This new collision between Jesus and His opponents took place shortly after He performed the second miracle of feeding the multitudes, which was similar to the one performed in the neighborhood of Bethsaida Julias. It cannot be determined how much time elapsed between the two miracles, but it was long enough for our Lord and His disciples to make an extended journey to the coasts of Tyre and Sidon where Christ met the Syrophoenician woman. From there, they traveled through the region of the ten cities on the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee. The journey was long enough to allow the cause and the fame of Jesus to recover from the low state to which they sank after the sifting sermon in the synagogue at Capernaum. The unpopular One had, once again, become popular. So, when He arrived at the southeastern shore of the sea, thousands were waiting for Him. They were so determined to hear Him preach and to experience His healing power that they remained with Him for three days. They had very little, if any, food. This created the necessity for the second feeding.

After Jesus performed this miracle on the southeastern shore, He sent the multitudes away. Then, traveling by boat, He came to the coast of Magadan, on the western side of the sea (Mt. 15:39). When He arrived, He encountered the Pharisees and Sadducees who came asking Him to give them a sign from heaven. These people had probably heard of the recent miracle, as well as many others that were performed by Him. But they were unwilling to accept the conclusion to which these wonderful works plainly led. They pretended these miracles were insufficient evidence of His Messiahship and demanded even more absolute proof before they would believe His claim. These religious leaders demanded, “Show us a sign from heaven.” What they wanted was something like the manna that was brought down from heaven by Moses, or the fire called down by Elijah, or the thunder and rain called down by Samuel. It was assumed that these kinds of signs could only be done by the power of God, while the signs that Jesus performed in His miracles of healing might possibly be done by the power of the devil! (Mt. 12:24ff.). It was the sort of demand that was often made to Jesus - in good faith or in bad (Jn. 2:18; 6:30; Mt. 12:38). The Jews sought after these signs. They wanted to see miracles that were unique and startling. These miracles had to gratify their superstitious curiosity and astonish the minds of those who loved wonders. The miracles they wanted to see were only signs and served no other purpose than to display divine power - like the rod of Moses that was changed into a serpent and then changed back into its original form. Jesus refused to give in to the demands of these sign-seekers. He would not lower Himself to do miracles of any sort just to prove He was the Messiah. He would not provide food...
for a superstitious appetite or do any entertaining works for these skeptics. He knew that those who remained unbelievers after they had seen His ordinary miracles could not be brought to faith by any means. These works were not empty signs; they were works of kindness. In fact, the more evidence they got, the more hardened they became in their unbelief. Jesus thought of their demand for these signs as an indication that they were already determined not to believe in Him. They would do whatever was necessary to get rid of this disagreeable problem, even if it meant putting Him to death. Therefore, when He refused to perform the signs they sought, it was His usual practice to add a word of rebuke or a sad prophecy. For instance, during a very early period in His ministry, on His first visit to Jerusalem after His baptism, He said, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up” (Jn. 2:19).

On this current occasion, Jesus’ soul was disturbed by the continued demands from the sign-seekers. “He sighed deeply in His spirit” (Mk. 8:12), knowing full well what these demands meant, both to Himself and to those who made them. So, with excessively severe and harsh words, He addressed the men who came to tempt Him. He rebuked them for their spiritual blindness, calling them a wicked and adulterous generation. As He had done once before (Mt. 12:39-40), ironically, He pointed them to the sign of the prophet Jonah. He told them that even though they knew the signs of the weather and understood what a red sky in the morning or evening meant, they were blind to the obvious signs of the times. These signs immediately told them that the Sun of righteousness had arisen and that a dreadful storm of judgment was coming like a dark night on Israel. For she had become apostate and was living in sin. He branded them, and the whole generation they represented, with the word wicked to describe their behavior toward Him. This behavior came from their lying hearts. It was evil and full of spite. And He used the term adulterous to describe them, in relation to God, as guilty of breaking their marriage covenant. They pretended to love Him greatly and to have a zeal for Him - with their lips. But in their hearts and lives, they turned away from the living God to idols - customs, ceremonies, and signs. He gave them the story of Jonah the prophet as a sign. It was a mystical reference to His death. He was saying that one of the most reliable evidences that He was truly God’s servant was the fact that He was rejected and treated in a disgraceful and uncivilized way by those to whom He was speaking. He was telling them that there could not be a worse sign for a man than to be well-received by them. The person who was received in this way could not be a true Christ.

