

## The Parable of the Leaven

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This parable and the Parable of the Mustard Seed are a pair. They tell much the same story, but with somewhat different emphases. Understanding the Parable of the Leaven is very straightforward. In fact, it is so straightforward that it is amazing that most commentators give a wrong interpretation for it. In the Parable of the Mustard Seed (<http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/par4mustard.htm>), Jesus taught that the small, powerful, and simple faith that He planted would grow into a large and corrupt institution. The Parable of the Leaven focuses on the corruption.

### The Parable of the Leaven

The Parable of the Leaven appears in Matthew and Luke. I will here quote them side-by-side.

<i>Matthew 13:33</i>	<i>Luke 13:20-21</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.	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.

### Symbols and Explanation

As with several other parables, Jesus does not directly explain the meaning of this parable. Nevertheless, its meaning should be straightforward when we understand from the Bible how the symbols have been used elsewhere.

*I. The Leaven:* This should be one of the easiest symbols in the Bible to understand. Leaven is referred to in both the Old and New Testaments, and, when it is used typologically, it always, without

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par4leaven.pdf

exception, is a symbol of corruption and its permeating and infecting nature. In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word *sē'ōr* is four times translated as "leaven" and once as "leavened bread." It refers to fermentation. Words related to this word are translated by such words as "residue" and "remnant." The evolution of the word is probably that it was discovered that leftover dough fermented. The Hebrew word *châmêts* is translated "leaven," "leavened," and "leavened bread." It means that which is leavened or fermented. Words related to this word are translated by such words as "violence," "cruelty," and "vinegar." The common ground is sourness and corruption. "Unleavened bread" in the Old Testament is translated from the Hebrew word *matstsâh*. Its basic meaning is that which is sucked up or greedily devoured because it is sweet. That is, it refers to that which has not been soured. This gives us an idea of what leavened bread was like before the invention of modern yeast.

There was not always such a thing as a packet or jar of dried yeast or a cube of yeast cake. Through most of history, leavened bread was what we now call sourdough bread. Basically, sourdough is made from a starter of dough or batter, technically called a sponge, that is allowed to ferment. This takes time. When it ferments, it swells and bubbles from the gasses created by the wild yeast and other microbes. Some of this starter is then put into another lump of dough that is again allowed to ferment. This is then baked into a loaf of bread. Unlike bread made from modern yeasts that have been cultivated to have little taste, sourdough bread has a sour taste. This is nice—occasionally. But most people do not want to eat sourdough all of the time. The only alternative anciently was unleavened bread, which is why the word *matstsâh* (or *matzo*, as it is now called) is related to the Hebrew word for "sweet." Compared to sourdough, it was sweet. So, when people wanted a softer, risen bread, they ate sourdough. When they wanted something not sour, they ate unleavened bread, with the tradeoff that it was not soft and puffy. Both were commonly eaten.

It is because sourdough bread was a lump of dough that had become corrupted by fermentation that caused it to swell, bubble, and turn sour that it was considered impure. God used this concept to make leavened bread a symbol of impurity and corruption that can spread from one lump to another. Therefore, God ordered that no leavened bread was to be used with meat offerings, or burnt offerings, because they pictured the sinless, pure, and incorrupt Jesus (Exodus 34:25; Leviticus 2:11). No leaven was to be eaten or even found in the people's homes during the feast of unleavened bread. Briefly, the first Passover was when God had the Israelite families kill lambs, put the

blood on their doorposts, stay indoors and eat the lambs, during which time their firstborn were protected from the death angel. This was a picture of the reality we now have in the New Covenant. The lamb pictured Jesus slain for our sins, and the blood on their doorposts pictured our being under His blood and, thus, protected from God's wrath. The Israelites were to have cleaned leaven out of their houses and to eat only unleavened bread for seven days, picturing our being imputed as pure and sinless in Christ.

Leaven was allowed in some other offerings that were not burnt that did not picture Jesus, such as the two loaves presented at Pentecost (Leviticus 23:16-17). These pictured the first fruits of God's people; that is, the harvest of souls that began in reality on the Pentecost after Jesus' death and resurrection.

In the New Testament, "leaven" as a noun is from the Greek word *zumē*. It refers to that which is fermented. The verb is *zumōō*, and it means to ferment or leaven something. The noun is found at the beginning of this parable and the verb at the end. "Unleavened bread" is from the Greek word *azumos*, which means not fermented or not leavened.

In Matthew 16, we quickly learn that the New Testament's use of the symbol of leaven remains as it was in the Old Testament—corruption. In verse 6, Jesus said, "Take heed and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees." This is explained in verse 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." The Pharisees were legalists and the Sadducees were liberals, but both were teaching corrupt doctrine. In Luke 12:1, there is further explanation, when Jesus says, "Beware ye of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy." Again, we see a form of corruption or sin, hypocrisy, being typified by leaven.

