

Matthew 16:1-12

Read the passage: [The Message](#) or [The New Revised Standard Version \(NRSV\)](#).

Click [here](#) for an easy to print or email Adobe PDF version of this note.

Chapters 16 and 17 of Matthew are a turning point in Matthew's telling of the Jesus story.

In my humble opinion, ;-)) the action of these two chapters can be summarized as:

- the religious authorities don't get who Jesus is, what he is about, what he has been making plain to anyone with two good eyes to see;
- the crowds don't get who Jesus is, what he is about, what he has been making plain, and their support for Jesus is going to make the authorities nervous;
- the disciples do get who Jesus is - sort of;
- Jesus begins to teach his followers the next level of truth about trusting God.

Chapter 16 begins with a challenge to Jesus from the religious leaders: show us a sign to prove that Jesus was who he was acting like. Jesus honourably refuses to perform such a sign. (See my [Introduction to John](#) for an explanation of why Jesus refuses to do signs on demand.)

Verse 16:4, the "sign of Jonah," see Matthew 12:38-42 and Luke 11:29-32.

In Luke, the sign of Jonah is the repentance of the heathen Ninevites - they repented when Jonah went to them; but "something greater" is here, and this generation is not repenting. This is a classic form of rhetorical challenge:

THEN: (a lesser prophet) + (a heathen people) = (a true repentance and faith)
NOW: (a greater prophet) + (people of the covenant) = (faithlessness)

In Matthew 12, the sign of Jonah is interpreted as:

THEN: 3 days in the belly of a whale
NOW: 3 days in the belly of the earth (i.e., Hades)

The encounter with the religious leaders who don't get who Jesus is, is then followed by a story of the followers not getting it. They had forgotten to bring bread. "Bread," of course is referring to what truly is needed to feed us. Recall the first temptation to turn stones into bread and Jesus' response that we live by God's word. This passage is a teaching against the religious leaders of their time - their teachings are not "bread," not the word of God; and also once again reveals the disciples own failure to "get" Jesus.

Verse 16:8, "you of little trust" who don't get what is happening is a theme that will re-occur in 16:22, 16:25, 17:6, 17:20, and 17:23.

(Aside: the word that is often translated "faith" in many Bibles, is better translated as "trust." In modern ears, "faith" means "intellectual belief or agreement;" but in Jesus' time "faith" is closer to "trust" in its meaning. God is trustworthy and therefore we have faith / trust in God.)

David Ewart
www.holytextures.com