

# The Many Forms of Unbelief (16:1-12)

*Pray.* Is **doubt** a *good thing* or a *bad thing* for a follower of Jesus? Most people are appropriately hesitant to answer that question. And I think a lot of that is because Christians over the years have spent many long hours *debating* the answer to that question. Some Christians would say doubt is a **good thing**; that to have a faith without any doubt is like having an immune system without any antibodies in it: it makes you more *vulnerable* to crises of faith than you would be otherwise. That's *one* view.

**Other Christians point out** that nearly every time doubt gets brought up in the bible, it seems to be portrayed *negatively*—like it's a liability, not an asset. So, those people conclude, doubt must be an inherently *bad* thing and be avoided. And as with most hotly contested topics within evangelicalism, **the truth is probably** somewhere in the middle. And I think **the answer mostly depends** on what we *mean* by the word “doubt.” In the bible, and particularly in the gospels, there are at least two *different* words that sometimes get translated as “doubt.”

One is the word **distazo** [dis-tad'-zo]. It means, quite literally, to have a “double stance.” To waver or oscillate between two *opposing* beliefs. It's the same word Jesus used a couple weeks ago if you remember when Peter hops out of the boat, starts to walk on the water with Jesus, and then promptly begins to sink because he sees the wind and the waves. That's *distazo*. He had a “double stance.” Peter was *torn* between the belief that *Jesus* was greater than the *waves*, *and* the belief that the *waves* were greater than *Jesus*. And whether you want to call that kind of doubt good or bad is really beside the point because it's just a *reality* of life. I personally don't know any followers of Jesus who haven't experienced some amount of *distazo* in their life.

But there's *another* word in the bible for doubt. It's the word **apistia** [ap-is-tee'-ah]. It means, quite literally, to be “*without* faith.” Without *belief*, or *unbelief*. It is more of a heart posture that is set *against* faith in Jesus. It's more like an *unwillingness* to accept who Jesus is and what he's capable of; a sort of *stubbornness against* it all. And *that* type of doubt is presented pretty much exclusively as a *bad* thing in the bible when it comes up. And *that* is the focus of our passage in Matthew this morning.

And in this passage, Jesus is going to tell us **something most of us don't really want to hear**: that there's at least a *little* bit of unbelief in all of us. So let's dive in and see what Jesus says. If you haven't already, go ahead and open your bibles to **Matthew 16**. As a church, we've been walking, story-by-story, through this first-century biography about Jesus. If you were here **last week**, you know we covered a story of Jesus interacting with a woman from a *Gentile* region of the country. This week, he returns to Jewish territory,

where he encounters some **familiar faces**: the *Pharisees* and the *Sadducees*. Pick it up with me in chapter 16, v. 1:

**[1] The *Pharisees* and *Sadducees* came to Jesus and tested him by asking him to show them a sign from heaven.**

So **pro tip on reading the New Testament**: anytime you hear about the Pharisees and Sadducees doing something *together*, your **ears should perk up** a little. Because these two groups of people were not fans of one another at all. They didn't see eye-to-eye on much of *anything*. **For those dialed into our modern political scene: it would be a little bit like hearing today that Marjorie Taylor Greene and AOC co-sponsored a bill together in Congress. Just not something that happens, hardly ever.** The Pharisees and Sadducees were both technically Jewish religious groups, but that's pretty much where the similarities *stopped*.

The **Pharisees** we talked about last week. They were the hyper-conservative, Moral Majority-esque, rule-following crowd. They held the bible of their day in high regard, and held everyone who *didn't* hold it as highly as they did in *low* regard. The **Sadducees** on the other hand, were sort of the high-brow socialites of their day. They were technically a religious group, but were very *secular* in their view of the world. They didn't believe in anything supernatural, and really only used their *religious* status as a *means* to political power. You'd often find them wining and dining with anyone who was anyone in first-century Jewish culture.

