

Meeting With Christ

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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THE PARABLE OF THE LEAVEN

Matthew 13:33

Whenever Jesus taught people about the kingdom of God, He often used examples taken directly from everyday life. The parable of the leaven is one good example. Let's read this short parable.

Matthew 13:33. Another parable He spoke to them: "The kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal till it was all leavened."

Here Jesus is telling the story of a woman who was busy making bread. He says, 'Look over there. Do you see that woman behind the window? Do you see what she is doing? She is going to make a loaf of bread, maybe even several loaves of bread. She already got her pans and pots ready. Now she is mixing flour, water, yeast and a pinch of salt together. The yeast is a very important ingredient because it causes the dough to rise. Later when it is all leavened, the woman will bake the bread.'

You all know that bread made simply from water and flour is dry and very hard. That is why we mix it with leaven. When you put the dough in a warm place, at the right temperature, the leaven changes the quality of the bread by making it porous and moist. Through the process of fermentation, the whole dough is filled with air and it becomes very soft.

Two opposite views

What is the spiritual teaching of this passage? There are essentially two interpretations of this parable.

(1) Some say that the leaven represents God's work and the bread is the world. This means that the church is the leaven working inside the world, the bread, and its influence spreads throughout the world. If that is the picture, it is basically repeating the lesson of the previous parable, the parable of the mustard seed (Matthew 13:31-32). There we saw that the influence of the church will be pervasive in the world. Man and society will be affected in one way or another by this leaven.

(2) The other way to understand this parable is that the world is spreading into the church. The description of 'leaven taken by a woman and hidden in the meal' indicates a mixture of evil within the good. It is a picture in which the leaven symbolizes evil that penetrates God's kingdom and His church.

Throughout the history of the church, both views were held. Most Bible commentators of our time prefer the first interpretation, namely that the church, like leaven mixed in with dough, penetrates and transforms the world.

I personally prefer the second interpretation. The parable is a picture of evil diffusing itself through the church. It seems to me that the arguments supporting that point of view are stronger than those of the first one. We will see what those arguments are in this lesson. Now let's take a close look at this parable.

The kingdom of God is 'not' like leaven

The parable of the leaven begins with these words. *The kingdom of heaven is like leaven...* Here we have to be very careful how we read the Scriptures. If we read the story like this, *The kingdom of heaven is like leaven*, then it would seem like Jesus is saying that the kingdom of God is the leaven which penetrates the world. But that is not exactly the meaning of Jesus' words. The fact that the kingdom of heaven is likened to leaven does not mean that the kingdom is the leaven. You see, when Jesus uses the expression 'the kingdom of heaven is like this,' the point of His comparison is not strictly the noun which follows that expression but the parable as a whole.

Take for example the parable of the sower. It is not the 'man who sowed' who is compared to the kingdom of heaven, but the situation resulting from his sowing. In the parable of the mustard seed, Jesus says, *The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed*. Again, the point of comparison is not the mustard seed in itself, but what happens when it is sown. *The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field* (Matthew 13:31).

We read in Matthew 25:1, *At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins*. Does that mean that the kingdom of heaven is being represented by these women? No. We have to read the sentence until the end. *At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom*. The kingdom of heaven is not simply compared to ten virgins, but to ten virgins who have taken their lamps and gone out to a marriage feast. In the context of this parable, the meaning is that when Jesus returns to judgment, it will be as it was the case of ten virgins in a marriage ceremony. It is the whole thing together that represents the situation in the kingdom.

This reminds me of Paul when he says, *For the body is not one member, but many* (1Corinthians 12:14). The body is made up of many members, not just of one single member. It is the same thing with the kingdom parables. When a parable begins with the expression 'the kingdom of heaven is like this,' we should not assume that the first word is the one that the kingdom of God is like. The kingdom of heaven is not like leaven. It is like leaven put into the bread by a woman. The whole picture is involved, not just the first word. The meaning of the statement will not change if we say, 'The kingdom of God is like a woman who took leaven and mixed it with flour.' We can also change the words around in this way, 'The kingdom of God is like meal which a woman took and put leaven into.' The meaning remains the same.

A little leaven leavens the whole lump

The next point we have to deal with is the question of the leaven. What does 'leaven' mean in the Bible? Well, the word of God has a lot to say about 'leaven'. If you take a NT concordance and look under the word 'leaven,' it won't be long before you notice that leaven refers to something bad.

In the parable of the leaven, it appears once as a verb (*zumoo*) and once as a noun (*zume*). There are only two other places outside of this parable where the verb form is used: 1Corinthians 5:6 and Galatians 5:9. Let's look at these two passages.

*1 Corinthians 5:6. Your glorying is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven **leavens** the whole lump?*

7 Therefore purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, since you truly are unleavened...

Do you see the picture? Paul says, 'You, Christians, are a loaf of bread which should not be leavened. You are in fact unleavened. Clean out the old leaven of sin in your life.'

