

THE PARABLE OF THE LEAVEN

Matthew 13:33

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"Another parable spoke 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" (v. 33).

In the mercy of God we are not left to any human opinions or authority, nor is the meaning of the parables of Matthew 13 open to argument. Christ Himself explained for us the first two and the seventh, and it is obvious that the intervening four must be interpreted in strict accord with them. There is an unmistakable *unity* underlying the whole chapter. As there is a noticeable connection between the first two parables in relation to the *beginning* of the kingdom of heaven in its present form, so there is a close relation between the third and fourth which treat of its *extension* and *corruption*. The third gives us the *external* aspect or outward growth of the kingdom, the fourth reveals its *internal* aspect and secret corruption.

The popular interpretation of this parable regards the "leaven" as representing the Gospel and its power, the "woman" the Church. Here are the words of Dr. John Gill: "Leaven is everywhere else used in a bad sense . . . here it seems to be taken in a good sense, and the Gospel to be compared unto it." The "woman," he tells us, is "the church" or the ministers of the Gospel. Calvinists understand the "three measures of meal" to represent God's elect; Arminians understand them to prefigure all mankind. The latter expound the parable as follows: As the result of the Gospel, and by means of its assimilating power, the mass of humanity is ultimately to be penetrated, affected, and blest. So firmly is this belief embedded in the minds of church-goers that it is hard for them to tear loose from it.

It is apparent at once that our understanding and interpretation of this parable turns upon a correct definition of the "leaven." If this is a figure of the Gospel, and if the meal represents the human race, then it necessarily follows that, ultimately, all must be regenerated or at least reformed by the Evangel. But if the "leaven" is the symbol of corrupting evil, and the meal stands for the pure truth of God, and that this parable also supplies a picture of the Christian profession, then it necessarily follows that, ultimately, the truth of God is to be corrupted throughout Christendom. *How* are we to find out which of these is true? Only from the Holy Scriptures. Let us now examine the current interpretation of this parable in the light of the Word:

1. If the popular view is correct then, in this chapter, Christ flatly contradicts Himself. What He has said in the first three parables is dead against *world*-conversion or even *world*-reformation by means of Gospel preaching. In the first parable, instead of our Lord teaching that the good Seed would bear fruit in *every* part of the field, He declared that most of its ground would prove uncongenial and unproductive. Nor was there any hint that later "sowers" would find conditions improved; rather did He intimate that things would get worse. In the second parable the picture

which He drew of the coming Harvest expressly forbids such a thought, and positively excludes the idea of world-conversion in this Age. In the third parable He predicted that Christendom would develop into such a monstrosity that the Devil's agents would be afforded shelter in it and would rule over it. How then can this fourth parable teach the very opposite?

2. The post-millennial interpretation of this parable is flatly contradicted by what we are told in verses 11, 35 of Matthew 13. There we learn that these parables are "mysteries of the kingdom of heaven," "things which have been kept secret from the foundation of the world." Dr. Gill echoes the teaching of the Reformers, and they have been re-echoed by later Calvinists, affirming that the "leaven" represents the Gospel. But that *cannot* be. Whatever may or may not be prefigured, the "Gospel" is the last thing which could possibly be in view. For this reason: the Gospel was *not* an unrevealed secret in O.T. times. Galatians 3:8 declares that the Gospel was "preached unto Abraham."

3. If the "leaven" represents the Gospel and the "meal" the human race, or, as Dr. Gill teaches, God's elect in their natural condition, then the figure which Christ here employed is a faulty one. And this in three different respects. First, in the way it works. *How* does "leaven" act? Why, it is simply placed in meal, and then it works of itself! That is all: just place it there, *leave it alone*, and it is bound to leaven the whole lump. But is *that* the way the Gospel works? Certainly not. Multitudes *have* received the Gospel, but it has had no effect upon them!

Second, in the actor here mentioned. It is a "woman" who places the leaven in the meal. But the Lord Jesus Christ has not committed His Gospel into the hands of *women*. There were none among the twelve, nor among the seventy whom he chose and sent forth. The preaching of the Gospel is a man's job. The part allotted to the sisters, and an important part it is, is to hold up the hands of their ministering brethren by prayer and supplication.

Third, in the effects it produces. When leaven is placed into meal it causes it to swell, it *puffs it up*! Is *that* what the Gospel does when it enters human hearts? No indeed. It produces the very opposite effect. It humbles, it abases.