One person I heard called the Pharisees the "**Serious**," and the Sadducees as the "**Sophisticated**."<sup>1</sup> That's a pretty helpful way of putting it. You have one group who thinks they're righteous because they rigidly obey the Scriptures, and looks down on anyone they consider "worldly." And then you have *another* group that thinks *they're* righteous because of their social clout and connections, and looks down their nose at anyone who they consider to be old-fashioned prudes. **Now, it's always good to be careful about reading our current cultural dynamics into the pages of the bible. But that said, the parallels to our society today are at least a little interesting, right? Bare minimum, we can conclude from all this that there is truly nothing new under the sun. But all that to say,** you can begin to see how and why these two groups in Jesus' day didn't have much in common.

But **here** in Matthew 16, **they come together** in a rare moment of unity: Matthew says they both wanted to "*test*" Jesus. Matthew chooses that word intentionally; it's the same

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<sup>1</sup> Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary: the Churchbook, Matthew 13-28*, Kindle loc. 2352 of 15713.

word used earlier in Matthew when Satan “tests” Jesus out in the wilderness. In other words, the Pharisees and Sadducees are playing for the wrong team here. They’re either wanting to *embarrass* Jesus, *discredit* Jesus, or perhaps both. This is further proven by the fact that they ask Jesus for a “sign from heaven.” They want Jesus to somehow demonstrate, with an unmistakable show of power, that he is who he says he is.

But the **reason that’s odd** is that Jesus has already been *doing plenty* of those types of signs in the gospel of Matthew. Like seemingly *every day*. And the Pharisees and the Sadducees, or at least many of their colleagues, have been present on many of those occasions. So **their request of Jesus here is truly disingenuous. They’ve already made up their minds not to believe in Jesus, but they’re hoping that they can at least discredit him. But they’re pretending as if they just need more evidence, more convincing. In other words, they are squarely in our “unbelief” category from a moment ago.**

And to that point, **the last time we saw these two groups** together, **John the Baptist** was telling them they needed to “bear fruit in keeping with repentance.”<sup>2</sup> Seems to me like they haven’t been doing much *repenting* since that interaction. Which helps explain some of **Jesus’ response** to them—look back with me in v. 2:

*[2] He replied, “When evening comes, you say, ‘It will be fair weather, for the sky is red,’ [3] and in the morning, ‘Today it will be stormy, for the sky is red and overcast.’ You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times.*

This reads a little like a **back-handed compliment** at the Pharisees and Sadducees. “Hey, you guys actually do really *well* with a limited amount of evidence. You know how to forecast the weather just by looking up at the sky. But you can’t piece together who I am from the things I’ve already done? And then he uses a line he’s used before in Matthew...

*[4] A wicked and adulterous generation looks for a sign, but none will be given it except the sign of Jonah.” Jesus then left them and went away.*

Jesus directly **calls them out** for their deceptive behavior, and then says the only sign they’re going to get is the “sign of **Jonah**.” So if you’ve spent much time around the bible at all, you probably know Jonah as the guy who got swallowed by a big fish. And that’s true. Sometimes Jesus uses that story as a parallel to his own. So the last time Jesus

used this line in Matthew 12, he highlighted how, just like Jonah spent three nights inside the belly of the fish, he himself would spend three nights in the grave before his resurrection. So that's *one* layer of this reference to the "sign of Jonah." He's saying to the Pharisees and Sadducees, 'I'm not gonna give you any sign, other than the sign of my own death and resurrection.'

