

MATTHEW 13 – PART E

Last week we looked at the Parable of the Mustard Seed, and this morning we want to look at the next parable in these seven parables – that of the Parable of the Leaven. Both of these parables are linked to one another in their goal or theme because they are speaking of the influence of the kingdom of God **in the world**. Each one has a small beginning, but eventually has a much greater impact than its beginning.

At the beginning of the ministry of Christ there was this great anticipation that the kingdom of God had actually arrived in all of its glory and in what some of the Jews thought would be its world-wide influence and domination. That is what they wanted and were expecting, and at first, it seemed that Jesus may have been their ticket to the big show. You can just imagine what they began to think when they saw Jesus perform all of His miracles. However, we know the story and how things did not quite work out the way that they had envisioned. In the end, there was no king sitting on the throne and no kingdom established over the earth. They were still in bondage to the Roman Empire and eventually lost Jerusalem to them when it was destroyed in 70AD. In the Jewish mind, Christ never accomplished what they expected a king to do, and so they rejected Him. It was not that He had failed to demonstrate His power – not at all. He had performed miracle after miracle. Everywhere that He went people were cured of all types of diseases. He had demonstrated great power over nature, over disease, sickness, and over death as well. His credentials were undeniable, but, honestly, He just did not fit their idea of the coming King. Even when they took Him to Pilate, Pilate had no clue as to why He was really there. He was just there because the Jewish leaders hated Him and did not think that He was really qualified to be their earthly king. Notice what Jesus told Pilate in [John 18:36](#),

Jn 18:36 (NKJV) Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now My kingdom is not from here."

Neither Pilate nor the Jews had any idea of what Jesus was talking about – a kingdom in another world! What in the world was that? [Luke 17:20-21](#) goes on to say,

Lk 17:20 (NKJV) Now when He was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, He answered them and said, "The kingdom of God does not come with observation; ²¹ nor will they say, 'See here!' or 'See there!' For indeed, the kingdom of God is within you."

They are totally confused and this is probably what they were thinking – “*You cannot observe your kingdom? How dumb is that? Obviously, you must not be a king, or you would clearly understand what a kingdom really was.*” In reality, they were the ones who did not understand what a spiritual kingdom was because the kingdom of God at that time was not something that you could just readily discern and not something that you could physically see. It had no buildings and no armies. [Romans 14:17](#) says this about the kingdom of God,

Ro 14:17 (NKJV) for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

It simply is not an outward thing – well, at least not NOW! So, you can just imagine how the disciples must have felt. They were probably walking around scratching their heads and saying, “*Well, it appears that we have a king, but where in the world is the kingdom?*” I guess that that question is why we are

even in [Matthew 13](#) – right? The kingdom of God simply was not what they imagined it to be, and the king was not going to rule like they expected Him to rule, and people would not become subject to the kingdom in the way they anticipated they would. There were still wars, the people were not beating their plowshares or spears into pruning hooks, and the Romans were still in power. Pilate was totally confused why Jesus was even standing before him, and then Jesus actually told Pilate that He was a king. John 18:37 says,

Jn 18:37 (NIV) "You are a king, then!" said Pilate. Jesus answered, "You are right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me."

Now, everyone is confused because Jesus certainly does not look like a king. No wonder Jesus called His kingdom a “**mystery**”. In fact, that is why we even have these parables.

So, here in these two parables, Jesus is talking about the tremendous power of God’s kingdom to grow beyond its humble beginning. There is Satan, the world, the tares, false teachers, false prophets, and evil everywhere – and yet the kingdom of heaven will grow, and even in the face of intense opposition and persecution. From the smallest seed it grows to the biggest shrub, and from a tiny piece of leaven, it permeates and saturates a large mass of dough. The leaven permeates everything, and it begins to have an influence on everything in which it is placed. Christianity started very small, but it has had a worldwide influence and has influenced and impacted the entire world, and not just spiritually. On the surface and at first glance, the first two parables may not have seemed to have been all that encouraging – the parable of the soils and that of the wheat and the tares. The Word of God would be sown and the birds would come eat the seeds on the wayside, some would fall on rocky soil and not grow, and some would fall among the thorns and get choked out. There will be people who reject the kingdom and there will be some who receive the kingdom. Then, the disciples were told to let the tares grow alongside the wheat until the final judgment – good and evil side by side. None of that sounds too encouraging from the disciple’s perspective.

However, when we come to these two parables about the mustard seed and the leaven, it is obvious that the kingdom of God was going to have a great influence in the world. So, in our second of these two parables, [Matthew 13:33](#) says this,

Mt 13:33 (NKJV) 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."