The apostle Paul wrote those words to the church of Corinth in reaction to her immorality. At the beginning of the chapter, mention is made of a very serious sin in which a man committed incest, i.e., he had a sexual relationship with a relative of his own. In this case, it was with his mother-in-law. Paul said out of fury, 'Such a thing is disgusting even to the non-Christians. How dare you tolerate a sin like this in your church? This cannot pass over without correction!' Then he said, 'I have decided to excommunicate this man.' By this action, he removed the leaven from the church. He took out this sinful influence so that it does not affect the entire Christian community.

The word leaven is used in the same negative way in Galatians 5:9. Paul says this.

*Galatians 5:9. A little leaven **leavens** the whole lump.*

In this particular context, Paul is speaking about the influence of false teaching in the church, namely, the return to circumcision. 'It only takes a little leaven,' Paul says, 'to affect a whole lump of dough. So it is with false teaching. If we let it spread, it will permeate and mislead the whole church.'

Symbol of evil

The noun form of leaven occurs 12 other times in the NT (Matthew 16:6, 11, 12; Mark 8:15, 15; Luke 12:1; 13:21; 1 Corinthians 5:6, 7, 8, 8; Galatians 5:9). And again, it is always used in reference to corrupt doctrine or to corrupt practice.

In the OT, the word 'leaven' also represents something evil. That is why leaven was forbidden in all offerings to God by fire (Leviticus 2:11; 6:17). We read in Leviticus 2:11, *No grain offering which you bring to the Lord shall be made with leaven, for you shall burn no leaven nor any honey in any offering to the Lord made by fire.* Because leaven symbolizes the pervasive character of evil, it was inappropriate to use it in offerings which typified the propitiatory sacrifice of Christ. For the same reason, the Israelites were forbidden to eat leavened bread for seven days at the time of Passover. Not only that, they were prohibited from having any leaven in their homes (Exodus 12:15, 19) or in their land (Exodus 13:7; Deuteronomy 16:4). At that time of the year, the Israelites searched with extreme care their homes, to purge out every particle of leaven.

This is the point we need to observe. In the Bible, leaven is never used in a good sense. There is not a single place in the Scriptures where it typifies something good. Even when Jesus uses the word 'leaven,' it is always in a bad sense (Matthew 16:6, 11; Mark 8:15; Luke 12:1). If we want to change the symbolic meaning of leaven and take it in a good sense in the parable of the leaven, we must have some very solid arguments. But it seems to me that there are no strong reasons for making an exception and regarding the symbol here differently from its application everywhere else in the word of God. The interpretation that makes the leaven to be the gospel introduced into the world by the church and influencing subtly the whole world is based more on an exception than on a general rule. To be consistent, it is more logical to see the picture of evil penetrating the Christian community.

Three measures of flour

Let us consider another question. In the NIV, we read, *The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough.* What

does this dough represent? Dough is used in Romans 11:16 as a picture of the people of God. Paul writes, *If the part of the dough offered as firstfruits is holy, then the whole batch is holy.* Because of the holy lives of a few faithful ones, God cares for the nation as a whole – for the whole lump – for His people.

In the parable of the leaven, the Greek word for ‘flour’ or ‘meal’ refers specifically to wheat flour (*aleuron*). This does not come out in the English translation but it is very clear in the Greek text. And when we speak of wheat flour, we are talking about believers. Remember the parable of the tares. According to Jesus’ own explanation, the tares represent the sons of the devil, whereas the good seed, the wheat, stands for the children of God (Matthew 13:38). Wheat is also used as a picture of believers by John the Baptist in Matthew 3:12 where he declares that Jesus will one day ‘gather His wheat (the righteous) into the barn, but He will burn up the chaff (the wicked) with unquenchable fire.’

In John 6, the bread is Jesus Himself. *I am the bread of life*, Jesus says. And we, by extension, being the body of Christ, are called ‘bread’. That is why in 1Corinthians 10:17 it says, *For we (the church), though many, are one bread and one body.* The Christians are all one bread and one body with Christ. So the wheat, the flour, the bread, all those terms refer to believers.

If leaven symbolizes evil and wheat refers to Christians, then the lesson of the parable is that evil is able to penetrate the kingdom of heaven and corrupt it. The world is penetrating the church with its bad influence and Jesus is telling us to watch out for this. That, to me, is a more natural interpretation of the parable.

Hidden in the flour

Notice the word ‘hid.’ *Which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal.* This action, ‘to hide,’ indicates two things: (1) a certain act of secrecy, and (2) a certain covering up of something. Can we say that God takes His kingdom and hides it in the world? No, the kingdom of God comes with no hiding at all. Rather, it comes into the world in such a way that the world is quite aware of it.

