

The Gospel According to Matthew

By

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CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

MATTHEW 13:33

THERE are two interpretations of this parable.

- The first and the most popular is that which treats leaven as the type of the Kingdom.
- The other claims that the whole picture is required to set forth what the King intended to teach concerning the Kingdom.

That is to say, one method of interpretation lays emphasis upon the fact that the Lord said, "**The Kingdom of heaven is like unto leaven.**" The other interpretation insists that to stop there is to miss the Master's meaning, and that it is necessary to read "**The kingdom of heaven is like unto leaven, which a woman took, and hid in three measures of meal.**"

Either leaven alone is the type of the Kingdom, or all the facts of the picture the meal, the woman, the leaven, the hiding, and the issue are required in order to understand what the King intended to teach. If the first interpretation of the parable, that leaven is the symbol of the Kingdom, be the correct one, we are necessarily driven to the conclusion that in this instance leaven must be the type of good, and that as a result of its working all things will be finally brought into subjection to the King.

That is the view which seems to be held to-day by the great majority of expositors. According to the second view leaven is not a type of good but of evil, as it is in every other case in Scripture. It is thus the type of a principle which affects for evil the Kingdom testimony of this particular age. The ultimate issue described, therefore, is not the conquest of the age by the principles of the Kingdom, but rather the intermixture with the Kingdom testimony of forces which enfeeble it. If a view is not to be accepted because of its popularity, neither ought it to be rejected on that account. There are, however, other reasons which compel me to accept the second theory as the true one.

I do so in the first place *because the former view is out of harmony with the symbolic use of leaven in the Bible in other places.*

Those who hold the first view admit frankly that this is the only case in which leaven is used as a type of good. Uniformly, from its first mention to its last, with this one exception - if it be an exception - leaven is a type of evil. In its actual effect leaven ever produces disintegration and corruption, and in all other cases it is used in harmony with this fact, as a type of evil.

I do not personally believe that in this one instance there is a departure from the general rule.

Secondly, and this to me is a more convincing proof, I cannot accept the more popular interpretation, *because it contradicts the teaching of all the other parables, not one of which suggests that the Kingdom influence in this age is to be victorious wholly and absolutely.*

Mixture is suggested from beginning to end. The sowing of the seed in the first parable results not in universal harvest of good, for three-quarters of the seed so sown is inoperative. In the second we have not merely the sowing of good seed, but the deliberate sowing of darnel, and the Master distinctly commanded that there was to be no separation until the consummation of the age.

In the parable of the mustard seed, while its growing was a symbol of good, its false development revealed the intermixture of evil. If these first three parables teach that this age is not to be characterized by perfect victory for good, and if the leaven is a type of good, then all the teaching of the first three is contradicted by that of the fourth.

A further reason for my inability to accept the more general interpretation is that *the history of the centuries and the experience of the present hour alike contradict that interpretation, and harmonize rather with the teaching of the earlier parables.*

There has been no complete mastery of evil by good in any part of the world in any age, nor even in the Church of God. The mixture of the two principles is manifest everywhere.

Finally, I cannot believe that the teaching of the parable is according to popular interpretation, *because it would be out of harmony with the other parables as to method.*

It is perpetually insisted that Jesus said, “**The Kingdom of heaven is like unto leaven,**” and that therefore no one has any right to say that leaven is not typical of the Kingdom of heaven. But in the parable of the darnel we read, “**The Kingdom of heaven is likened unto a man,**” and here nobody suggests that the man in that parable is the type of the Kingdom of heaven. It is absolutely necessary to take the whole picture of the man sowing darnel in a field already sown with good seed in order to understand the teaching of the Lord. We have no more right to pause upon the word “**leaven**” in the fourth parable than upon the word “**man**” in the second.

If the word “**leaven**” exhausts the Master’s teaching at this point concerning the similitude which He is suggesting, then the word “**man**” exhausts His thought in the parable of the darnel concerning the similitude which He there sets up. The same test may be applied to other parables.

In a subsequent one the King said, “**The Kingdom of heaven is like unto a king,**” and if we are compelled to stop at the word “**leaven**” in this parable, we must do so at the word “**king.**” It is evident, therefore, that to understand the teaching the whole picture must be kept in mind. That picture is one of three measures of meal, of a woman deliberately hiding the leaven in the meal, and of the working of that leaven until all the meal is under its influence.

Now let us examine the symbolism.

In order to do so we inquire first, what is the essential thing in the picture?

Then, what are those matters which affect the essential thing?

As regards the first, we reply that the thing of primary importance is not the leaven, and not the woman, but the three measures of meal. The woman and the leaven are considered according to their relation to the meal, and the effect produced is regarded also in its relation to the meal, "**Till the whole was leavened.**"

Therefore, the matter of supreme interest is the meal, and what happened to it.

