

## Matthew 13:33

### Introduction

In Matthew 13:33, Jesus sets before us now the fourth parable of *the kingdom*. We remember that for all of us who have been given ears to hear, eyes to see, and hearts to understand, these parables are meant to *reveal* to us the *secrets* of the kingdom of heaven. They are meant to reveal to us those things about the kingdom that previously had never been fully understood. The point here is not just giving us the “facts” of head knowledge, but rather the true *understanding of faith* that we might “attain... to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ” (Eph. 4:13). So in this study, may God grant that we may approach His word in true faith and believing.

In the first parable of the Sower, the secret revealed is that the Messiah’s kingdom is a matter of the *heart*, and that as we proclaim the Gospel of the kingdom to others, that message may or may not take root and bear fruit in a person’s life – depending on the kind of soil in the heart of those who hear. This calls us to trust in God’s sovereign power to change and transform hearts, and to content ourselves with the simple task of earnestly and prayerfully scattering the seed.

In the second parable of the weeds of the field, the secret revealed is that even though the promised kingdom is already a present reality as Christ is now ruling over all of heaven and earth, nevertheless, the separation of the wicked from the righteous will not happen until the close of this age. This calls for endurance, because even though we are the sons of the kingdom, oftentimes our lot will appear to be no different, if not even worse than the sons of the evil one.

In the third parable of the mustard seed, the secret revealed is that the kingdom of heaven starts out as the *smallest* and *most insignificant* of all seeds, and then *gradually* grows, and grows, and grows, until eventually it fills all the earth, and all the nations of the earth come to find nourishment and refuge under the Messiah’s rule. This calls for faith – faith to *see* in the mustard seed the full grown tree... and so faith to persevere in the day of small beginnings.

The fourth parable is very much like the parable of the Mustard Seed:

***He told them another parable. “The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened.”***

### **I. What’s the difference between the parable of the Mustard Seed and the parable of the Leaven?**

Just like the parable of the Mustard Seed, we have a small and insignificant beginning that results in something big and spectacular (cf. France). So these two parables are obviously “twin” parables (cf. Mark and Luke) with very similar messages (cf. 44-46). But I do believe that there seems to be a clear difference in their emphasis. The Parable of the Mustard Seed emphasizes the *outward growth* and expansion of the kingdom. But the Parable of the Leaven emphasizes the transforming power of the kingdom as it pervades and penetrates and permeates throughout all – thoroughly, and totally, and completely (cf. Carson). In the Parable of the Mustard Seed, it is the

*kingdom itself* which is being transformed from something small into something big. But in the Parable of the Leaven, it's not the kingdom that is being transformed. Instead, it is whatever the kingdom has been *working upon* and *working in*... *this* is what we find being transformed – just as leaven itself is not transformed, but rather the dough that the leaven is penetrating.

## **II. What is leaven?**

The leaven in the parable was not leaven as we think of it today. Instead, it was a fermented piece of dough from a previous batch. A woman would take this fermented piece of old dough and mix and knead it in (cf. NIV) with the new dough and then wait until the entire batch of new dough was also leavened. There are many people who think that three measures of flour would be enough to feed about one hundred people. Others suggest that it was enough to feed a large family. In any case, we know that it was a *large* amount of dough – especially in *comparison* to the very *small* amount of leaven. And yet as the New Living Translation puts it: “Even though she put only a little yeast in three measures of flour, it *permeated every part* of the dough.”

## **III. What is the meaning and symbolism of leaven in the Bible?**

Let's think for a little bit about the meaning of leaven in the Bible. Many of us may associate leaven with wickedness and evil and corruption. In the New Testament, Jesus warns His disciples about the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees (Matthew 16:6, 11-12). Paul compares the sin that the Corinthian church was tolerating to leaven, and warns that this one sin will end up infecting the whole body (1 Cor. 5:6; cf. Gal. 5:9). But what about leaven in the Old Testament? It is true that during the feasts of Passover and “Unleavened Bread”, leaven was forbidden.

- ✓ Exodus 12:15 (cf. v. 19) – Seven days you shall eat ***unleavened bread***. On the first day you shall ***remove leaven out of your houses***, for if anyone eats what is leavened, from the first day until the seventh day, that person shall be cut off from Israel.

But the reason for this prohibition was not because leaven symbolized wickedness, but rather because the Israelites were to remember how the Lord had delivered them from Egypt.