But I also think the **connection goes a little deeper** than that. **Because if you know the story of Jonah in a little more detail, you also know that Jonah was a prophet with a bit of a personal problem. Namely, that he didn't do what God asked him to do, but simultaneously thought he was better than all the other people who didn't do what God asked them to do. He's a prophet who calls other people to repent, but never really repents himself.**

So when Jesus **references that story**, to a group of religious leaders who *also* aren't repenting, and *also* often think they're *better* than *other* people who aren't repenting, do you think maybe that's *strategic* on Jesus' part? I'd be willing to bet it is. The "sign of Jonah" does refer to Jesus' death and resurrection, to be sure. But I think it's also Jesus saying "you guys should read back over the story of Jonah. You might see somebody you recognize." And it's Jesus' way of saying, essentially, **'you guys don't need another sign. You don't need more evidence. You don't need more proof. What you need is to repent. You need a radical change of heart. The problem you have isn't a lack of proof. The problem you have is a hardened heart.'**

And with that, **Jesus just walks off.** He leaves, and goes to rejoin his disciples. And then this happens, v. 5:

*[5] When they went across the lake, the **disciples forgot to take bread.** [6] "Be careful," Jesus said to them. "Be **on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees.**"*

So **yeast** is what makes bread rise. But here's the thing about yeast: it only takes a very small amount to make a *huge* difference. If you take the tiniest pinch of yeast, and work it into a batch of dough, it will change absolutely everything about the physical properties of that dough. **A little bit goes a long way.** So when you combine *that* understanding of yeast with the conversation we just heard between Jesus, the Pharisees and the Sadducees, you can at least *start* to discern what Jesus is saying. He's wanting to warn his disciples against adopting some aspect of the Pharisees' and Sadducees' behavior. Which we'll circle back to here in a moment.

But here's **what we have to remember** about the passage: *you and I* know about that conversation with the Pharisees and Sadducees. But the disciples, at least best we can tell, do *not*. It doesn't appear that they were present for that conversation. To them, it just seems like Jesus made a random, off-hand comment about yeast. So they're utterly *confused* by it, v. 7:

*[7] They discussed this among themselves and said, "It is because we didn't bring any bread."*

**God love 'em**, right? They don't know what Jesus is referring to, so they just assume he's taking some sort of passive-aggressive jab at them about forgetting to bring bread. Jesus overhears them talking about this and responds, v. 8:

*[8] **Aware** of their discussion, Jesus asked, "You of little faith, **why** are you talking among yourselves about **having no bread**? [9] Do you **still not understand**? Don't you **remember** the **five loaves** for the **five thousand**, and how many basketfuls you gathered? [10] Or the **seven loaves** for the **four thousand**, and how many basketfuls you gathered? [11] How is it you **don't understand** that I was not talking to you about **bread**? **But be on your guard** against the yeast of the **Pharisees and Sadducees.**"*

So **Jesus calls their attention** to the two different occasions just recently where he has fed thousands upon thousands of people with very little food. Occasions that the *disciples* were there for. He reminds them of that as a way of saying, "hey, I'm not really sure how else to tell you this—but I've kind of got the *bread* thing under control. I'm not talking to you about *bread*. I'm talking to you about the *behavior*—the spiritual *posture*—of the Pharisees and Sadducees. I'm saying *don't be like them*. Don't *do* what they're *doing*."

And then, I just **absolutely love that Matthew includes this** in v. 12:

*[12] **Then they understood** that he was **not** telling them to guard against the yeast used in bread, but against the **teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.***

Now here's **what's funny to me about this** statement. Remember: Matthew, our author, was one of the twelve disciples present for this interaction. He was one of the ones who misunderstood what Jesus said initially. So here, it's like he's saying to his audience, "don't worry: we understood *this* time." Good for them, right? Better late than never.

But **notice the sequence** of what just happened in the passage. Jesus had an interaction with the Pharisees and Sadducees, where he critiqued them for ignoring the “signs” they had already seen from him. And then he has to have a similar, albeit *milder* conversation with his *disciples* about how they have *forgotten* about the “signs” *they* saw from him. **Jesus warns his disciples about the dangers of being dense...a warning that they evidently are too dense to understand, at least at first.** Now to be sure, the disciples don’t seem nearly as dense as the *Pharisees and Sadducees*; they’re not dead set *against* belief in Jesus. They’ve got more *distazo* than they do *apistia*. More *doubt* than *unbelief*. But the unbelief is still in *there*.

