

# The Leaven

Luke 13:20-21; Matthew 13:33

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## Introduction

- This parable is the shortest of all the parables of Matthew thirteen.
- The parable of the leaven is perhaps the most misunderstood/controversial parable in Matthew 13 if not, the entire Bible.

## The Ancient Bread Making Process:

- Unlike today, the ancients had to resort to a natural leavening process due to not having access to *instant yeast* or *self-rising flour* etc.
- For them to make their bread (sourdough) they would need three basic ingredients (water, flour, salt) but much more time.
- They would have to make *starter dough* i.e. *leaven* by mixing water and flour and allowing it to sit out for about 5 days to gather bacterial microorganisms to formulate a yeasty substance.
- This would form *leaven* which could be either *dried* (reactivated with water for later use), or *kept active* (by adding more flour and water each day to “feed” the bacteria.
- Once the *leaven* was prepared they would take a small amount of leaven and mix it through the dough and set it aside for hours to allow the leaven to spread throughout the entire lump of dough. The leavening of the new lump could take anywhere from between 5-25 hours depending on the bakers desires. The longer you leave it the more gluten breaks down.
- “When a Jewish mother’s daughter was getting married, the mother would give her gifts. And one of the gifts that a mother gave a Jewish girl was a little piece of leaven from the last dough made before the wedding. And the girl was to start her first loaf in her new marriage with that starter from her mother.”

**\*\*Note:** This is one of the main reasons for the use of unleavened bread in the Scripture as it was easier to produce and make during unexpected times of hospitality, or even sacrifices (meal offering) cf. Gen. 19:3 – Lot served the two angels “unleavened bread.”

# 1. The Key Characters/Symbols

## a. The Leaven

- i. Leaven according to *Webster's Dictionary*: 1. A mass of sour dough, which, mixed with a larger quantity of dough or paste, produces fermentation in it and renders it light. 2. Any thing which makes a general change in the mass. It generally means something which corrupts or depraves that with which it is mixed.
- ii. According to *Strong's* it means *to ferment* and it comes from a root word meaning *to boil* with the idea of bubbling which is exactly what happens to the *leaven* as it is being prepared for use.
- iii. According to *Oxfords* it means: a substance, typically yeast that is used in dough to make it rise. 2. A pervasive influence that modifies something or transforms it for the better.
- iv. Symbolically it is used in Scripture to refer to the *influence or permeation* of error.
  1. Israelites were told to put leaven out of their houses to prepare for the Passover, Ex. 12:15
  2. Most sacrifices were not to contain leaven, Lev. 2:11
  3. False doctrines likened unto leaven, Matt. 16:6; Gal. 5:9
  4. Sin is likened unto leaven, 1 Cor. 5:6.
- v. The *significance* of leaven is that it only takes a small amount to affect and permeate the whole. Leaven is a powerful substance that continues to spread until the entire lump of dough is infected with its presence.

## b. The Measures of Meal

- i. The Bible makes mention of *three measures* of meal. A measure is the word *saton* which corresponds to the same Hebrew word *seh-aw* (Gen. 18:6) and is equivalent to about 13 kg.
- ii. Therefore *three measures* of meal is equivalent to 39kg of flour. This would make enough bread to feed over 100 people.
- iii. The *significance* here is that the amount of meal is *large* especially in comparison to the leaven. This is not in reference to something small in scale. The contrast between the leaven and the meal is vast.

## c. The Woman

- i. This woman is either a *baker* preparing bread for the market. Or a *mother* or *servant* who is preparing a weeks' worth of bread for a very large household (including servants). Or most likely a preparation for a large special celebration of some sort, e.g. wedding, feast, etc.

- ii. So who's the woman?
  - 1. She's a woman who bakes. It has no significance to the parable. The purpose of the parable is the central main truth of the permeating and impact of the kingdom upon the world.
  - 2. In Luke 15 – Who's the Shepherd that finds the lost sheep and rejoices? Who's the Father that embraces the lost son with joy? Who is the woman that finds the lost coin and rejoices?