- ✓ Exodus 12:33-34, 37, 39 – The Egyptians were urgent with the people to send them out of the land in haste... So the people took their dough ***before it was leavened***, their kneading bowls being bound up in their cloaks on their shoulders... And the people of Israel journeyed from Rameses to Succoth... And they baked ***unleavened cakes*** of the dough that they had brought out of Egypt, for ***it was not leavened***, because they were thrust out of Egypt and could not wait.
- ✓ Deuteronomy 16:3 (cf. Ex. 13:6-8) – You shall eat ***no leavened bread*** with it. Seven days you shall eat it with ***unleavened bread***, the bread of affliction—for you came out of the land of Egypt in haste—that all the days of your life you may remember the day when you came out of the land of Egypt.

If unleavened bread is the bread of affliction, then we might say that leavened bread is the bread not of evil and wickedness, but rather of *abundance and plenty*. But now more importantly, why was leaven also forbidden in some of Israel's grain offerings?

- ✓ Leviticus 2:4, 8-9 (cf. 7:12) – When you bring a grain offering... it shall be **unleavened loaves** of fine flour mixed with oil or **unleavened wafers** smeared with oil... And you shall bring the grain offering... to the LORD, and when it is presented to the priest, he shall... take from the grain offering its memorial portion and burn this on the altar.

Once again, many people assume that the reason the bread had to be unleavened was because leaven symbolized wickedness and corruption. But the Old Testament never says this! And if leaven symbolized wickedness and corruption, then how can we explain the following verses?

- ✓ Leviticus 7:13-14 – With the sacrifice of his peace offerings for thanksgiving he shall bring his offering with loaves of **leavened bread**... And from it he shall offer one loaf from each offering, as a gift to the LORD. It shall belong to the priest.
- ✓ Leviticus 23:16-17, 20 – You shall present a grain offering of new grain to the LORD. You shall bring from your dwelling places two loaves of bread... They shall be of fine flour, and they shall be baked **with leaven**, as firstfruits to the LORD... They shall be holy to the LORD for the priest.

If leaven symbolizes wickedness and corruption in the Old Testament, then why does God *command* that in some of Israel's grain offerings the bread *must* be leavened? Why was leaven commanded in some grain offerings and forbidden in others? In fact, in the peace offering of thanksgiving, both leavened *and* unleavened bread were required in the *same* offering (Lev. 7:11-14)! What's going on here? How are we to explain this? Well, the leavened bread was never burned on the altar. Instead it was always eaten by the priest. The leavened bread was an expression of abundance and plenty, and so it was an appropriate way to celebrate God's faithful provisions. From the *unleavened* bread, however, a portion was always reserved to be *burned* on the altar. Both the leavened and the unleavened bread were expressions of thanksgiving, but the leavened bread was *eaten* by the priest while the unleavened bread was *burned* on the altar. So why did the bread that was burned on the altar have to be *unleavened*?

- ✓ Leviticus 2:11 (cf. Amos 4:5; NIV) – No grain offering that you bring to the LORD shall be made with leaven, for you shall *burn* no leaven... as a food offering to the LORD.

There was one other thing that was never burned on the altar – and that was blood. Before they were burned, the blood of the sacrificial animals was always drained out at the side or the base of the altar (Lev. 1:15; 5:9). And what do blood and leaven have in common? Perhaps we could put it this way: Just as “the life of the flesh is in the blood” (Lev. 17:10-11), so also the life of the bread is in the *leaven*. And whatever was burned on the altar (whether animal or bread) must not have in it any remaining symbol or representation of *life*. The leaven symbolized life and potency. Leaven is a powerful, moving, active force. And so “even though [the woman] put only a little yeast in three measures of flour, it *permeated every part* of the dough” [NLT]. Webster gives this definition of leaven as a verb: it means “to... *permeate* with some... *vivifying* [life-giving] element”. Dictionary.com says that it means “to *permeate* with [a] *transforming*

element.” And so it is with the kingdom of heaven! It is like leaven because it permeates and pervades and is always transforming from the inside out. The kingdom of heaven is like leaven because it has a penetrating power to spread through and through until the *whole* has been entirely and completely transformed.

#### **IV. What is the leavening power of the kingdom?**

So what does all of this mean practically? Well first of all, we need to remember that the kingdom of heaven is the rule and the reign of God. And yet this powerful and dynamic rule and reign of omnipotent, almighty God... it comes to us today in the simple, “little” *Gospel*.

- ✓ Romans 1:16 – For I am not ashamed of the *gospel* [though others may mock and scorn something so apparently small and insignificant], for it is the *power of God* for salvation to everyone who believes.
- ✓ 1 Corinthians 1:18 – For the *word of the cross* is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the *power of God*.

