

This couple's been married for over 10 years. One day the wife turns to her husband and asks, 'Do you love me?' The husband says, 'Of course.' And he goes to the cupboard in the living room, and after searching for a while, pulls out a sheet of paper, and says with a smile, 'Here you are – our marriage certificate. It's written down here, we got married – that **proves** it.'

'Yes,' she says, 'but do you **love** me?' Her husband thinks for a moment, and then says, 'I gave you some flowers last Valentine's day, and I bought you some chocolates, and I **did** take you out for a meal last Christmas. That **shows** it.'

The wife looks down at the ground, then lifts her face to look into her husband's eyes. 'Yes,' she says, 'But I'd just like to hear you **tell** me that you love me. I want to hear you **say** 'I love you.'

It's true, isn't it? I don't think that saying, 'Actions speak louder than words' is always right. I think words can have a more penetrating effect on our hearts sometimes. And I think that's what happens with faith – we need to **hear** God **telling** us he loves us. God speaking to our hearts, **telling** us he loves us.

We're going to look at passage in the Bible this evening which shows the need for this to happen, for God to reveal himself to us, to **tell** us who he is and that he loves us. And at the same time we'll see the dangers of not **listening** to him.

Let's read from Matthew's gospel, chapter 16:1-20.

We see very clearly here, don't we, the contrast between unbelief, as represented by the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to **test** Jesus in verse 1, and the belief or faith of Peter in verse 16, saying that Jesus is the Son of the living God.

I want us to see this evening that we must beware unbelief, there are dangers to beware – in the way unbelief demands signs and the way it spreads and corrupts. I also want us to see what faith says of Jesus, and that God gives faith.

Unbelief demands signs for the wrong reasons. Think back to our illustration of the husband and wife. Another scenario: every morning before he sets off for work, the husband gives his wife a kiss and says, 'I love you.' And every morning as her husband walks off down the garden path, she says, 'I don't **believe** you. **Prove** it.' The husband calls back, 'I've shown you over these 10 years that I love you – **lots** of times.' 'I still don't believe you,' she says.

The Pharisees and the Sadducees are like that: in verse 1 we find them coming to **test** Jesus and they ask him for a sign from heaven, something to show them that Jesus is who he says he is. They're unbelieving and they ask for a sign.

The Pharisees and the Sadducees were two groups of Jews who had differing approaches to religion: the Pharisees were very hot on religious laws and traditions and enforced them very strictly, and in this way they held authority and power over their people; the Sadducees, rejected these traditions – they were from wealthy, landowning priestly families - they were happy to have authority and power that came with it.

So they were theologically and politically opposed to **each other**, even enemies. But here we have them united in their opposition to Jesus. Why? Because he threatened their authority and power. So they didn't believe, because they didn't **want** to believe, because that would mean that the authority they exercised over the Jewish people would **disappear**, and they couldn't have that.

Isn't it amazing how just the mention of the name **Jesus** raises people's hackles? They don't want to hear because they might lose the things they hold most dear.

The Pharisees and Sadducees asked Jesus for a sign. I don't know about **you**, but **I** would say to them, 'Open your eyes! Are you blind? Jesus has just fed four thousand men plus women and children with seven loaves and a few fish? Isn't **that** a sign from heaven? Before **that** he healed the daughter of a Canaanite woman. Before that he walked on the Sea of Galilee. And even before **that** he'd fed five thousand men plus women and children. Are these normal everyday events in **your** world, Pharisees and Sadducees? Hasn't Jesus given you enough signs already? Open your eyes!'

Here's their problem – they don't **want** to see. They come asking for a sign with the wrong motivation – they come to **test** Jesus. They're not coming to find out who Jesus **is**. They've already made their **minds** up, they're united **against** him. They don't want him to be who he claims to be because it will be the end of any power and authority they have. Unbelief will keep asking God for signs, each bigger than the one before. Unbelief will test God. God says, '*Do not put the Lord your God to the test.*'

Contrast this with the Canaanite woman in chapter 15, verses 21 – 28. This woman comes to ask Jesus to heal her sick daughter. Even though Jesus at first **refuses** to help, she persists in her request and Jesus **does** heal the girl.

He says in verse 28, *‘Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted.’* Totally different to the Pharisees. Faith says, **‘Because** I believe, please do this; I believe that nothing is impossible for you God, please do this.’ God does reveal himself through signs and wonders, through miracles which only God can do.

But unbelief will always be blind, because the unbelieving don’t **want** to see. Like cyclists and red lights – they just don’t see them. Jesus quoted the prophet Isaiah in Matthew 13:14-15; *‘You will be ever hearing and never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving. For this people’s heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes.’* And as we read last week at the end of Acts, **Paul** uses that same quote.

It was true in Isaiah’s time, in Jesus’ time, in Paul’s time and I suggest it’s still true today. No matter what God does, there are some who will **never** recognise the truth although they may hear it proclaimed loud and clear, although they may witness signs and wonders, they’ll keep unbelieving, because they don’t **want** to believe. It’ll change their way of life, it’ll challenge the way they treat others, it’ll take away their feeling of power. They’ve closed their eyes.

