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Matthew 16:5-12

Matthew Series: "Challenged by Christ"

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Imagine a master chef, running a 4-star restaurant. He hires a sous chef to help prepare the food, but then the master chef tells his new assistant: "Here are my recipes, but you don't have to follow them. You can use the ingredients that I choose, or you can just choose your own." Do you think that chef would be heading for trouble in his kitchen? Today's Bible story teaches us that Jesus would not be that kind of chef.

Now imagine a parent, who tells her kids at mealtime: "You can eat this healthy, delicious food that I've cooked. Or, you can just eat candy, if you want." And after dinner, this parent says to the kids: "If you want to light firecrackers, play with sharp knives, and walk in the street, it's OK with me." Jesus would definitely not be that kind of parent.

And let's imagine a pastor who tells his congregation: "Friends, you should only come to church when you feel like it. And you don't have to worry about what the Bible says about how to live your life. Just make up your own rules, and it will all work out." Jesus would not be that kind of pastor, would he?

Today's Bible story makes it clear that Jesus wasn't like that at all. Often we modern-day Christians like to think that Jesus was always this super-cool, mellow guy who just made everybody comfortable and relaxed all the time. Well, that wasn't the Jesus that Matthew and the other disciples knew.

Today we see Jesus challenging Matthew and the other disciples, pushing them, inspiring them, expecting more from them. He wasn't just trying to make Matthew feel comfortable and loved. Jesus was trying to make Matthew better. And that's what Jesus does for us, too. He wants us to be better disciples, smarter Christians, more faithful followers. Are you ready to be challenged by Christ?

Let's look quickly at what led up to today's story. Two sensational miracles had recently taken place. In Matthew chapter 14 we hear how Jesus took five loaves of bread and two fish, and miraculously multiplied them to feed a huge crowd of 5000 men, plus women and children. Then, in chapter 15, we read that on another day, with just seven loaves and a few fish, Jesus was able to provide food for 4000-plus people. These were spectacular, public miracles, and everyone was buzzing about this miracle-worker, Jesus.

The religious establishment didn't like the buzz. The Pharisees and the Sadducees -- the Bible experts and the Temple rulers -- didn't like Jesus getting all of this attention. So, right after the feeding of the 4000, some of these Pharisees and Sadducees tried to mess with Jesus. They tried to convince him to perform a miracle on their terms. But Jesus didn't dance to their tune. He walked away from them, and then he turned to his disciples, Matthew and the other eleven. And this is where today's story begins.

Jesus warns his followers, "Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees." "Leaven?" they think. "What's Jesus talking about? Leaven is yeast, and yeast is used to make bread. Is he going to do another miracle?" And they start asking each other, "Did you bring any bread? Me, neither. No one told me to bring bread. Jesus is talking about leaven, but none of us have any bread!" Their focus is on themselves, on their capacity, on their lack of resources.

And Jesus chides them for it. “O you of little faith,” he declares. “Why are you discussing among yourselves the fact that you have no bread? Have you already forgotten how I pulled off the feeding of the 5000, and the feeding of the 4000? Do you honestly think I need your bread to do a miracle?”

But then Jesus challenges them. “You’re missing the point completely. I’m warning you against the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees. Their way of doing religion is to rely on themselves. The Pharisees are hypocrites, because they think they can keep God’s law perfectly. And the Sadducees think their Temple rituals are going to save them. Don’t be like them,” Jesus warns.

In other words, “Don’t rely on yourself, and your own goodness. Don’t imagine you’re ever going to be good enough in God’s eyes, or religious enough. Put your trust in me, and in what I can do,” Jesus seemed to be saying. The miracles Jesus did were to help people understand he was truly the Son of God, the one who could provide for their needs. The sermons he preached were to direct people to God’s ways, and God’s salvation. The sacrifice Jesus eventually made on the cross was God’s way of paying in full for the people’s sins. The resurrection victory on Easter Sunday God’s power opening up heaven’s doors for all people – Matthew, the other disciples, you, me – all people who put their belief and trust in Jesus.

Matthew tells us this story today of how Jesus challenged him, refocused him, re-directed his faith away from himself and towards Jesus. The Lord needed for Matthew and the other disciples to pay better attention to him, to rely more fully on him, to stop worrying about their own strengths and weaknesses, and to start trusting his limitless strength and

his perfect power. Because that's what would make them better disciples, smarter Christians, and more faithful followers.

And, I'm telling you, Jesus is definitely challenging you and me today, too. Take a good look at your life today. Are you living for the Lord? What percentage of your life are you really living for the Lord? Jesus wants you to do better. Are you making choices and decisions in your life based on what you want, or on what Jesus wants? He wants you to make smarter choices, smarter decisions. Are you sitting here in this church thinking God loves you because you're such a good person, or because Jesus is the Lamb of God who died for you? Jesus wants followers who are faithful to him, trusting fully in him, relying completely on him.

The life of the disciple is the life of challenge. That was Matthew's life, and it's your life, too. Are you ready to be challenged by Christ? Let's pray.