And **that, I would argue, is what the “yeast” of the Pharisees and Sadducees” actually is: it’s unbelief. It’s the stubborn unwillingness to respond in faith and trust who Jesus is, and what he’s capable of. It’s the parts of the disciples—and us—that inherently resist Jesus, his authority, and his influence. And the key, Jesus says, is to not let that little bit of unbelief, infiltrate and permeate our entire lives.** The key is to deal with it when we see it, rather than giving it the time and the space and the air it needs to grow. **The “yeast” of the Pharisees and the Sadducees is the stubborn unwillingness to respond in faith to what we’ve already seen of Jesus. It’s unbelief.**

So all of this prompts **the obvious question**: *where* might there be unbelief in *us*? And chances are, we’re going to need **some lenses** to identify it well. Most likely, we don’t just go about our daily lives as followers of Jesus, have a moment, and go “oh, I think that was *unbelief* in me right there.” If we could do *that*, I don’t know that we’d *need* warnings like these from Jesus. So with the rest of our time, I want to offer you some modern forms of unbelief I’ve seen play out in the lives of followers of Jesus. Just ways that I’ve seen, over the past several years helping lead people, that unbelief tends to *present itself*. And the hope is that these will become some lenses to spot unbelief in us when it crops up, and deal with it.

First, sometimes unbelief looks like...

## Rationalism

Rationalism is the type of unbelief that says **something is only true** (and worth following) **if it makes logical sense to me**. There was a lot of this in the *Sadducees*. Remember: they didn’t believe in the supernatural at all—they stuck with what made logical sense to them.

**This is the posture that as long as the things Jesus asks me to do are things that make rational sense to me and the world around me, I’m down. But not further than that.**



So if Jesus asks me to take a **better-paying job** somewhere else where I can keep increasing my standard of living like a good American does, I'm all in. But if Jesus were to ask me to take a significant pay *cut* to work at a place that serves the people and the community around me and the kingdom more *meaningfully*? I don't know about *that*. I'm gonna need more "confirmation." Or, I can get on *board* with the *rational* parts of faith—reading and studying the bible, or discipling other people. But spiritual gifts like *healing* or *prophecy*? Learning to sit in silence and solitude and listen for the still, small voice of God and follow his prompting? Those weird me out and don't seem very rational or logical, so I'll pass. *Rationalism* is **the belief that in order for me to follow Jesus into something, the logic of it is going to have to completely check out.**

But **here's the problem**: **Jesus is likely going to call us to a number of things in our life that probably don't make complete logical sense to us, at least not when we say yes to them.** And certainly, he's going to call us to do a great *many* things that don't make sense to the people around us who don't follow Jesus. And what's more: **the very idea of following Jesus** in the *first place* is going to seem, to many people, to be illogical. We believe a guy who said he was king of the world, said he was proving that by being executed, and then came back from the dead and floated up into heaven. If you were wanting a system of belief that always makes complete, rational sense—you might want to look elsewhere.

Now, **just because I know Christians get a bad rap** for this: that's not me saying that followers of Jesus shouldn't use our *brains*. It's *not* to say we reject *anything* that makes rational sense just *because* we're Christians and we believe in the supernatural. Not at all. *Logic* isn't our *enemy*. *Reason* isn't *bad*. It's just not our *sole* guiding principle as followers of Jesus. It's not our *authority*. *Rationalism can be* a form of unbelief: a way of refusing to listen to what God is clearly saying, because we can't make complete logical sense of it. **Sometimes God calls us to do things that make complete, logical sense. And sometimes God calls us to do things that make very little sense, especially from the world's perspective. That doesn't make them any less worth doing.**

Second, on the **other end of the spectrum**...