Watch Out!

After He freely spoke His mind, Jesus left the sign-seekers. He entered the same boat He had taken from the other side and departed again for the same eastern shore. He was anxious to get away from them. After He arrived at the shore, He used the confrontation that had just happened to instruct the disciples. “Watch out and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees” (Mt. 16:6). The words were spoken abruptly, similar to the way someone would speak when he was waking up from a daydream. We can only imagine that Jesus had been thinking about what had occurred as His disciples rowed Him across the sea. He sadly reflected on
the prevailing unbelief and the dark, declining signs of the weather. These signs were prophetic of the evil that was coming to Him and to all of the Jewish people. And now, remembering that He is in the presence of His disciples, He communicates His thoughts to them in the form of a warning. He cautions them against the deadly influence of the evil time in which they lived in the same way that a parent might tell his child to beware of a poisonous plant whose dazzling flowers caught his attention.

It should be noted in this warning that pharisaic and sadducaic tendencies are identified. Jesus does not mention two leavens, but only one that is common to both religious parties, as if they were two species of one genus or two branches from one stem. In truth, they were. On the surface the two parties were very different. One was excessively zealous while the other was moderate in religion. One was strict, the other lenient in morals. One was exclusively and intensely Jewish in their feelings, while the other was open to the influence of pagan civilizations. Each party had its own unique leaven. The leaven of the Pharisees, according to Christ, was hypocrisy (Lk. 12:1). The leaven of the Sadducees was being absorbed with material and temporal things. In some people it took on a political form, as in the case of the parties within the Herod family (they are called Herodians in the Gospels). Others held to a philosophy which denied the existence of spirit and the reality of the future life, and made that denial an excuse for their being totally committed to the things in the here and now. But it happened here as it happens in other situations: Extremes met. Phariseeism, Sadduceeism, and Herodianism, though they had minor differences, were radically the same. The religionists, the philosophers, and the politicians were all members of one great party which had been hostile to the divine kingdom for a long time. They were all the same: worldly-minded (the Pharisees are specifically noted for their covetousness in Lk. 16:14). All were opposed to Christ, basically for the same reason: He was not of this world. All of them united at this time in an attempt to annoy Him with unbelieving, unreasonable demands (see Mk. 8:15 where “the leaven of Herod” is mentioned). And, in the end, they all had a part in His death. So it was made crystal clear - once and for all: A Christian is not someone who is simply superficially different from either the Pharisees or Sadducees. Rather, he is someone who is radically different from both. This is a serious truth and not yet well understood. Many people imagine that right believing and right living means they should go to the opposite extremes of any evil tendency. To avoid the strictness and superstition of the Pharisees, which has become repulsive, people run into the skepticism and license of the Sadducees. Or, when they become frightened by the excesses of unfaithfulness and worldliness, they try to find salvation in ritualism, in infallible churches, and in reviving the practices of the monks who lived in the Medieval Ages. Therefore, the two tendencies continue to multiply one another on the principle of action and reaction. One generation or school goes all out in one direction. The other makes it a point to be as unlike its predecessor or its neighbor as possible. Both are equally far from the truth.
The Radical Vice
Jesus did not think it was necessary to state what the common leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees was. He had already indicated what its nature was in His plain and severe reply to the sign-seekers. The radical vice of both parties was nothing other than ungodliness: blindness and deadness of heart to God. They did not know what was true and good when they saw it. And when they knew it, they did not love it. The evidences that the King and the kingdom of grace were among them were everywhere. Yet here they were asking for arbitrary, outward signs, *external evidences* in the worst sense. They wanted proof that the One who spoke as no man had ever spoken before and worked wonders of mercy that had never been seen before was not an impostor, but, rather, a wise and good man, a prophet, and the Son of God. Truly, the natural man - religious or not religious - is blind and dead! What these people who sought for a sign needed was not a new sign, but a new heart. They did not need more evidence but a willing spirit to obey the truth.

