

R. O. Blechman is one of the most famous illustrators in the world. In his book, *Dear James: Letters to a Young Illustrator*, he shares a series of letters he wrote to a younger illustrator. In a very poignant letter, he addresses the reality of failure:

Preliminary drawings and sketches often are discouraging things, pale shadows of one's bold intentions. Seemingly nonsense, they're especially dispiriting for beginners ... 'Is that what I did,' the novice might ask, 'and I consider myself an artist?! ... Speaking for myself ... my trash basket is full of false starts and failed drawings ... There should be a Museum of Failed Art. It would exhibit all the terrible art that would have ended up in trash bins and garbage cans, lost and unknown to the public life.

Surprisingly, the Bible contains a Museum of Failed Discipleship. Over and over again, the Gospels record the false starts and spiritual failures of the disciples. Thankfully, they also record Jesus' willingness to encourage and challenge them. We tend to cover up our heroes' faults, and we're even more likely to gloss over our own colossal flops. Instead, the Gospels allow us to see the disciples' failures—and most of those stories came from the disciples themselves! This honesty provides encouragement to us when we say to ourselves, "Is that what you I did, and you call yourself a Christian?"

In Matthew 16:1–12, we'll see two things that often trip us up in our journey; two things that will fill our trash baskets with false starts and failed drawings. These two things are what I'd label as forgetfulness and falsehood.

A Museum of Failed Discipleship

Here in Matthew 16:1–12, Jesus is back in Galilee and once again being confronted with opposition from the religious leaders.

The Pharisees and Sadducees came to Jesus and tested him by asking him to show them a sign from heaven. (Matthew 16:1)

Here Jesus is approached by a very odd combination of forces. The Pharisees and the Sadducees were two religious groups who didn't see eye to eye at all. As we'll see a bit later, the Pharisees were the religious conservatives, and the Sadducees were the liberals. This is kind of like Giants fans joining hands with Dodger fans to cheer against the hated NY Yankees in the World Series. Sometimes when you have a common enemy, you drop your differences and join forces. That's what we see here.

Notice it says they "tested him." That word "test" can also be translated "tempt." It's the same word Matthew used to describe

how the devil "tempted" Jesus in the wilderness. So they're looking for a way to discredit him. They're not sincere seekers at all. Their minds are made up about him.

They ask him "to show them a sign from heaven." It wasn't enough that he healed countless people, drove out demons with authority, and multiplied a few loaves of bread to feed thousands of people. They want a sign from heaven. It's like, "Show us something we've never seen before; something spectacular in the sky. Like the sun standing still, a cloud formation where God writes, 'Jesus is Messiah' in the sky or a voice from heaven."

But just as he had before, Jesus refuses. Look what he says.

He replied, "When evening comes, you say, 'It will be fair weather, for the sky is red,' 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. 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. (verses 2–4)

He starts out and says, "You guys know how to look into the sky and see signs that allow you to predict the weather, but you have no idea how to discern the signs of the times." Have you ever noticed how some people are obsessed with weather reports? I mean we have apps for the weather; we even have a weather channel! How weird is that?

When Jesus mentions the "*signs of the times*," he's not talking about the end of the world kind of stuff we often associate with the signs of the times. Rather, he's referring to what his own ministry pointed to. Jesus was clearly showing through his miracles and his teaching that the Kingdom of God was dawning. Those were the signs, but they didn't get it. The proof that they failed to discern the signs is that they asked for a sign!

And Jesus turns them down with some pretty strong language. He calls them a "*wicked and adulterous generation*" to whom no sign will be given except the sign of Jonah. The sign of Jonah is he was three days in the belly of a huge fish, but he survived. The sign of Jonah is Jesus would soon be three days dead, but he would then be raised up.

And then it just says he left them; he withdrew with his disciples. Poignant words. He was withdrawing not just physically but spiritually. And this is the last time he'll withdraw from them. The next time he marches south towards Jerusalem will be to die.

So he climbed into a boat with his disciples, and they head across the lake again. Look what happened.