Paul says for example in Acts 26:26, ‘The things of which I preach were not done in a corner.’ They were not hidden from human view. The events in the life of Jesus were obvious to everybody. All the Palestinian people could see what He was doing. That is why Jesus said to the people who came to arrest Him secretly, ‘Why do you arrest Me in the dark? Everyday I was in the temple teaching and you never touched Me. I sat in a public place. I didn’t hide Myself. So why do you do this thing in secret?’ The world acts secretly. Jesus does nothing in the corner.

In the same way, the apostle Paul says in 1Corinthians 4:9, ‘We, apostles, have become a spectacle to the world.’ A spectacle is something that the whole world can see. There is nothing hidden about it. In 2Corinthians 4:3-4, Paul again says, ‘The gospel that we preach is not hidden. But if it is hidden, it is hidden to those who are perishing. And they are perishing because the god of this world has blinded their eyes so that they cannot see the glory of Christ.’ The gospel is not hidden by God. If there is anything hidden, it is Satan who did the hiding, who blinded the eyes of the people to prevent them from seeing the glory of Christ.

The influence of the church works in a way that is obvious to anyone. The Lord Jesus says in Matthew 5:14, *A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden.* The church is like a city on a hill. It shines out. Everybody can see it. So it is not the church that is hiding in the world. It is the world that is entering secretly into the church.

Jesus is not the only one who gives us this warning. Jude tells us that *Certain men whose condemnation was written about long ago have secretly slipped in among you* (Jude 4). In 2Peter 2:1, we read that *False prophets also arose among the people ... who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves.* That

is the leaven that is hidden in the meal, the pervasive and secret influence of the false teachers and of the world in the church. And that is what the Lord Jesus is warning His disciples about in this parable. ‘Watch out for the leaven of the world that you do not fall. Beware of the leaven that can bring destruction upon you if you are not careful.’

Three kinds of leaven

More specifically, leaven is mentioned by the Lord Jesus as an attribute of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees of which the disciples are to beware. What is the leaven of the Pharisees? It is hypocrisy. *Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees*, the Lord Jesus says in Luke 12:1, **which is hypocrisy**. The Pharisees were guilty of hypocrisy, that is, saying one thing and doing another. You see, hypocrisy is not something that comes suddenly. It is a slow and subtle process. The Pharisees were not people who had the intention of being hypocrites. They were exemplary in their sincere pursuit of doctrinal truth. But after a period of time, slowly by slowly, they became self-righteous. They knew perfectly the letter of the Law but they missed the spirit of the Law. They shifted away from the focus of the Scriptures. Paul speaks of ‘shifting from the hope of the gospel (Colossians 1:23).’ Shifting away is a slow process no matter what causes the shifting.

Some believers start out as genuine Christians. But slowly by slowly, they cool down. They shift away so that eventually only the outward appearance of spirituality is left. The inside is gone. They honor God with their lips; their heart is far from Him. They preach one thing but do not practice it. They have departed from their first love, being neither cold nor hot.

In this connection, have you ever noticed how leaven works? Leaven works only in one kind of environment. What kind of environment is it? A lukewarm environment. If you put the dough in a cold place, the leaven will not do anything. If you put it in a hot place, nothing will happen either. You have to give the leaven the lukewarm condition that it needs to raise the dough. In that sense, the church cannot be the leaven. The church must be either hot or cold, as Jesus says in Revelation 3:16 (*...because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth*).

What is the leaven of the Sadducees? We read from Luke 20:27 that it is unbelief. *Then some of the Sadducees, who deny that there is a resurrection, came to Him...* The Sadducees only accepted the Pentateuch. They did not believe in the resurrection or in the miracles, or in the life after death. Unbelief can also affect the church. Some Christians may struggle with doubts about their faith. They have many questions which they don’t find answers. They are easily shaken with every wind of doctrine. And slowly by slowly, their faith is eroded by unbelief.

Finally, Jesus warns us about another kind of leaven in Mark 8:15. *Beware of ...the leaven of Herod*. ‘The leaven of Herod.’ What is it? ‘That fox,’ Jesus called Herod in Luke 13:32. This has reference to the subtle diplomacy and cunning political management of a difficult Roman region, which enabled Herod to keep his puppet position and royal power for many years. Now, in order to have peace, he had to be an opportunist. He was willing to be nice with everybody so long as you leave him to be king of his little empire. It is possible to be spiritually opportunistic by having one foot in the kingdom of God and the other foot in the world. These people behave as though they can have the best of both. So long as they can continue to do their own will, they don’t mind getting baptized. Eventually they become worldly Christians.

So Jesus, by His use of the word leaven in these three instances, is warning His disciples of the danger of allowing their thinking to be assimilated to that of the world around them, the world of the Pharisees, Sadducees and Herodians. And if we are to judge from the use of the word leaven in the rest of the Scriptures – an unseen pervasive evil influence – we have to interpret the parable of the leaven as a picture of the spreading of evil within the church.