## Emotionalism

Emotionalism is a form unbelief that says **something can only be true if it feels true.** A lot of Christians I know make decisions by saying things like "it just *felt* right." Or "it just *didn't feel* right." Now again here, that's not necessarily *wrong*. It could be the Holy Spirit

making something “feel” right or not right. But when that becomes the sole authority on decision making, it can get kind of dicey.

I think we’ve told you guys stories before about **engaged couples** that we do premarital counseling for, who are already sleeping together. So we’ll counsel them on how, if they are followers of Jesus, that’s not God’s design for sexuality or for their relationship. And sometimes they’ll say something like “let us pray about it.” To which I’m always like, “I mean you can pray about it, but I’ll be glad to tell you what God’s going to say, if you wanna skip a step and save some time.” And then they’ll come back and say “you know, we just prayed about it, and it just doesn’t *feel* right to discontinue that part of our relationship. It *feels* right for us to keep doing what we’re doing.” To which I always want to say, “oh I’m sure it *feels* great! That’s not the issue. The issue is that this isn’t God’s design for sexuality.” (I *don’t* say that, but I do *want* to)

There’s also other **people who struggle** greatly to implement any types of **spiritual disciplines** into their life. And they’ll say things like “well when I read the bible, I just don’t *feel* anything. When I pray, I don’t *get anything out* of it.” And they’ll use that as reasons to **bail on it**. But **that’s emotionalism. It’s the belief that for something to be true or good or worthwhile, I have to feel as if it is.**

And **we’ve done entire series** here at City Church in the past about how emotions aren’t *bad* things. **Emotions can be beautiful, really helpful things to our relationship with Jesus. They’re just not great authorities on what is or isn’t true.** So don’t let the unbelief of *emotionalism* determine how you think about reality. **Sometimes God calls you to things that feel good and feel right. And sometimes he invites you into things that *don’t* immediately feel that way.** They might still be good things. Make sense? Okay, third, unbelief sometimes comes in the form of...

## Moralism

Moralism is the form of unbelief that **says if I do good things, God will give me a good life.** Moralism is what the Pharisees were *notorious* for. Christian sociologist Christian Smith points out that what many Western Christians call “Christianity” is actually closer to what he calls *moralistic therapeutic deism*. *Moralistic*, meaning the main thing God cares about is that I live a moral life. *Therapeutic*, meaning that the main purpose of my belief system is to help me feel better about myself. And *deism*, meaning that God does *exist*, but he’s not really all that personal—he’s more like an impersonal disconnected force that exists somewhere out in the clouds and doesn’t really have much to do with my day-to-day life.



And I think that last part is why **moralism is such an insidious type** of unbelief. Because **it keeps you from meeting the real God**: the one who wants to know you and speak to you and walk with you and *be* with you. Moralism just turns God into a glorified vending machine. You put the right amount of coins in, God will give you the life you want in return. Whereas the *real* God—the God of the bible—is a God who wants to enter into a real, actual friendship with you based on *grace*, and not based on what you do. Moralism ends up being crushing and robs us of enjoying God.

So really quickly, let me just give you a **way to discern** if *moralism* is a thing for you. One of the quickest ways to spot it is to watch your reaction when your “vending machine” version of God malfunctions. So if you feel like you’re living a good moral life, and bad things still happen to you—and you get inordinately *angry* about it? Especially towards *God*? If you immediately get frustrated that God isn’t holding up his part of the bargain, that’s usually a dead giveaway that you’re operating under *moralism*.

I’ll give you **two more**, and we’ll try to be **fairly quick** about these...