4. The popular interpretation is contradicted by the plain facts of history and by present-day experience. Were the current explanations true, then we should be forced to acknowledge that this prediction of Christ's has failed in its accomplishment. The Gospel has now been preached for nineteen centuries, yet not a single nation or state, no, nor even city, town or village, has been completely evangelized_let alone won to Christ! If the popular view is the correct one, then the Gospel is a colossal and tragic failure.

5. To make the "leaven" a figure of the Gospel and its power, of that which is good, is to contradict every other passage in Scripture where this figure is used. Christ was speaking to a Jewish audience, and with their knowledge of the O.T. Scriptures none of them would ever dream that He had reference to something that was good. With the Jews "leaven" was ever a figure of evil.

The first time that "leaven," in its negative form, occurs in the Bible is in Genesis 19:3, where we are told that Lot "did bake *un-leavened* bread" for the angels, and that "they did eat." No doubt

leavened bread was a common commodity in the wicked city of Sodom. Why then did not righteous Lot place some of it before the angels? Because he knew better. He must have known that they, like Peter, allowed "nothing common or unclean" to pass their lips. They would receive nothing with the least semblance of evil in it. Many congregations today are not nearly so careful about *their* food_ *their soul*-food. They will readily swallow any rubbish that is handed them from the pulpit, and the sad thing is that they will do so *without any protest*. Why do they not go to the preacher and say, Why don't you give us the Bread of life?

In Exodus 12 it will be found that Jehovah commanded the Israelites to rigidly purge their houses of all "leaven" at the Passover season. Why was this if "leaven" is a type of that which is good? Exodus 34:25 tells us that God prohibited any "*leaven*" from accompanying offerings of blood. Leviticus 2:11 informs us that "leaven" was also excluded from every offering of the Lord made by fire.

This parable in Matthew 13 is not the only occasion when the Lord Jesus employed this figure. How did He use it elsewhere? In Matthew 16:11 we find Him saying to the disciples, "Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees." There, it is plainly a figure of that which is *evil*. So in Luke 12:1 He said, "*Beware ye of the leaven of the Pharisees which is hypocrisy*." Would He then deliberately *confuse* His disciples by using it as the figure of *good* in Matthew 13?

The Holy Spirit has also used this same figure through the apostle Paul. In what manner? In 1 Corinthians 5:6, 7 we read, "Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump? *Purge out* therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump." Would they be told to "purge out" that which was *good*? The last passage in the N.T. in which "leaven" is mentioned is Galatians 5:7-9. Note there three things: first, it is called a "*persuasion*"_ *something* which exerts a powerful and moving influence. Second, it *hinders* men "from obeying the truth." Third, it is expressly said to be "*not* from Him which calleth you." Thus, that which is a thing of fermentation_ *really*, incipient putrefaction_ *is*, throughout Scripture, uniformly a figure of corruption_ *evil*. It is remarkable that the word "leaven" occurs just *thirteen* times in the N.T., a number always associated with evil and the work of Satan.

Objectors have appealed to two passages in the O.T. where "leaven" *is* employed in a *good* sense. But when examined it will be found that they are only seeming exceptions. The first is in Leviticus 23:17. The two loaves presented unto the Lord at the Feast of Weeks were to be baked "with leaven." But there is no difficulty here. The Feast of Weeks foreshadowed what is recorded in Acts 2, where the "first fruits" of this dispensation are seen. The *two* "loaves" prefigured saved Jews and Gentiles. Inasmuch as the old nature *remains* in those who are born again, the "leaven" was needed in the loaves which represented these believers. Whenever the typical bread represented Christ it must be unleavened, wherever it typified His people it must be leavened.

The second passage is in Amos 4:5, "Offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving with leaven." This was the language of *irony*, which means it has a meaning the very opposite of what is said. You will sometimes hear a parent say to a willful child, You do that and I will deal with you! Does he mean for the child to actually do it? No, the very reverse. So it is in Amos 4:5: the preceding verse proves it_ "Come to Bethel, and transgress; at Gilgal multiply transgression; and bring your sacrifice every morning." Clearly it is the language of irony.