When they went across the lake, the disciples forgot to take bread. “Be careful,” Jesus said to them. “Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees.”

They discussed this among themselves and said, “It is because we didn’t bring any bread.” (verses 5–7)

We can understand the failure of the religious leaders to perceive the signs of the times. They’re stubborn and hardhearted, just like so many people today. But what’s hard to understand is how dense the disciples were. It’s like “dumb and dumber”—the Pharisees are dumb, but the disciples are even dumber! I love how it says, “As they discussed this among themselves.” I can just see them going back and forth:

Thomas says, “The yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees? What’s he talking about now?”

John says, “I have no idea! He’s always saying things like this.”

Peter replies, “I know. He’s hungry! And he’s not happy about it because we forgot to bring the bread!”

Thomas says, “Oh no! What are we going to do?”

As we go on in this passage, you’ll see how a number of times Jesus mentions their failure to “understand.” When he warned them about the “yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees” he was, of course, thinking of the religious leaders who just confronted him with a request for a sign. But they thought he’s talking about literal bread, which they forgot to bring with them when they hopped in the boat.

Meanwhile, Jesus is quite aware of their deliberations. Look what he said.

Aware of their discussion, Jesus asked, “You of little faith, why are you talking among yourselves about having no bread? Do you still not understand? Don’t you remember the five loaves for the five thousand, and how many basketfuls you gathered? Or the seven loaves for the four thousand, and how many basketfuls you gathered? 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.” 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. (verses 8–12)

Remember, right before this in chapter 15 there was the story of a Canaanite woman who Jesus said had “great faith.” Now he chides the disciples for having “little faith.” He said, “Why are you so worried about bread? Have you forgotten about how, not once but twice, I took a few loaves and fed thousands of people? Don’t you understand? Don’t you remember? Don’t you think I could provide for twelve of you if I did that for the multitudes? I

wasn’t talking about bread, guys. I was talking about a far more dangerous problem than running out of bread.”

And then they got it. They understood. He was warning them about the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees. Somehow their teaching was like yeast or leaven. Yeast, of course, is a very small thing. It doesn’t present itself as all that dangerous. The thing about yeast is it just takes a little, but under the right conditions, it spreads. The teaching of the religious leaders was like that. It was insidious. It snuck up on you. It was off just a little bit, but it took you on a trajectory that was a million miles away from the truth.

Beware of both forgetfulness and falsehood

So once again, there are two dangers we’re warned about in this story. Two things that are often thrown in the Museum of Failed Discipleship. The first one is forgetfulness. In their current crisis of not bringing any bread, the disciples forgot about Jesus’ past miraculous provision of bread and were missing out on something far more important Jesus was trying to teach them. And what was that? He was trying to teach them to beware of falsehood, or what we might call false teaching; the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees. Beware of the twin dangers of forgetfulness and falsehood.

Forgetfulness: Let’s talk first about forgetfulness. How often we forget about the Lord’s past provision in our current crisis. These guys had quickly forgotten, so Jesus reminded them. He wanted them to recall how many baskets full of broken pieces they picked up after the crowds were fed. Why did he do that? Because his overflowing provision in the past was meant to feed their faith that he’ll supply in the present and in the future. Faith shrivels when we forget God’s past faithfulness.

You’ve heard of Moses. What was Moses to put in the Ark of the Covenant as he led the people of Israel through the wilderness, heading for the Promised Land? There were the stone tablets, Aaron’s staff, and what else? They were to take a little bit of manna—you know that stuff that fell from heaven, which kept them alive for 40 years. Why take manna with them when they didn’t need it any longer? To remind them of God’s past provision.

Maybe you’ve heard about Joshua as well. After the miraculous crossing of the Jordan River, the priests of Israel were told to take twelve stones from the riverbed and place them in a mound in Gilgal. Why? God said it was to be a “memorial.” What’s fascinating is Gilgal would later become the command headquarters for conquering the Promised Land. They’d go there before, during, and after their victories to see the stones and rerun the mental tapes through their minds of God’s past faithfulness.