## Cynicism

This one I’ve found is a *big one* for lots of people. Cynicism is the type of unbelief that says **everything good is too good to be true**. It’s when we decide that if we just expect the worst from everything, we can never be let down. It’s a form of self-protection. And cynicism in many ways has become the spirit of our age here recently. **And some of that I can understand: we've been going through a two year long worldwide pandemic, Vladimir Putin is doing horrific things in Ukraine. And all of that is made worse by the fact that for the first time in human history, you and I carry around a 24/7 news outlet in our pockets. And the things that get posted there don't generally trend towards the positive and uplifting.**

So on one level, I *get* it. But **here’s what you’ve got to know** about that cynicism: it can do an okay job of protecting you against some disappointment, sure. But it can also do a really good job of preventing you from ever experiencing much joy at all. And for followers of Jesus, it discounts the gospel: the story about how God has sent his son Jesus to rescue and redeem what was lost, and to reconcile all things to himself. You can’t live by *that story* and still remain cynical about everything all of the time. It’s a resistance to living your life by the one true story of the world. And then finally, the **flip side of cynicism is...**

## Optimism

Optimism is the belief that *there's a bright side to everything*. Sometimes it presents itself in the upbeat, always positive, always cheery, Enneagram 7s of the world (7s we love you). But sometimes it *also presents itself in Christian cliches* like “everything happens for a reason” and “the best is yet to come!” And while those comments might be *well-meaning*, sometimes they're not all that helpful. Especially when someone is in the midst of tremendous suffering or difficulty.

Now in some ways, *we are called to a type of optimism* as followers of Jesus. Like we just mentioned, we know how the story of the world ends, and we know it is and will be good news. So that should inform our thinking and speaking and feeling. But that's a particular *kind* of optimism—not *blind, foundation-less* optimism. **When optimism *isn't* directly rooted in the *gospel*, it can actually just be a form of unbelief. It can be a barrier to faith, rather than an expression of it.**

And *here's why*: *blind* optimism can be a way of saying “I don't *need* the gospel to be true, because I can just look on the bright side. I can find the silver lining.” And practically, **optimism can be a way to avoid recognizing, grieving and entering into the most broken spaces in our world, because we either avoid it or put a positive spin on it.** Whereas the *gospel* tells us “the world *is* a dark place. Some things are indeed pretty bad. Some things are even worse than they seem. But there is no space that is too bad and too broken for the transforming power of Jesus to reach into and transform.” *That's* the good news.

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So those are *just five different forms* I've seen unbelief come in: *rationalism, emotionalism, moralism, cynicism, and optimism*. And I'm sure there's probably more where those came from. But these are all subtle ways that we resist the good news of Jesus in our hearts. Ways that we, like the Pharisees, Sadducees, and disciples, resist seeing Jesus for who he is and what he's capable of. Which brings up one final question: what's the solution? If we see any of that in us, how do we rid our hearts of the “yeast” of unbelief?

We *return to the very beginning of our passage*. When the Pharisees and Sadducees reveal their unbelief in asking for a sign, what does Jesus say? *No sign will be given to you except...what?* The sign of Jonah. Anybody remember what we said the sign of Jonah stood for? The death and resurrection of Jesus. In the death and resurrection—the gospel message itself—we find something far *better* than all those forms of unbelief.

We see something **better than rationalism**, because sometimes the things we need most make very little logical sense: *a crucified king. A risen martyr. A conquering victim.* Those things don't make sense—and yet they are the very basis for our faith. In the gospel, see something **better than emotionalism**, because sometimes our emotions *lie* to us. What the disciples thought was the worst, most grievous day in history, was actually the day history changed for the better. While they sat in an upper room overwhelmed and terrified, Jesus was rolling away the stone from the tomb.

We see something **better than moralism**, because the cross means God's affections for us hinge on *Jesus'* goodness. They don't wax and wane based on *ours*. We see something **better than cynicism**, because we don't need to insulate ourselves from disappointment. We have a savior to walk with us *through* it. And we see something far **better than optimism**, because the resurrection doesn't leave us searching high and low for the brightside, it opens up a whole new future altogether. **Every form of unbelief is just a cheap imitation for the good news of Jesus. It's a counterfeit version of something altogether better, and altogether different.** And it's all made available to you and I through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

**May God help us** all believe *that* news, and resist the yeast of unbelief.

Let's pray together.