In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul was addressing the blatant, open sin that the Corinthians had been tolerating, even glorying in through their wrongheaded open-mindedness: "Your glorying is not good. Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump?" (verse 6). Here is a picture of the pervasive nature of leaven taken from the fact that a small amount of sourdough starter will infect a pure lump of dough. This is, in fact, very similar to the picture we see in the parable. Paul continues in verse 7: "Purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened. For even Christ our passover is sacrificed for us." This is taken from the picture of the Israelites who

had to clean out the leaven from their houses for the feast of unleavened bread connected to the Passover. Paul says, "ye are unleavened," and this is so because Jesus, by His death as our Passover lamb, has cleansed us from all sin (1 John 1:7). In verse 8, Paul says, "Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, neither with the leaven of malice and wickedness; but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth." The feast Paul refers to is not a keeping of days, but the reality that the shadow of the days of unleavened bread merely pictured. It is the feast of our sinless lives in Christ. Notice that Paul specifically connects leaven with "malice" (*kakia*—badness) and "wickedness" (*ponēria*—worthless or iniquitous deeds). To be unleavened is connected with "sincerity" (*eilikrineia*—clearness or purity) and truth. In Galatians 5:7-9, Paul says, "Ye did run well; who did hinder you that ye should not obey the truth? This persuasion cometh not of him that calleth you. A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump." The Galatians were being influenced away from the truth. Paul warns them by again using the analogy of a little sourdough starter spreading through the whole lump of dough. Again, the leavening is a picture of corrupt doctrine.

Considering that the Bible in both the Old and New Testaments consistently interprets the picture of leaven to be some form of corruption—sin, false doctrine, hypocrisy, malice, wickedness—that easily spreads to infect all, it is astounding that anyone can interpret the leaven as anything good. Yet, flying in the face of sound exegesis, this is exactly what most commentators do. Notice this note from *The NIV Study Bible*: "In the Bible, yeast usually symbolizes that which is evil or unclean.... Here, however, it is a symbol of growth. As yeast permeates a batch of dough, so the kingdom of heaven spreads through a person's life. Or it may signify the growth of the kingdom by the inner working of the Holy Spirit (using God's word)." So, the author acknowledges what leaven usually—more correctly, always—symbolizes and then, with no biblical support, ignores it and makes up an interpretation not supported by the Bible. Again, another commentator says, "Leaven often typifies evil influences, but here the point is the powerful influence of the kingdom of God" (I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: a commentary on the Greek text* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978] 562). What biblical evidence is there for this interpretation? He gives none.

Leaven=corruption and its permeating and infecting nature

*II. The Woman:* The word translated "woman" is *gunē*, which is an ordinary word for "woman" or "wife." In typology, women represent Old Covenant Israel (Galatians 4:25; Revelation 12), God's New Covenant people (Galatians 4:26; Revelation 21), wicked and apostate Israel (Zechariah 5:7-8), and the false religion we saw in the article about the Parable of the Mustard Seed called Babylon the Great (Revelation 17; notice also Revelation 2:20). Considering that what the woman injects into the three measures of meal is corruption, we will eliminate God's New Covenant people from the possibilities of who the woman represents. This leaves Israel and Babylon the Great. When we realize that both Judaizers and the institutional church since Constantine have tried to infect and corrupt the Gospel, perhaps the way to see the woman is as any apostate, false, religious system that is infecting the Gospel.

Woman=false religious system

*III. Hid:* Something most commentators ignore is the fact that the woman hides the leaven in the meal. The word here does not simply mean "put." It is *egkruptō*. It means "to hide in." It's root, *kruptō*, means "to conceal." There is stealth involved here; something underhanded is going on.

Hid=stealthily hides

*IV. Three:* Numbers often have significance in the Bible. Three indicates completeness. Nothing better shows this than the fact that God, complete in Himself, is a Trinity. Here is a tiny random sampling of some other biblical threes. The number of measures of meal for offerings was often three (e.g. Leviticus 14:10). The men of Israel had to appear before God three times a year (Deuteronomy 16:16). Jonah was in the great fish for three days, and Jesus was in the grave for three days. Peter denied Christ three times and three times Jesus asked him if he loved Him (Matthew 26:70, 72, 74; John 21:15-17). Saul was three days without sight (Acts 9:9). God told Peter three times to kill and eat the animals in his dream, and immediately after, three men came to fetch Peter (Acts 10:16, 19). There abides faith, hope, and charity (1 Corinthians 13:13).

I want to mention in passing that the word "measures" in the parable is actually a specific measure. The Greek word is *saton*. This word comes from the Hebrew *s'âh*. This is one-third of an ephah, so these three measures are one ephah. This is the same measure times the same number found Genesis 18:6 for the cakes made for Abraham's

three heavenly visitors. An ephah is more than a bushel, which means that it is more than eight gallons or around 40 liters.