Now, once again, the elements of this parable are something that every Jew would clearly have understood. This was something that they used and witnessed every day. We do not, but they did. The women of a household were making bread every day. It was a staple in their diet and what they could eat. The woman would take a new batch of dough and get it all ready by kneading it, and then she would take a very small piece of fermented dough from another batch and put it into the new loaf and watch it cause the new loaf to ferment and rise. Now, we need to appreciate that the leaven itself is a very small piece, very small, and Jesus says here that it is “**hidden**” in “**three measures of meal**” which is anywhere from 6 to 8 ½ gallons and weighs approximately 50 pounds. The leaven had to be placed into something else in order to exercise an effect, but once it is placed there, it begins to permeate all of the dough. That is a lot of bread to be fermented and impacted by just a tiny piece of leaven.

However, it appears that the point in this parable is the tremendous effect that just a little bit of leaven has on the whole lump of dough. Now, if you have ever had unleavened bread, you know that it does not really taste that good. It is flat, compact, and not very appetizing at all. It is not something that you would want to eat every meal, but when the leaven is placed into the unleavened dough, it causes it to be much better. It rises and becomes much tastier – what we call bread.

So, what are the spiritual lessons in all of this? Well, it is really very simple. This is a one sentence parable. The lesson is that **the power of the kingdom of God to influence is very great**. Just insert a little bit of the leaven into the very large batch of dough, and the whole batch is eventually changed. The leaven represents the tremendous influence of Christ, His kingdom, His gospel, and His subjects in the world. There is evil all around us. It is everywhere. There is greed and corruption. There are drugs and immorality and ungodliness at every turn. There is hatred and wars. Evil simply abounds. Yet in the midst of all of that is the kingdom of God, and the power that it has to influence the world is very great.

I have to at least mention at this point that there are many who take the exact opposite view of what I have told you. They say that the leaven represents evil permeating itself within the kingdom and that the woman in the parable represents the work of a false religious system (and sometimes even referred to as the Roman Catholic Church). Those that hold this view say that leaven always symbolizes evil in the Bible, and that the parable teaches the apostasy of the church. For instance, Dwight Pentecost, an absolutely wonderful Bible expositor and especially of End Time events, unfortunately taught this,

The progress of the age is marked, according to this parable, by (1) the ministry of the woman. This evidently refers to the work of a false religious system (Rev. 2:20, 17:1-8). There will be the rise of false religious systems which claim to be the kingdom. (2) The age is marked by the introduction of the leaven. This figure is used in Scripture to portray that which is evil in character (he lists references). This corruption is introduced into the meal. Meal was used in the Old Testament (Leviticus 2:1-3) in connection with the sweet savour offerings and was typical of the person of Christ. This parable would reveal that there will rise a religious system that will introduce a corrupting element into the doctrines of the person of Christ.

He further states that...

The mustard seed refers to the perversion of God's purpose in this age, while the leaven refers to a corruption of the divine agency, the Word, through which this purpose is realized.

Now, I cannot argue that those things have not happened – for they certainly have. There are false religious systems and false doctrines related to Christ at every turn. In fact, we can accurately say that the most vicious of all false doctrines generally relate to the person of Christ. That is probably the ultimate goal of all false doctrine – to undermine both the person and the work of Christ. If He is less than what the Bible states, then our faith has no foundation and we are of all men to be the most pitied.

However, we need to carefully examine the assumption that is made by those who hold this position. Their assumption is that leaven is always represented as something that is evil. For instance, they would quote [Luke 12:1](#) which says,

Lk 12:1 (NKJV) **In the meantime, when an innumerable multitude of people had gathered together, so that they trampled one another, He began to say to His disciples first of all, "Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy."**

The leaven here is not so much the hypocrisy itself as the **influence** that it has. Because of the nature of leaven, it is only an analogy that is good when applied to its permeating influence. I.e., that is what leaven does – it permeates something else. So the point of using the leaven to describe the hypocrisy of the Pharisees was that the hypocrisy of the Pharisees effects them the way leaven effects bread, it permeates everything they do. These men were the absolute epitomy of hypocrisy. Everything they did was evil, ungodly, and superficial. They cared about no one but themselves. This picture is simply an analogy, and hermeneutically you never take an analogy and give it an absolute theological meaning. An analogy is simply an illustration.

So here leaven is not an illustration of sin, it is an illustration of that which permeates and influences the whole. The point in all of this is simple – leaven is not something evil, but something that has a permeating influence, and that influence can be either good or bad. It can go either way. Theologically, we cannot just take a term like leaven and give it some absolute theological meaning that it always refers to sin and to evil. It is not really a major theological term like justification, sanctification, redemption, election, calling, or salvation. The simple meaning of the word “**leaven**” is that it is something that permeates something else – that is all that the word means. In [1 Corinthians 5:6](#), Paul says this to the Corinthians,

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

Once again, if you follow that closely, the impact of the word “**leaven**” is not that it is evil, but that it permeates the whole lump. They were actually glorying, almost boasting, in their wickedness. He said in [v2](#) that they were puffed up about it and had not even mourned about what was going on in their midst. So Paul actually rebukes them for this and simply says that if they continue that their glorying in sin will permeate to everyone else - and we know that to be very true and accurate. The New Testament says it this way in [1 Corinthians 15:33](#),

1Co 15:33 (NKJV) **Do not be deceived: "Evil company corrupts good habits."**

In [v7](#), here's how he uses the analogy.

