nations.

[24 : 46] I'm interested in more than stomachs. I'm interested in giving all people the bread of life. That is what Jesus is doing. But there is, isn't there, there is a danger he needs them to guard against.

Because the Pharisees and Sadducees, they are giving people food too. And if you let even a tiny little bit of it in, it will be like dropping yeast into a ball of dough.

It's a tiny amount and it's imperceptible at first, but what happens? It spreads and it spreads and it spreads. And before you know it, it's everywhere and it's very, very difficult to get out.

Jesus is not speaking about physical bread that the disciples finally clock onto in verse 12. I say finally, we wouldn't have been doing any better.

But they catch on now, don't they, that Jesus, thinking about a much bigger picture than they are, an eternal concern, not an afternoon's concern, He has warned them against the teaching of the Pharisees and the Sadducees.

[26 : 03] Now we don't have any Pharisees and Sadducees walking around today, do we? I've certainly never met any. But what were they teaching? That we do have to look out for.

We've seen, haven't we, that the Pharisees were prone to adding things to Scripture. We saw that a couple of weeks ago. The Pharisees were prone to adding, the Sadducees were known for taking away.

And that, I think, is part of the reason why Jesus offers this specific warning against both of them.

Together. Because the temptation, isn't it, is always to go from one side to the other.

As if what we want to do is find something in the middle. We often think if the problem is with the legalistic Pharisees, then we should become a bit more easygoing. And then if things get a bit too easygoing, or maybe we should become a bit, a bit tighten up a bit and become a bit more like the Pharisees.

But Matthew 16, 1 to 12 is showing us the two unlikely friends as they might at first seem are actually on the same side. And that side is against Jesus and his disciples because different as they might first seem, both together when they come unsatisfied with Jesus.

[27 : 34] Both together come to Jesus looking for something more than Jesus. thinking there needs to be something more to Christianity than Jesus Christ crucified and resurrected.

The false teaching that spreads like yeast through bread is one that says, I see you Jesus, but I want something more. I want something more I can do myself.

I want something more lively or more dynamic or more relevant. Give me something more to do.

Give me something more to feel. But as soon as we look for more than Jesus, we lose Jesus. So Jesus tells his disciples to remember and beware.

Remember, they are not going to be left without what they need and so focus your attention on watching out from teaching that will pull you away from me by promising something more than me.

We all worry, don't we, about the day to day. We fret about what's waiting for us at work tomorrow.

We're anxious if we're going to be able to pay the bills.

[29 : 01] We're thinking constantly about exams or assignments. Now, Jesus is not saying kind of forget about it all. It doesn't matter. He's not saying that at all. He's shown, doesn't he, in the previous two chapters that he obviously cares for people's needs and he does have practical concern.

It matters. It does. We need physical foods. We have practical concerns. Jesus cares for those needs but he has a far greater concern because there is a far greater danger.

And he wants the disciples to share that greater concern. There is a far greater danger than having a bad day at work or failing an exam or even having an empty fridge.

The biggest threat in the field is not the lack of food in the trough. It's the wolf who wants to devour God's sheep. It's the teaching that leads us away from Jesus to trust more in ourselves and less in our shepherd.

That is what to watch out for. Guard your soul. Watch out for it by sticking to God's word and God's word alone.

[30 : 18] Not adding to it, not taking from it and not wanting something more from God than Jesus and his death and resurrection in him.

We have every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places. Don't go looking for more. That is what Jesus warns us against.

So let us be on our guard this week and every week. Be more concerned about the state of your soul and the satisfaction of your stomach.

Let us make sure that what fills our hearts and minds is sound teaching from God's word. Not anything. Not anything from anywhere that will draw us away from him or leave us thinking we need more than him.

And that can be anywhere and everywhere, can't it? Pharisees and Sadducees don't come with a label and they sound very different from each other. But they are equally as dangerous.

[31 : 34] Anything. Anything in your life that adds laws to God's word in your life. Anything that takes away from the authority of God's word in your life.

Anything that leaves you thinking you need more than Jesus today or tomorrow or ever. Watch out. Watch out. Beware. So Jesus warns us.

He warns us all. He warns an evil and adulterous generation. He warns his disciples all so that they would see the danger ahead and steer clear from a destructive path.

Jesus warns us because he loves us. And if we love him we will listen to those warnings. Let us pray together.

[32 : 40] Father, we thank you and praise you that you sent your son Jesus Christ to live and die and rise again that we might have all that we ever need in him.

And we thank you that in his ministry on earth he did not come to be liked but he came to love others by warning us when we need to be warned that we might be kept safe from harm even when the warnings might be hard to hear.

We pray that you would help us all to come to you in repentance and belief knowing that our hearts are unclean and we pray that you by your spirit would help us to trust in you and in your word to remember who you are and what you have done for us and to watch out for anything that might draw us from Jesus.

In his name we pray. Amen.