Three=completeness

*V. Meal Becomes Leavened:* The Greek word translated "meal" is *aleuron*. It comes from the word *aleō*, meaning to grind. So, it refers to ground up grain; it can also be translated "flour." Never does grain or ground up grain in the Bible picture the world. Therefore, even though it is the most common interpretation given by commentators, the Bible eliminates the possibility that the meal in this parable pictures the world. What we must see here is not just flour but the fact that it started out unleavened and became leavened—the pure has become impure. Where have we seen something before that started out one thing and became something else? Of course, in the previous parable—the Parable of the Mustard Seed. The Parable of the Leaven is a behind-the-scenes look at how the mustard seed became a tree. It was morphed by being covertly corrupted by a false religious system. The symbols have been changed to fit what we need to see, but we are still looking at the same thing: the corruption of the original faith that transforms it into something else.

The big, visible church we see today is apostate. Why? Because corruption has spread through the entire lump.

Meal becomes leavened=the corruption and morphing of the original faith

### **The Lesson of the Parable of the Leaven**

The Parables of the Mustard Seed and Leaven both show us the change from the pure, original faith to a corrupt and unnatural institution. The Parable of the Leaven gives us a little more detail in showing us that the change occurred because false religion (the woman) injected corrupt doctrine into the faith. Thus, we ought to expect corrupt teaching and corrupt practice in today's church. So warned, we ought to be like the Bereans. When we hear or read something, we ought to search the scriptures to see whether these things are so.

### **Application of the Parable to Our Lives**

What application can we make from this parable?

- 1) We must expect that much that we hear and read in the church is corrupt.
- 2) We ought to be like the Bereans. When we hear or read something, we ought to search the scriptures to see whether these things are so.
- 3) To accomplish the above, we must be firmly grounded in the Word. Every one of us has the responsibility to learn to rightly divide the Word of truth.
- 4) We should not expect to reform the corrupt system. Have you ever tried removing leaven from a lump of dough? It is not possible. But what will happen is that anything touching that lump of sourdough will become infected by it. God's solution is, "Come out of her, my people, that ye be not partakers of her sins, and that ye receive not of her plagues" (Revelation 18:4). Being separate from the institutional church is the way to preserve the faith.

The parable we have just examined explains why, in Luke 18:8, Jesus asks this question: "The Son of Man having come, shall he find the faith upon the earth?" (*Young's Literal Translation*). Notice that, true to the Greek, "faith" has the definite article before it (it is missing in the King James Version). Jesus is asking whether He will find the original faith. The only hope I see to answering "yes" to His question is for those who see the corruption to isolate themselves from it, to consider the infected, institutional church to be in quarantine.

As I did with the last installment, I will close this article with a quote from twentieth century Baptist preacher A. W. Pink in his book, *The Redeemer's Return*:

We turn now to the fourth parable of Matt. 13 - the parable of the Leaven, the leaven which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal till the whole was leavened. This parable is one of the foundation passages of post-millennialists. In it they see clear proof that the Reign of Righteousness, the Golden Age, is to be brought about by the efforts of the Church. The woman, we are told, symbolizes the Church, the three measures of meal the human race, and the leaven the Gospel, which, working silently but surely shall yet permeate the whole of humanity and influence all men Godward and heavenward. But the assumption that the leaven here signifies the influence and power of the Gospel will not stand the test of

the Scriptures, for in the Word of God "leaven" is uniformly employed as a figure of that which is evil.... How strange then that sober expositions should ever have regarded sour dough - a form of incipient putrefaction - as a symbol of the unadulterated Word of God working in the hearts of men!... The action of the woman is further evidence that the post-millennial interpretation of this parable is erroneous, for there is nothing secret about the proclamation and spread of the Gospel. Said our Lord to His disciples, "What I tell you in darkness, that speak ye in light: and what ye hear in the ear, that preach ye upon the housetops" (Matt. 10:27); and wrote the apostle, "But having renounced the hidden things of dishonesty, not walking in craftiness, not handling the Word of God deceitfully" (2 Cor. 4:2). But both "craftiness" and "deceit" did mark this woman's action. She stealthily introduced into the meal a corrupting element, and though the resulting bread might be rendered more palatable, nevertheless it had been polluted. The three measures of meal stand for the whole of Christendom....

To say that this parable teaches that the Gospel is to win the whole world to Christ is to put light for darkness and is to make error equal truth. If the leaven represents the Gospel, the woman the church, and the meal the entire human race, then we have to confess that our Lord erred in His judgment and entirely over-estimated the power of the Gospel to find a response in the hearts of men, for after eighteen centuries of Gospel preaching we cannot point to a single country where all its subjects make even a profession of Christianity; nay, the world over, we cannot find a single city, town, or hamlet where everyone of its inhabitants is a believer in the Lord Jesus. No; this parable shows us the secret working of a putrefying element which spreads nought but corruption.

(As found here: <http://www.biblebelievers.com/Pink/return28.htm>. Quoting this section does not mean that I agree with all of what Pink says in this book.)

The next parable we will examine in this series will be the Parable of the Hidden Treasure.