## 2. The Interpretations

### a. The Infestation of Corruption in the Kingdom

- i. This parable shows the internal doctrinal corruption of the kingdom. The leaven is *evil* and consistently in Scriptures refers to something that is bad evil and corrupt.
  - 1. Herbert Lockyer: "Leaven is uniformly symbolic of that which disintegrates, breaks up, corrupts, as the following biblical usage proves."
- ii. Considering all the parables have *mixture* of good and evil therefore here we see also the corruption of the kingdom.
- iii. The parable is to be taken as a whole not looking at the kingdom of heaven as *leaven* but as *leaven which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal*. Therefore the *whole verse* is descriptive of the kingdom of heaven.
- iv. The description is that the kingdom of heaven will be filled with the leaven of corruption inserted by this woman.
- v. The woman refers to the *apostate church of Rome* as women are characterized as *Kingdoms, Cities and Churches* which are all representative of the *apostate church of Rome*.
  - 1. In addition, Jesus rebuked the church at Thyatira for allowing Jezebel the prophetess to seduce his servants.
- vi. The future of the mystery form of the kingdom is characterized by *corruption* and *apostasy* and therefore the leaven cannot refer to good.
- vii. The meal refers to the *gospel* or *church* or *kingdom* which is filled with spreading corruption and false doctrine.
- viii. We believe that in this parable the meal represents the food of God's people as it is found in the Bible. The leaven is evil doctrine. The woman is a false prophetess who teaches and beguiles (Rev\_2:20). Is it not significant that women have been the founders of several false cults? Forbidden by the Bible to teach in the church (1Co\_14:34; 1Ti\_2:12), some have defiantly

taken the place of doctrinal authorities and have adulterated the food of God's people with destructive heresies. William MacDonald

1. John Phillips, J. Vernon McGee, Warren Wiersbe and Herbert Lockyer would all agree with the above interpretation.

#### **b. The Impact of the Kingdom**

- i. The kingdom of heaven is likened unto *leaven* that has a permeating spreading influence and impact upon the world gradually and ultimately leavening the whole of the earth.
- ii. The disciples of Jesus and Jews expected the kingdom to come in mighty power. The Jews believed that Messiah would come in great power to set up His kingdom and overthrow their enemy oppression.
- iii. They expected an *outward* display of greatness and power which would break the bands of their Roman oppression and set them free under the rule of their promised King!
- iv. Yet when Jesus came unto his own (John 1:11-12) they received Him not. He didn't meet their "criteria."
- v. Jesus begins to teach his disciples of a mystery form of the kingdom. Due to the rejection of the Jews (Matt. 12), Jesus now reveals to his disciples and those with Him of this form of the kingdom they did not expect.
- vi. It is not going begin with an *outward* display of power, but rather an *inward* pervasive, permeating power that will, in the end, pervade the world.
- vii. The Kingdom was going to be exactly like leaven that takes a hidden place within the dough but ultimately dominates and permeates the entire lump.

Note: Jesus is not teaching postmillennialism. Postmillennialism teaches that the vast majority of people will be saved in the church age. The gospel will have increasing success and will produce a world of peace, righteousness, and prosperity before the return of Christ. This is contrary to Bible prophesy.

### **3. The Explanation**

#### **a. Can Leaven be Good?**

- i. Although it is true that leaven has a negative typology attached to it there are several things that need to be considered.
  1. It has a primary meaning of *permeation* not evil.
  2. Not every type can always be perfectly applied to every verse of Scripture.
    - a. Serpent – Good or bad? The serpent beguiled eve. Yet we are called to be *wise as serpents*. Christ is likened unto the *brazen serpent*.

- b. Lion – good or bad? Satan is a roaring lion, yet so is Christ the Lion of the tribe of Judah.
  - c. Goats – good or bad? The goats are the false brethren, yet they were a wonderful type of Christ’s sacrifice as our “scape goat.”
3. Note the following verses concerning leaven:
- a. *Besides the cakes, he shall offer for his offering leavened bread with the sacrifice of thanksgiving of his peace offerings.* Leviticus 7:13
  - b. *Ye shall bring out of your habitations two wave loaves of two tenth deals: they shall be of fine flour; they shall be baked with leaven; they are the firstfruits unto the LORD.* Leviticus 23:17
    - i. The question is not whether leaven is good, but does it always have to be evil? Leaven has two key meanings *permeation* and in typology *evil*.