6. Let us now consider the "three measures of meal." Post-millennarians say that they represent the human race among whom the Gospel is working. If so, the "meal" is a figure of that which is *evil*. The human race is fallen, sinful, depraved; "the whole world lies in the Wicked one" (1 John 5:19). Nor is the usual explanation supplied by Calvinistic commentators any better. They say the "*meal*" stands for God's elect in their natural state. But the analogy of faith is against them. Let our appeal be to the Scriptures.

"And Abram hastened into the tent unto Sarah, and said, Make ready quickly three measures of fine meal, knead it, and make cakes upon the hearth" (Gen. 18: 6). Did Abraham prepare for the Lord and His angels food out of that which symbolized evil? Note what is said in 1 Kings 17:14-16. God does not feed His servants on that which speaks of evil! Now *where* does "meal" for bread come from? Any child can answer: not from evil tares, but from good wheat. It is the product of the good Seed. Then that which is good, wholesome, nutritious, pure, can never be a figure of fallen and corrupt humanity.

In Genesis 18:6 the "three measures of meal" are a figure of *Christ's person*, just as the "tender calf" in verse 7 which was killed and dressed prefigured His work. The meal is a type of Him who is the Corn of wheat (John 12:24) and the Bread of life. And thus in the language of N.T. symbolry the "meal" stands for the *doctrine, of Christ*.

7. The *action* of the "woman" in our parable exposes the error of the common interpretation. She "took," *not* "received;" and *hid* the leaven in the meal. Is this the way in which the servants of God preach His Gospel? Is the evangel something to be whispered in secret? Does God bid His servants act stealthily? No. The Lord has said to them, "What I tell you in darkness, that speak ye in light: and what ye hear in the ear, that preach ye upon the housetop" (Matthew 11:27).

Writing to the Corinthians, and describing the character of his own ministry, the apostle Paul said, "We faint not, but have renounced the hidden things of dishonesty, not walking in craftiness, nor handling the Word of God deceitfully, but by manifestation of the truth commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God" (2 Cor. 4:2). But in our parable, the woman is acting dishonestly and deceitfully: she stealthily introduced a foreign and corrupting element into the meal. Her object was to effect its deterioration. If the reader will turn to Leviticus 2:11 he will find that this "woman" was doing the very thing which the Word of God forbade her; and he will also observe that she *left out the oil*, which was the very thing the Scriptures enjoined!

Let us now turn, briefly, to the positive side, and give what we believe is the true interpretation. As already stated, the "three measures of meal" stand for Christ as the food of His people: Christ as presented in the written Word, therefore, the doctrine of Christ. The "woman" refers, primarily, to the Papacy, and generally, to all corrupters of God's truth. Romanism has many "daughters." It is most significant that the leading false cults in Christendom were originated by *women*. Modern Spiritualism was started in Boston, U.S.A., in 1848 by the Fox sisters. Seventh Day Adventism was founded by Mrs. White. Christian Science was organized by Mrs. Eddy. Theosophy was devised by Madame Blavatsky, and is now engineered by Mrs. Besant.

The "leaven" symbolizes the corrupting of God's truth by the introduction of evil doctrine—compare Matthew 16:12. The unadulterated truth of God is too heavy for the natural man: the sovereignty of God, the helplessness of man, the awfulness of sin, the totality of human depravity, the eternal punishment of the wicked, are indigestible to the carnal mind. Therefore, Rome and her "daughters" have introduced the lightening "leaven," so as to make, what they hand out, more palatable to their dupes. And thus has history repeated itself. Of old God complained to Israel, "Ye offer *polluted* bread upon Mine altar" (Mal. 1:7). So today priestcraft and clericalism have corrupted the bread of God.

It is to be noted that the "three measures of meal" *were not removed*, nor was something else substituted in their place. Instead, a foreign element was mingled with it, an element which has slowly and gradually corrupted it. In 2 Thessalonians 2:4 the apostle Paul declared, "The mystery of iniquity does *already work*." The leaven had started to act even then, and, as our Savior declared, it would work till "the whole was leavened." How nearly this is the case today the majority of our readers are sadly aware. There are but few places to which an hungry child of God can now go and receive pure Bread. But thank God there *are* still a few such places. While the Holy Spirit remains on earth amongst the saints, God's truth *will be* proclaimed. While *He* is here, there is a *hindering* cause, preventing the "whole" from being "leavened." But at the Rapture the Hinderer will be "taken out of the way" (2 Thess. 2:7), and *then* the "whole" will be completely leavened. The "salt" will be removed, and nothing will be left to stay universal corruption.

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