We proceed to inquire, then, what Jesus meant by using this figure. It has been correctly pointed out that it is both important and interesting to interpret any expression or thought in Scripture by the presence thereof in other parts of Scripture, and especially by its first occurrence.

Following that principle of investigation, we find that the first occasion upon which the three measures of meal are mentioned in Scripture is as far back as the book of Genesis (18:6).

There we have an account of the entertainment of the Lord by Abraham. In one of the great Theophanies of the Old Testament the Lord manifested Himself as an Angel. Whether Abraham at the moment knew Who the visitor was, I am not prepared to affirm; but recognizing Him as supernatural he hastened to entertain Him. In order to this, Sarah took three measures of meal and prepared it.

Passing on through the Bible I find the figure again in connection with the meal offering. For this there was fixed a minimum and a maximum amount. Gideon brought an offering, and Hannah also, and on each occasion three measures of meal are spoken of.

In the book of Ezekiel, in connection with the final and perfect offerings, seven times over in one brief instruction the amount of the meal offering is three measures of meal.

In the Divine economy the meal offering followed the burnt offering.

- The burnt offering signifies the devotion of the life to God.
- The meal offering was the result of cultivation, manufacture, preparation, and, therefore, so far as man was concerned, always signified dedication of his work to God.

Remember, too, the meal offering was an offering of hospitality; part was retained by the worshipper and part was at the disposal of the priest. In the meal offering, then, we have a symbol of the perfect communion established between the worshipper and God upon the basis of the worshipper's service. From the simple rites of home life was taken that which was to be the perpetual symbol of dedication to God in service as the ground of perpetual communion with Him.

In the list of offerings it was most explicitly commanded that no leaven was to be mixed with the meal offering. Its presence would have been the symbol of intrusion of that which corrupted, into the fellowship of service.

In our parable then, fellowship with God in service is seen to be marred during the present age by the introduction of a corrupting influence. The woman mixing the meal stands as the representative of authority and management in the matter of service to God. Turning to the leaven, we repeat that it is in itself a corrupt thing, and can only exercise a corrupting influence.

I know it may be objected that in our common life to-day it is used, as, for instance, in the making of bread. It is, however, by no means certain that this method is the best possible, just as we are coming to understand that the intrusion into the physical life of man of alcohol is in itself a grave peril, it may be that presently we shall come to believe that the use of leaven is injurious physically. That I am not prepared to discuss; it is simply a passing suggestion.

The fact that leaven is used in certain ways to-day does not for a moment affect the simple truth that if it have its perfect outworking the result is destruction. It is in itself corrupt, and is always an agent of corruption.

When Sarah prepared the meal for the angel, she mixed no leaven with it. Leaven was distinctly forbidden in the meal offering, and when Paul used the figure of the leaven, whether in reference to the Levitical code, the Jewish custom, or the Master's use of it, it was always in the sense of evil.

“Your glorying is not good. Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump? 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: 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” (I Corinthians 5:6-8).

In the parable, then, we see a woman, the type of authority and management, hiding leaven, the emblem of disintegration and corruption, in the meal, the symbol of service and fellowship.

Such is the principle of the parable. What, then, according to this interpretation, does it teach?

It first recognizes that the Kingdom testimony in the present age must be based upon the fellowship of the people of God with Him in incorruptness; that the Church and the individual can only bear testimony which is influential for the Kingdom of God as they are entirely separated from all that of which leaven is the symbol.

Underneath the oaks of Mamre, after participation in the symbolic meal, Abraham stood talking face to face with the One Whom he had entertained. There he pleaded for Sodom, and his right of approach, his right of appeal, his right of argument were based upon the fact of his personal separation from all the corrupting influences of the country into which he had been brought, the unleavened cakes which Sarah had prepared being the symbol of that separation.

While Abraham thus interceded with the Lord, Lot was in the midst of Sodom; a righteous man, according to the teaching of Peter in his Epistle, and yet utterly without influence for good in the city. Lot could do nothing for Sodom. He could not lift it. He could not persuade it. He could not save it. If the city was nearly saved, it was not by the influence of Lot, but by the intercession of Abraham.

Lot, though a good man in his personal attitude and in his deepest intention, had corrupted his testimony and lost his power by admitting the influences of Sodom into his heart. Abraham, on the other hand, living in separation from its sin, had maintained his power to pray for Sodom.

Similarly in the teaching of the parable. The Kingdom testimony depends upon separation. It follows by necessary sequence that testimony for the King is weakened in the measure in which the Church in her management of her own affairs - the woman becoming the type of ecclesiastical government is weakened by the intrusion of such motives and methods as are worldly.