1Co 5:7 (NKJV) **Therefore purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, since you truly are unleavened. For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us.**

So, what is he talking about? It is simple. He is saying “*You are a Christian now, you are a new lump of dough. So, do not put into that new lump the “old leaven”.* Where did the “**old leaven**” come from? It comes from an old loaf, right? So, when you were baking bread in the past, you took off a piece, put it aside and let it ferment and then you stick it in the new batch of dough. Do you see what Paul is saying? He is saying that you are a new creature in Christ, you are a “**new lump**”. I.e., you are the one who now has the good leaven to permeate other batches of dough. Purge out the old leaven. Do not bring any of the “old stuff” or the “sins” from your former life into your new life to allow it to influence that new life. It is a good thing that he is saying. The new bread, the good bread that Paul is talking

about here still needs new leaven, good leaven – right? “**Purge out the old leaven**” that would overly influence you to do that which is not honoring to Christ. That is what Paul is saying. It is an issue of continuity. You start with a new loaf and you have what the ladies who make bread call a “starter loaf”. If you have a bad starter loaf, then all of the other loaves will be bad.

Then Paul talks about the first Passover in Egypt and unleavened bread? Why does he do that? Well, when they left Egypt they had to do so in haste. The death angel came, it killed all of the first born in Egypt who did not have the blood over the doorposts of the house. The people of Egypt wanted them out so bad that they began to give them things just to leave. God said that while you are leaving, do not make leavened bread. Why would he say that? Well, it is symbolism for them leaving their old life and starting their new life. If they made leavened bread before they left and took it with them, then where would the little lump of leaven have come from? It would have come from Egypt – and God wanted them to leave Egypt behind.

In the same way, when we were saved, [2 Corinthians 5:17](#) says that God made us to be “**a new creation**”,

2Co 5:17 (NKJV) Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.

The point is that we became a new creation in Christ that we were to leave our old life behind. So, when they took the Passover, they used unleavened bread to remind them that they were leaving behind their former manner of life and were starting over. That is exactly what happens at salvation for every believer – we are to leave our old life behind and begin a new life in Christ. The Israelites were now disconnected from Egypt – and the unleavened bread symbolized that fact. In [Leviticus 23:17](#), God told them that when they got to the feast of Pentecost that they were to offer leavened bread.

Lev 23:17 (NKJV) You shall bring from your dwellings two wave loaves of two-tenths of an ephah. They shall be of fine flour; they shall be baked with leaven. They are the firstfruits to the LORD.

Once again, here is an incident where leaven does not mean evil. In this case, it is a very good thing.

At this point, it is important to understand how these parables are actually given to us. The first two parables deal with the evil in the world. In the parable of the soils, in three of the four times that the gospel is sown, it is snatched away by other things. In the parable of the wheat and tares, the tares are sown by the enemy and are left with the wheat until the end of the age. In the field (which is the world), there will be a side-by-side development of that which is good with that which is evil. The good seed will be sown and the false seed will be sown, and there will always be this consistent conflict between good and evil. That is one strong reason why I personally do not agree with post-millennialism which states that the church will usher in the kingdom of God and it will all get better and better. In my mind personally, that is not a sustainable theological position – even though it is very prevalent. In the first two parables, we were dealing with the evil in the world, but in the next two we are dealing with the power of the kingdom to overcome that evil. So, if you take the position that the leaven is something evil, then the power of the kingdom to overcome evil does not come into play. This is important simply because when we interpret this parable, we want to interpret it with the hermeneutical consistency that

our Lord uses as He unfolds the parables. Having said that, it seems evident that we have to take the parable of the mustard seed and the parable of the leaven together.

So, interpreting the leaven as being evil does not really seem to fit here. Secondly, [v33](#) says that, “**The kingdom of heaven is like leaven...**” I.e., the leaven is referring directly to the kingdom of heaven, and so the influence of the leaven is what makes the batch of dough better. Once it is introduced into the loaf, the leaven is what actually makes it to be bread as we know it. As we saw in the last parable, all of the social advances, all of the legal systems, all of education and great art and great music reflects the influence of Christianity. All of the caring and benevolent societies, all of those things that help the poor and give aide to those that are down-trodden and depressed comes out of the Spirit of Christ through the hearts of His people who are leaven in the world, who are influencing those around them. If you do not believe this, then just go to countries that have never known the touch of Christianity and see how they treat people. They treat them like dirt, like filth. The world has been leavened and influenced dramatically, in an incredible way by the Spirit of God working through believers.