

The Parable of Leaven

Matthew 13:33

As we continue to study the parables of Jesus within this chapter, we come to the fourth parable He taught the multitude. Following this parable, Jesus will send the multitude away, and the remaining parables will be discussed privately with the disciples.

This parable consists of one simple statement that reveals eternal truth. While the statement Jesus makes is easy enough to understand on the surface, it has generated much debate and controversy throughout the years. Unfortunately, Jesus does not define this parable as He did some of the others. As we move through His words, I will share my interpretation of the text, and also give you what others think. Consulting the various commentaries I have, I discovered them to be evenly divided on the interpretation of this passage. Let's examine the [facts](#) Jesus discloses as we consider: [The Parable of the Leaven](#).

I. The Picture in the Leaven – [Another parable spake he unto them; The kingdom of heaven is like unto leaven...](#)The opening phrase in this parable has generated all the controversy surrounding it. Jesus makes a comparison to the kingdom of heaven with leaven. One cannot deny that leaven is often spoken of in a negative sense in Scripture. Jesus warned the disciples to beware the leaven of the Pharisees, Sadducees, and of Herod, referring to the hypocrisy and deceit in their lives. Paul used leaven as an example to warn of the dangers of legalism in Galatians 5:9. When you study the Passover and exodus from Egypt, the Israelites were to bake bread free of leaven. The meal offering brought before the Lord was to be free of leaven.

- One must never forget, however, context is always key. What comparison did Jesus make in the text? He is not comparing the arrogant, defiant actions of men. He compares the kingdom of heaven with leaven in the text. He is speaking of those who are saved by His good grace; those who will spend eternity with Him in heaven. Granted Jesus is referring to the church age, and we see much sinfulness and corruption in our world and even in the church, but I cannot fathom that Jesus would compare His kingdom to that which is sinful and corrupt. Leaven is often spoken of in a negative manner because of the permeating effect it has. Beware allowing the hypocrisy of the Pharisees to permeate your lives. Beware legalism so that it doesn't consume you. Beware the leaven of Egypt, a picture of the world, so that your lives are not consumed with the cares of this world. [Mat.16:11-12 – How is it that ye do not understand that I spake it not to you concerning bread, that ye should beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees?](#) ^[12] [Then understood they how that he bade them not beware of the leaven of bread, but of the doctrine of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees.](#) In that particular passage, the disciples understood that Jesus was not referring to leaven in their bread, but the sinful practices of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

- I am convinced one errs in interpretation to assume the leaven here is spoken of as corrupt and evil. Parables are earthly stories with heavenly meanings. Jesus used examples of everyday life to illustrate eternal truth. Leaven was widely used among the Jews in that day during their everyday preparation of meals. *The ancient rabbis often referred to leaven in a favorable way. One of them wrote, "Great is peace, in that peace is to the earth as leaven is to the dough." When a Jewish girl was married, her mother would give her a small piece of leavened dough from a batch baked just before the wedding. From that gift of leaven the bride would bake bread for her own household throughout her married life. That gift, simple as it was, was among the most cherished that the bride received, because it represented the love and blessedness of the household in which she grew up and that would be carried into the household she was about to establish.*¹

II. The Possession of the Leaven – 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... Here we discover a simple, yet profound truth. The woman referred to in the text, possessed leaven and she hid that leaven in the meal. She could never have placed the leaven in the meal if she did not possess it. In order for the meal to be leavened, she had to possess the leaven to place within the meal.

- This is a simple truth that we need to understand and embrace. In order for leaven to be shared, one must possess leaven to share. In order for the Gospel to be shared one must possess the Gospel themselves. If you are saved you possess the Gospel of Christ. You have been confronted with its truth, responding by faith, and receiving salvation. You have the Spirit within. The saved, the church, has what this world desperately needs and it is up to us to share what we have been given of Christ.