**b. What does the verse say?**

- i. *Another parable spake he unto them; **The kingdom of heaven is like unto leaven**, which a woman took, and hid in three measures of meal, till the whole was leavened.* Matthew 13:33
- ii. *And again he said, **Whereunto shall I liken the kingdom of God? It is like leaven**, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal, till the whole was leavened.* Luke 13:20-21
  - 1. What is the kingdom of heaven similar to? (a) Leaven (b) a woman (c) three measures of meal?
  - 2. What is more authoritative: the words of Scripture or making sure all our typology is 100% consistent?
- iii. In the first interpretation you have a verse that reads: *“The kingdom of heaven is like unto three measures of meal which an evil seducing woman corrupted by hiding within it leaven.”*
  - 1. Bible interpreters have a blind spot of *fear* (labels of postmillennial) and also a *mental stubbornness*.

**c. How is it possible to have the permeating of the Kingdom amidst apostasy?**

- i. Jesus is teaching his disciples of the *way* of the kingdom not the *character* of the kingdom. Not every parable in Matt. 13 contains mixture:
  - 1. Parable of the Soils – Mixture – Subjects of the Kingdom
  - 2. Parable of Tares – Mixture – Subjects of the Kingdom
  - 3. Mustard Seed – No Mixture – Growth of the Kingdom
  - 4. Leaven – No Mixture – Growth of the Kingdom
  - 5. Hidden Treasure – No Mixture – The Value of the Kingdom

- 6. Pearl of Great Price – No Mixture – The Value of the Kingdom
- 7. The Drag Net – Mixture – The Subjects of the Kingdom
- 8. New and Old Treasures – No Mixture – The Teaching of the Kingdom
- ii. It doesn't start big, it starts small. It is literally hidden in a massive amount of flour. Just like those 120 disciples in the upper room, hidden from the vastness of the world.
- iii. Most people in the world today have heard about Jesus, the uttermost parts of the earth are being *re-evangelized* by Christians. Our battle as true believers has not necessarily been against *paganism* as much as it has been against *apostate* Christendom.
- iv. There has not been a time in history like today where there has been the most widespread knowledge of God in the world. True knowledge, most likely not, but the Kingdom as a whole has had a growing impact on the world.
- v. **What about this verse?** *I tell you that he will avenge them speedily. Nevertheless when the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?*  
Luke 18:8.
  - 1. The context is the faith of a persistent widow, a very serious faith not just a "saving faith." He would struggle to find her kind of faith.
  - 2. Surely when Jesus comes He will find "saving faith" upon the earth. The nation of Israel will be converted at His coming; there will be a separation of the sheep and goats. Surely, the sheep have faith! He will gather his elect from the four wings of the earth, do not they have faith?
  - 3. Doesn't Matthew 24:14 say: "*And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come.*"
- vi. The kingdom of heaven's mystery form started during the earthly ministry of Jesus (before the church) and will continue all the way through until the Second Advent (after the rapture of the church). It will continue to have spreading impact upon the world until its fruition at the beginning of the physical aspect of Christ's Millennial kingdom.
  - 1. *For the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea.* Habakkuk 2:14
  - 2. *All the ends of the world shall remember and turn unto the LORD: and all the kindreds of the nations shall worship before thee. For the kingdom is the LORD'S: and he is the governor among the nations.* Psalms 22:27-28

3. *He shall have dominion also from sea to sea, and from the river unto the ends of the earth. They that dwell in the wilderness shall bow before him; and his enemies shall lick the dust. The kings of Tarshish and of the isles shall bring presents: the kings of Sheba and Seba shall offer gifts. Yea, all kings shall fall down before him: all nations shall serve him. Psalms 72:8-11*
4. *Who shall not fear thee, O Lord, and glorify thy name? for thou only art holy: for all nations shall come and worship before thee; for thy judgments are made manifest. Revelation 15:4*
5. *The word that Isaiah the son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. And it shall come to pass in the last days, that the mountain of the LORD'S house shall be established in the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow unto it. And many people shall go and say, Come ye, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; and he will teach us of his ways, and we will walk in his paths: for out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. And he shall judge among the nations, and shall rebuke many people: and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. O house of Jacob, come ye, and let us walk in the light of the LORD. Isaiah 2:1-5*

## Conclusion:

The Kingdom of Heaven is like leaven which although it has hidden, and small beginnings it has a permeating force which cannot be stopped and will ultimately fill the earth. This parable is not teaching us of the *character* of the subjects of the kingdom, but rather is teaching us of the *spread* of the kingdom in the world.

## Memory Verse:

*Another parable spake he unto them; The kingdom of heaven is like unto leaven, which a woman took, and hid in three measures of meal, till the whole was leavened. Matthew 13:33*

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