Do you have manna in your ark? Do you have a Gilgal you can return to with each new challenge to your faith? In the midst of your faith challenges, are you remembering?

In a 2017 lecture, Mark Meynell addressed the connection between identity and memory. He described two patients who tell of their experience with memory loss. One said: "My memory of my past is a blank space. I feel lost and hopeless. I'm trying to explore a void." Both described how disconcerting it was to look at photos. Even though they recognized themselves, they had no recollection of the moment. They said it's like, "reading a biography of a stranger." Two things stand out in this study.

- First, without memory, it's hard to have an identity. One of the patients said: "I don't have the moorings that other people draw on to know who they are."
- Second, it's hard to have hope when we don't know our past. In other words, the inability to invoke the past greatly impedes one's ability to imagine a future. So forgetfulness leads to a loss of identity and of hope.

Maybe that's why, over and over again, the Bible tells us to remember; remember what God has done. Don't forget his deeds on your behalf. How can we do that? Let me suggest a few things.

- First, when God does something, write it down. Write down not just your prayers, but your answered prayers. I have a thing called a Five Year Journal, where on one page there's a place for a journal entry on the same day for five consecutive years. So I can look at what God did last year on the same date and the year before. I'm only in year three so I can't go back any further yet, but Lord willing, I will down the road. That helps me remember.
- Second, speak your story. The psalmist says, "*I will give thanks to you, Lord, with all my heart; I will tell of all your wonderful deeds*" (Ps 9:1). Charles Spurgeon was a great English preacher in the 1800's. Did you know he told the story of his own conversion 280 times in his sermons? You think I repeat stories! Imagine him being your pastor and having to listen to the same story 280 times! But maybe he needed to tell it. Maybe that was a way for him to remember.
- A third way to remember is to keep mementos of God's past deeds, like the stones at Gilgal the Israelites returned to time and time again. I knew a guy in college who hung a tire from his wall because God had protected him in a serious car crash. He did that as a reminder of God's faithfulness and protection. I'm not sure how that worked out when he got married, but it worked in college!
- Let me tell you one more way to remember—come to church. Be a regular part of worship. In worship, we recall the awesome deeds of the Lord. In worship, we're reminded through the preaching of God's word of what we call, "salvation history." In worship, we take the bread and the cup where Jesus said; "*Do this in remembrance of me.*"

Falsehood: We talked about forgetfulness. Let's talk next about a second danger—falsehood, or specifically, teaching that is false. We all value truth, right? How important is truth for justice to be done in a court of law? How important is truth in a marriage, or even in a friendship? The word truth comes from Old English word, which means faithfulness, fidelity, and loyalty. When we talk about falsehood or false teaching, we're talking about valuing what binds us together.

Honestly, I don't think we talk enough about false teaching. The apostles were constantly warning about false teaching and false teachers. The apostle Peter, who had quite a bit of experience with this sort of thing, said this, "*...there will be false teachers among you. They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them—bringing swift destruction on themselves. Many will follow their depraved conduct and will bring the way of truth into disrepute. In their greed, these teachers will exploit you with fabricated stories. Their condemnation has long been hanging over them, and their destruction has not been sleeping*" (2 Peter 2:1–3). That's a stern warning!

So what is false teaching? Let's start with what we see in this passage. We see the Sadducees and Pharisees coming to Jesus asking for a sign. In that sense, the leaven Jesus is talking about is a disposition to believe and to trust in Jesus only if he meets our criteria. It's a sign seeking mentality that demands he act in a certain way to prove he's worthy of our trust. Jesus says, "Don't be like that. Don't make your faith contingent on how you think God should act. Don't expect God to jump through your hoops. Don't seek for signs to prop up your faith." Do you know people who do that? People who say, "I'll believe in Jesus if he just shows up right now and does a miracle." Or in the midst of a crisis, we demand God act a certain way to prove he's worthy of our trust. Deep down in our hearts, we sometimes say, "Lord, I will trust you if..." That's what Jesus is warning us about.