- We know nothing else of this woman other than the fact that she possessed leaven and placed it in the meal. She did not keep what she possessed and call for another to share of their possession. She took what she had and placed it within the meal. If you are saved, you have the possession and obligation to share. Granted there are millions of believers in the world, but we must all do our part. We cannot keep the Gospel hidden within our homes and lives and expect the kingdom of God to grow. We share the responsibility to give of our possession for the benefit of others who are yet unsaved.

III. The Placement of the Leaven – The kingdom of heaven is like unto leaven, which a woman took, and hid in three measures of meal... She took the leaven she possessed and hid it in the meal. This required conscious action on her part. She knew the effect the leaven would have on the meal; she possessed the leaven within the house, and she put the leaven in the bread. She knew the leaven would not have an effect upon the bread until it was placed within the meal.

- It is interesting to note that she hid the leaven in the meal. No one else may have known that she placed the leaven within the bread, but it would soon be evident for all to see. While others may not have witnessed the action, the leaven would have a transforming effect on the bread. It would no longer be the same as before. Once the leaven was placed within the bread, it could not be removed.
- Jesus knew the opposition and difficulty that lay ahead for the disciples and those of the early church. He knew they would face persecution for their faith. Many would be forced to worship and share their faith privately, but the church would grow and prosper according to the Lord's plan and desire. We enjoy freedom to worship in America, but all do not. However, even in some of the most repressed regions of the world, the Gospel is being shared, people are being saved, and the church is flourishing. Those in authority may not be aware, but the kingdom continues to grow as the Gospel of Christ is shared and people are saved. We have the good news of the glorious Gospel; let's do all we can to place the Gospel in the hearts of those who have yet to hear and respond. We have the power and provision of the Lord working on our behalf. The world is dark and sinful, but the church continues to grow!

IV. The Permeation of the Leaven – 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.

Once the woman introduced leaven to the meal, it began to work and spread. Leaven would very soon permeate the entire loaf. It was impossible to create a loaf of bread where only a portion of the loaf was leavened. The leaven would soon transform the entire loaf, leaving no part untouched or unchanged.

- Isn't that how the Gospel works in our hearts? Once it is introduced, hidden deep within the heart, it brings total transformation. We are no longer the same, taking on an entirely different nature, completely transformed. Like leaven, it is impossible to remove once it is hidden within our hearts. John 1:12 – But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name. 2 Cor.5:17 – Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.
- Jesus spoke of the whole being leavened. This has resulted in debate as well, but it seems perfectly clear to me. We know that all are born in sin. Due to the fall of Adam, all are born with a sin nature, separated from God. The world lies under the curse of sin. Until one is saved by grace, sin dominates their lives. All stand in need of salvation. Sin does not have the power to eradicate the Gospel, but the Gospel will transform lives through salvation, eradicating the power and penalty of sin. To view the leaven as corrupt, based solely on a few references, ignores the entire message of sinfulness in man, redemption, reconciliation, and salvation in Scripture.

- Now, Jesus does not imply that all will be saved. We live in a world inhabited by those who remain in sin and those who are saved by grace. Due to the fallen nature of humanity, the world lies in darkness until Light is introduced. I am convinced Jesus is referring to the power of the Gospel, being taken to every corner of the earth. All will not receive the message of the Gospel, but the Lord has ordained that the message of the Gospel will permeate even the darkest corners of the world.

Conclusion: This passage brings great comfort to me, as well as, a deep sense of responsibility. I have been saved by grace, transformed by the power of Christ. I am secure in Him. I also sense the responsibility to share the Gospel I have received. We are the hands, feet, and voice of Jesus. The world lies in darkness, desperately needing the Gospel. We have this treasure. Are we willing to share what we possess with others who are in need?

Do you know Christ as your Savior? One has to do nothing to be lost and condemned before God. We are all born in that state. However, in order to be forgiven of sin, reconciled to God, and receive eternal life, one must be saved. If the Lord has dealt with you, revealing your need for salvation, respond to Him by faith!

ⁱ MacArthur New Testament Commentary, The - MacArthur New Testament Commentary – Matthew 8-15.