Jesus described the spirit of unbelief that ruled in Jewish society as a leaven. There was a special reference to how widespread it was. This was most appropriate because it passes from parents to children, from rich to poor, from the educated to the uneducated, until a whole generation has been corrupted by its evil influence. This was the state of things in Israel as He saw it. Spiritual blindness and deadness met Him everywhere He went. It was accompanied with the outward symptoms of an inward problem - a constant craving for evidence. The common people, the leaders of society, the religious, the skeptics, the judges, and the people from the country were all blind. Yet, apparently, all of them were terribly anxious to see. They were forever renewing their demand, “What sign will you show us, that we may see and believe You? What will You do?”

The Disciples Misunderstand
Annoyed an hour ago by the evil movements of His enemies, Jesus was now irritated with the stupidity of friends. The disciples totally, even ludicrously, misunderstood the word of warning that was addressed to them. While their Master was away, they discussed the question. They wondered what the strange words, so abruptly and earnestly spoken, might mean. They came to the conclusion that the words were intended to caution them against buying bread from either of the religious parties. But this was an absurd mistake. And yet, taking all things into consideration, it was not so very unnatural. For, in the first place, as we have already remarked, Jesus had introduced the subject very abruptly. And, secondly, some time had elapsed since the meeting with the sign-seekers. During that time, no reference seems to have been made to the issue. How were they to know that during all that time their Master’s thoughts had been occupied with what had taken place on the western shore of the sea? In any case, this was not likely to occur to them. Without a doubt, the demand for a sign had not seemed to them to be a significant thing. It was probably forgotten as soon as their backs were turned to the men who had made it. And then, finally, it happened just before Jesus began to speak, that they
remembered they had forgotten to bring along provisions for the journey. They had departed suddenly and had forgotten. That was what they were thinking about when He said, “Watch out and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees” (Mt. 16:6). They were so concerned that they only had one loaf of bread with them that when they heard the caution against a particular kind of leaven, they immediately jumped to the conclusion: “It is because we took no bread” (Mt. 16:7).

The disciples’ misunderstanding was simple and natural in its origin. Yet it deserved a correcting reply from Jesus. They could not have fallen into this mistake if they had taken an interest in spiritual and temporal things according to their relative importance. They had treated the incident on the other side of the sea too lightly, and they had treated their neglect to bring along bread too seriously. They should have taken the evil demand for a sign more seriously, and the words that their Master had spoken in reply. And they should not have been troubled about the lack of loaves when they were in the presence of the One who had miraculously fed the hungry multitude in the desert on two occasions. Their lack of concern on the one hand, and their abundance of concern on the other, showed that food and clothing occupied a greater place in their minds than the kingdom of God and its interests. If they had possessed more faith and more spirituality, they would not have exposed themselves to the question of rebuke that their Master asked them, “How is it that you do not understand that I did not speak to you concerning bread? But beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees” (Mt. 16:11).

And yet, Jesus can hardly have expected these crude disciples to appreciate, as He did, the significance of what had occurred on the other side of the lake. More than an ordinary insight would have been needed to discern the importance of that demand for a sign. And the disciples’ ability to read the signs of the times (as we will soon see, and as all we have learned about them already might lead us to expect) was very small indeed. One of the key lessons that needs to be learned from this chapter is this: With reference to the future, the thoughts of Christ were so different from the thoughts of His companions. We will have the opportunity to comment more on this later as we advance toward the final crisis. At this point, we are called to highlight the fact prominently for the first time.