Jesus says in verse 4 that he **will** give a sign to the Pharisees and Sadducees and so all peoples everywhere; *‘A wicked and adulterous generation looks for a miraculous sign, but none will be given it except the sign of Jonah,’* he says. Jesus refused to give them a sign except the sign of Jonah, something which would show once and for all that he was who he **claimed** to be, the Son of God.

Jonah, you’ll remember, was the man given a message from God to warn the people to turn from their wicked ways; he ran away, was thrown overboard ship and spent three days in a fish before God rescued him and in this way showed that this message was from God. The sign **Jesus** will give to the world is going to show that he is the **Saviour** from God through his death and resurrection three days later. This will be the greatest sign.

But Jesus knows that even **then**, some will still not believe. He says in Luke 16:31, *‘If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the **dead**.’*

So we need to ask ourselves searching questions: Are we wanting God to help us? Are we asking him to do great things? Nothing wrong with that – he **wants** us to ask great things of him to bring glory to him. But **why** are we asking for great things? What is our motivation?

Are we asking because we just want to see great things happening, to test God? Or are we coming to God in faith, believing he can answer our requests?

Unbelief demands sign with the wrong motivation. But secondly unbelief is dangerous for the impact it has – **it spreads and corrupts**.

Let's return to our married couple: The man has to go abroad on business for a while and he's going to be away from his wife for three months. At the start he writes regularly and frequently and always closes with the words, 'Love you.' But gradually the letters tail off and arrive much less often. Each still ends with 'Love you', but as they're coming less frequently the wife starts thinking that perhaps he **doesn't**. Doubts creep in, and they begin to nag away at her mind, until she's beginning to believe he doesn't really love her.

Unbelief nags and nags away at your mind. Unbelief grows steadily until you're convinced that these things can't be true. Let's face it, there've been lots of people more clever than us, well me anyway, that **haven't** believed. Unbelief spreads and grows until it corrupts your whole way of thinking. And that's what Jesus warns the disciples of in verses 5 – 12. He says in verse 6, '*Be careful, ... Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and the Sadducees.*'

When I was a little boy I remember on a Saturday afternoon my mam making bread. Home-made bread – lovely. She used to mix flour and other stuff together including this special ingredient which tasted awful, yeast. She used to mix it all up and thump it about a bit until it was in a dough, and then she put it in this massive bowl, covered it with newspaper and put it in front of the fire for the afternoon. Then the most amazing thing happened. This dough grew and grew until it was about five times bigger. My mam said it was the yeast that did this.

The dangerous effects of unbelief. Jesus likens it to yeast – it nags and nags, it grows and grows, it spreads and spreads, it eats away at belief, bit by bit until belief is **destroyed**.

The disciples are told to be careful, they're told to beware the teaching of the Pharisees and the Sadducees – why? – because gradually it would eat away at their belief, their life-giving faith.

It didn't take a lot of yeast in the dough for my mam's bread to increase massively. It takes just a little unbelief, a small amount of wrong teaching to corrupt a whole group and lead them astray. It doesn't take a lot.

The disciples were warned about the teaching of the Pharisees and the Sadducees, but we still have their teaching invading true belief **today**. We have those who want to **add** to the gospel of Jesus – those who tell us that as well as believing in Jesus you have to do things in certain ways. Perhaps more in evidence today are those who're trying to take **away** from the gospel – those who would say that the Bible's out of date and needs to change or compromise to fit in with the way we live today. How **dangerous**. Both are wrong. Both are disastrous for the life of faith. The truth is **truth**, just because people don't believe it doesn't alter the fact that it **is** the truth.

True believers can be affected by unbelief too – the greatest men of faith have had times when doubts have crept in. The man who asked Jesus for help for his demon-possessed son said, *'I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief.'* Mark 9:24. There's this constant conflict going on, nagging doubts.

Beware the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees, beware the teaching of those who don't believe, who don't want to believe and have made up their mind never to believe the truth. Unbelief spreads, it corrupts, it leads astray, it would destroy the life-giving truth of God.

How are **you** this evening? Are you easily swayed this way and that by unbelief? Don't let hardness of heart or stubbornness gain a foothold in your life, because like yeast working though all the dough, unbelief will gradually work through your whole life. We need to come to the Bible regularly. **Here's** the truth. If in doubt check the Word of God. We need to cling on to the **truth**, the **whole** truth and nothing **but** the truth, and God will help us.

So we've seen the dangers of unbelief as it demands signs to test God, not to find him; and it grows and spreads and corrupts until it destroys belief.

Let's move on to verse 13 of our passage, a highly significant moment.

True faith only comes through revelation from God.

Let's look firstly at what faith believes of Jesus; and then where the faith to believe comes from.

Jesus takes his disciples to Caesarea Philippi, about 20 miles north of Galilee. This was a very pagan town, so the disciples were now surrounded by statues of 'gods', temples, shrines, as well as the towering temple to Caesar. Would these be distractions when Jesus asked them a very important question, *'Who do people say the Son of Man is?'*

The Jewish people remembered Old Testament predictions that God would raise up a prophet from among them who would lead them, and so **they** interpreted this in an understandable way when they thought that Jesus was John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah or one of the other **prophets**. These views again could have been a distraction to the disciples, might have confused them.