But I think there's more to it than that. Jesus specially mentions the leaven of both the Sadducees and the Pharisees. Each of these groups took a different approach to God's word. The Sadducees were the theological liberals. They were highly educated, so much so they thought they could pick and choose what parts of God's word they'd accept and what parts they'd reject. For example, they rejected miracles. They didn't believe in the idea of a resurrection at the end of the age, or in the afterlife. And I wonder how often we fall for the same thing? How often do we pick and choose what parts of the Bible to take seriously?

Recently, I spent an evening with Bruce Wilkerson, who wrote a book a few years back called, *The Prayer of Jabez*. He spoke to a small group of us about the topic of forgiveness, and as he spoke, it struck me how this is one of these things we like to conveniently leave out of our discipleship. This was so important

to Jesus; he included it in what we call The Lord's Prayer, "*Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.*" What we often conveniently leave out is what Jesus said right after that, "*For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins*" (Matthew 6:14). I don't hear that talked about much. I love to talk about how God forgives me, but deep down I think I have the right not to forgive others. In that sense, we're like the Sadducees—we just kind of ignore the parts of God's truth we don't like or agree with. And anyone who teaches like that is a false teacher. Be warned!

What about the leaven of the Pharisees? They didn't subtract from God's truth, they added to it. They added hundreds of nit-picky rules and regulations to God's word, and in doing so, they ignored the things that really matter to God like justice and mercy. How do we add to God's truth? How do we hold on so tightly to our own traditions that we're blind to what God really cares most about?

Tim Challies is a blogger, author and book reviewer. He wrote a blog post called, *7 False Teachers in the Church Today*. Listen to this list:

The Heretic: The Heretic is the person who teaches what blatantly contradicts an essential teaching of the Christian faith. He's usually a great speaker and a natural leader, teaching just enough truth to mask his deadly error, but he leads his followers from the safety of truth to the peril of falsehood.

The Charlatan: This is the person who uses ministry as a means of personal enrichment. The Charlatan is only interested in filling his wallet. He uses his leadership position to benefit from others' wealth.

The Prophet: The Prophet claims to be gifted by God to speak new truth—authoritative sounding words of prediction, teaching, rebuke, or encouragement.

The Abuser: He uses his position of leadership to take advantage of others. Usually, he wants money, sex, or power, or all three.

The Divider: The Divider uses falsehood to divide a community of God's people. God wants unity in his church, brothers and sisters

united in the bond of peace. This false teacher brings strife, not love. He generates factions, not unity, discord, not harmony.

The Tickler: This is the one who cares nothing for what God wants and everything for what people want. He's the man-pleaser rather than the God-pleaser. The apostle Paul, who confronted many a false teacher, called them "ear-tickers" (2 Timothy 4:3–4).

The Speculator: Finally, the Speculator is obsessed with novelty, originality, or speculation. His teaching focuses on speculation. He obsesses over matters that are trivial or novel, like details about the end times.

Challis concludes with these words, "Satan's greatest ambassadors are not pimps, politicians, or power-brokers, but pastors. His priests do not peddle a different religion, but a deadly perversion of the true one. His troops do not make a full-out frontal assault, but work as agents, sneaking into the opposing army."

So those are two things to watch out for. Two things that will always end up in the Museum of Failed Discipleship: forgetfulness and falsehood. But how do these two things fit together? I'll leave you with this: When we forget what the Lord has done for us, we're far more prone to falsehood. When we fail to remember the deeds of the Lord on our behalf, we're far more susceptible to cheap substitutes for the truth.

You see when we forget what God has done for us, what we're really doing is doubting the gospel. In the gospel, it says, "I love you. I forgive you. I've done everything to make you acceptable and righteous in my sight. And I'll never leave you nor forsake you." When we forget that, we open ourselves to lies. We begin to think that maybe the gospel isn't enough. Maybe I need something more. All of a sudden, false teaching becomes attractive. Maybe it is teaching, which waters down the demands of discipleship, or maybe it's teaching, which adds to those demands. Either way, when we forget what the Lord has done for us, we are far more prone to falsehood.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

© 2018 Central Peninsula Church, Foster City, CA
Catalog No. 1434-32SC