The use of the word “leaven” in the New Testament is most remarkable.

Its first occurrence, in the actual reading of the books rather than in the chronology of events, is in our text. Later on, as the King came to Caesarea Philippi, and approached the crisis when the period of His propaganda merged into that of His Passion, He warned His disciples to “**Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.**” Mark tells us that He said, “**Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, and of the leaven of Herod;**” while Luke reports Him as saying, “**Beware ye of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy.**”

Coming to the letter to the Corinthians, from which I have already quoted, Paul uses the figure in connection with the toleration in the Church of an incestuous person, and the lack of discipline which characterized that toleration.

Yet again, in the Galatian Epistle, in combating the influence of Judaizing teachers, Paul declared, “**A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump.**” These references exhaust the use of the figure in the New Testament. Thus in the Old and New alike, leaven is the symbol of that against which the men of faith are to guard. From these references we may clearly see its evil nature.

Christ distinctly affirmed that the leaven of the Pharisees was hypocrisy; that is, the acting of a part, professing to be something which one really is not, the uttering with the lips of certain formulae of devotion while the heart is not subject to the King.

- The leaven of the Sadducees was that of rationalism. They denied angel, spirit, resurrection.
- The leaven of Herod was that of materialism, government by the manifestation of material splendor.

Herod overawed his people by pageantry and display. Ignoring true greatness, he laid all emphasis upon external magnificence, and the result was the utter corruption of his empire.

According to Paul, leaven was the symbol of the toleration of evil inside the Church.

He used it in connection with a man living in actual impurity, to whom had been given the shelter of her fellowship. Again, leaven was the type of formalism, and of return to such ritualistic practices as robbed religion of its spirit and life.

To summarize, the New Testament teaches that hypocrisy is leaven:

- Rationalism is leaven;
- A material idea of government is leaven;
- Toleration of evil within the borders of the Church is leaven;
- Formalism is leaven.

Any or all of these things serve to break up the life of the Church, and a weakened testimony results. They constitute a ferment, a disturbance, a disintegration. Wherever the Church has come under the influence of such evils, corruption has spread throughout, manifested in spoiled lives and feeble witness to the Kingdom of God.

If we turn from this interpretation of our parable to the facts of history, what do we find?

Has it not been the case that the Church's power to speak authoritatively of the mystery of God, and to exhibit the benefits and enforce the claims of the Kingdom in the world, has been paralyzed by the evil things of which the New Testament clearly teaches leaven to be the symbol?

Is it not true that at the present moment the Church's power to bring the world under conviction concerning the Kingdom of God is feeble because of her complicity with evil things?

She is still weakened by the leaven of hypocrisy:

- which is profession without possession: by the leaven of rationalism,
- which is denial of the supernatural: by the leaven of materialism,
- which is the adoption of the world's standpoints and principles, making the fact of Christ one of ostentation rather than one of purity and power.

And is it not true that not least among the leavening influences at work is that weak toleration of evil, and false pity for the wrongdoer which allows him to stay within her borders, making her incapable of speaking with authority to those in rebellion against the Kingdom of God?

Moreover, is it not true that formalism in a thousand different forms, expressing the widespread hankering after ritual, is a leavening force to-day, marring our testimony and spoiling our service of God which can only be effectual when based upon our own separation to Him?

In this connection I say, as I have said in dealing with former parables, that this is not a picture of the final fact concerning the Kingdom of God. It is a picture of the age which ends with the advent.

“When the Son of Man cometh, shall He find faith on the earth?”

- The popular answer of theology is, **Yes**.
- Christ’s answer is, **No**.

It is infinitely better in order to do our work as it ought to be done, that we should accept His estimate of our age. It may be objected that this outlook is pessimistic in the extreme. It would be, indeed, if this age were the final one; but it is not so, it is only initial. With the flaming of His advent feet will come the Kingdom administration of the King’s own presence. For that the world is waiting, and that we, by consecration, are attempting to hasten.

Thus far we have considered the first four parables, those spoken to the disciples in the hearing of the multitudes. In them, two things are made perfectly clear. First, that the Kingdom influence is to be felt from beginning to end of the age. The Son of Man sows His good seed and waits for the harvest; and there is relationship with God on the part of His own in separation and service.

We have also seen that throughout the age there is present and at work the principle of evil. Three-fourths of the good seed fails of harvest, and the enemy deliberately intermixes with the wheat the darnel. There is a false development even of the good into ostentatious display which is out of harmony with the true spirit of the King. The meal offering of fellowship in service is corrupted by the intrusion of the leaven of impurity.

There are other aspects of this age to which we now come in parables addressed only to those who were His own disciples.

~ end of chapter 36 ~

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