But when Jesus asks them in verse 15, *'But what about you? ... Who do you say that I am?'* he gets the answer of **faith** from Peter.

What does faith believe of Jesus?

In verse 16 we read, *'Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."'* **Faith** believes that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God.

The Jewish people thought he was one of the great **people** from their history, but Peter sees that Jesus is the **Christ**. The names Jesus and Christ have been put together so much down the centuries that some people in the world think that the word Christ is Jesus' surname – Jesus Christ. When giving Jesus' family tree in chapter 1, Matthew writes, *'... Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ.'* Matthew 1:16.

Peter calls Jesus the Christ. All through their history, the people had been waiting for one to come, the Christ, who would save his people. Matthew tells us that he is to be called Jesus, because the name means 'he saves'. Through the prophets in the Old Testament, God promised that one would come whose kingdom would never end. **Peter** believes that Jesus is the one, he is the one who has come from God and his kingdom will never end.

The Greek word 'Christos' and the Hebrew word 'Messiah' mean the same thing, they mean the 'Anointed One'. The Jewish people anointed three types of people – prophets, priests and kings. Jesus unites all three:

Peter later gives a talk in Jerusalem in Acts chapter 3, and he quotes from the Old Testament, saying, *'For Moses said, "The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you must listen to everything he tells you.'* Acts 3:22. Jesus the anointed **prophet**.

The writer to the Hebrews encourages Christians to hold on to faith, saying, *'Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess.'* Hebrews 4:14. Jesus the anointed high priest.

When the angel announces to Mary that she is going to give birth to Jesus, he says, *'He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will **reign** over the house of Jacob for ever; his kingdom will never end.'* Luke 1:32,33. Jesus the anointed **king**.

Jesus is 'the Anointed One': Jesus the prophet shows who God is; Jesus the priest puts us in touch with God; Jesus the king exercises God's rule and blessing on God's people. Peter says, **faith** says of Jesus, *'You are the Christ.'* Only through Jesus can we come close to God.

I can imagine Jesus and the disciples walking down the main street of Caesarea Philippi, looking at the temples and statues to their pagan gods and all the stone idols. And as Jesus asks, *'Who do **you** say I am?'*, I can see Peter looking round at Jesus, who he's walked with for months, talked with him, listened to him, seen him heal and work miracles, I can see Peter looking into Jesus' face and saying, *'You are the Son of the living God.'* You're not like these cold, lifeless, stone figures that these worship as 'gods'. You're the Son of the **living** God, the One that really exists, the One who is alive, the One who is Truth, the One who will **save** and rule his people. *'You are the Son of the living God.'* This is what faith believes of Jesus.

Peter has heard Jesus quote from Isaiah, *'The Spirit of the Lord is on **me**, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'* Luke 4:18,19. Jesus is the One sent by God, to free people from sin by his death on the cross, he is the One who will restore those who believe to his kingdom, to a wonderful relationship with God his Father.

Can **you** say with Peter, *'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.'*? Do you have the faith that Peter showed here?

Where does this faith come from? Verse 17, *'Jesus replied, "Blessed are you Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by **man**, but by my **Father** in heaven.'* Faith to believe in God does not come from **us**, it's not something we can just work **up**, it doesn't come by **our** efforts; it comes from God himself – it's a **gift** from God. Otherwise we'd be proud about it – if it was something **we'd** done. But it **isn't**. Faith comes because God **gives** it to us.

We can't come to God without **him** doing it for us – **he** has to draw us, **he** has to reveal himself to us. Jesus said, *'No-one can come to me unless the Father who sent me **draws** him, and I will raise him up at the last day.'* John 6:44. 7

God revealed himself to Peter, and that's the **only** reason why Peter could say, '*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.*' How **else** was he going to see that this man born in Nazareth, son of a carpenter, considered as mad by many including some of his own family was the Son of **God**? Not because Peter was clever. **God** revealed to him who Jesus was.

And that's what we **all** need – we **need** God to reveal who Jesus is, the Son of God, the Christ, the One who came into the world to save us from our sins, the One who was willing to go to that cross and **die** there taking the punishment **we** deserve for neglecting God. **This** is where we hear God saying, '**I love you**'. Like the wife in our original illustration, she just needed to hear her husband **say** that he loved her. God tells us loud and clear, '**I love you**. I want you in relationship with me. Turn to me. I love you so much that Jesus my only Son died on the cross, so you don't **need** to. I've done it **all**, can't you see? I love you.' Isn't that what each of us needs to hear this evening? Isn't that what **you** need to hear?

God is speaking. Are you hearing? Don't be like the hard-hearted Pharisees, don't be distracted by the unbelievers and their teachings changing the gospel. This is the good news of Jesus; he is the Christ, the Son of the living God; he loves you; is God giving you the faith to believe? Don't turn your back on him. Believe, like **Peter** believed. He said '*Lord, to whom shall we go? **You** have the words of eternal life. We believe and **know** that you are the Holy One of God.*'

Jesus asks **you** tonight, '*What about **you**? Who do **you** say I am?*'