In the Parable of the Sower Jesus calls this powerful Gospel very simply “the *word* of the kingdom” (v. 19). And just as with the Gospel, so also we know that the *word* of God contains within it a life-giving power. So we read:

- ✓ Psalm 33:6 – By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, and by the breath of his mouth all their host.
- ✓ Hebrews 11:3 – By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God.
- ✓ 2 Peter 3:5 – The heavens existed long ago, and the earth was formed out of water and through water by the word of God,
- ✓ Romans 4:17 – God... gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.
- ✓ James 1:18 – He brought us forth by the word of truth.
- ✓ 1 Peter 1:23-25 – You have been born again... through the living and abiding word of God... and this word is the good news that was preached to you.
- ✓ Hebrews 4:12 – For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

The Gospel is not just a set of propositions... just like the leaven in the dough the Gospel is a living and transforming power. The word of the kingdom is not just a piece of information... like the leaven in the dough, it is a living and transforming power. It is the power of God! And so the *Gospel*—the *word* of the kingdom—pervades, and penetrates, and permeates throughout the whole – thoroughly, and totally, and completely until an entire transformation has taken place. Jesus says: “The kingdom of heaven is like *leaven* that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was *all* leavened.”

## Conclusion

In this parable, then, there is both a wonderful promise *and* a gracious command. First of all, the power and the energy for our transformation into the perfect likeness of Christ does not come from us, but it lies hidden *within us* in the Gospel. When God plants the Gospel within our hearts, that Gospel is like leaven, and therefore it is guaranteed to bring about the entire transformation of our lives.

- ✓ Philippians 1:6 – And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you *will bring it to completion* at the day of Jesus Christ.
- ✓ 2 Corinthians 3:18 – And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, *are being transformed* into the same image from one degree of glory to another.

Our sanctification is no less sure than our justification because both flow from the *same* powerful Gospel.

- ✓ 1 Corinthians 1:18 – For the *word of the cross* is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are *being saved* it is the *power of God*.

And so our sanctification flows not from our own striving, but from the transforming power of the Gospel itself as from deep within it penetrates and permeates throughout the whole of our lives. If this is the same Gospel that has already accomplished our justification, can our sanctification be any less sure? What wonderful freedom and rest! What wonderful certainty and confidence! What wonderful peace and joy! Just a little leaven will leaven the *whole* lump, Jesus says. This is the power of the Gospel. This is the wonderful promise. We could even call it a prophecy.

But now we come to the gracious command. We don't *respond* to this promise by doing nothing and ceasing to strive. *Far* from it! Instead, we willingly and joyfully seek to live our lives *in light* of the *promise* – earnestly working to have every nook and cranny of our lives transformed and shaped by the *Gospel* of Jesus Christ – the *word* of the kingdom. We learn from this parable of the leaven that there is no sphere of life, there is not one aspect of our existence that Jesus Christ has not promised to redeem for His glory. And so there is no sphere of life, there is not one aspect of our existence over which Jesus Christ has not claimed absolute sovereignty. The leaven penetrates and permeates throughout the *whole* – throughout all of our recreation and leisure, throughout all of our labor and work, throughout every aspect of marriage and family, throughout every moment of our day and night, both in public and in private. We must not try to shut the kingdom up in a compartment as though there are some places that it does not touch, or where it has nothing to say. In what little nook or cranny of our lives have we been resisting the leavening influence and the transforming power of the Gospel? Is it in our choice of entertainment in TV and movies, books and magazines, music, social media, and internet? Is it in our speech, actions, or attitudes? Is it in our temper, our use of time, our use of money, or our dress? Is it in a specific family relationship, whether husband, wife, parent, or child? Is it in the sphere of work or school? In all of these areas, and in *every* area, the word of the kingdom must be sovereign. The Gospel must do its leavening and transforming work. Let us not try to stand in

the way of this work, but rather aid and abet it at every step along the way – *knowing* that the power to change comes not from us, but from the Gospel within.

“Let us ask ourselves whether there is any work of grace in our own hearts. Are we resting satisfied with a few vague wishes and convictions? Or do we know anything of a gradual, growing, spreading, increasing, leavening process going on in our inward man? Let nothing short of this content us. The true work of the Holy Ghost [we might say, “of the Gospel] will never stand still. It will leaven the whole lump.” (Ryle)<sup>1</sup>

### **Teaching our Children**

Q. What did Jesus compare the kingdom of heaven with in Matthew 13:33?

A. “The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened.”

Q. What is leaven? What does it do?

A. (See Roman Numeral II on page 2 and add your own explanations)

✓ For older children review the last two paragraphs before Roman Numeral IV. (Why was leaven forbidden in *some* of Israel’s grain offerings, but not others)?

Q. What is the leavening power of the kingdom?

A. The leavening power of the kingdom is the *word* of the kingdom. It is the simple, “little” Gospel (See Scriptures on page 4; see also last paragraph on page 4)

Q. As true Christians,<sup>2</sup> we are to be transformed into the perfect likeness of Jesus Christ. Where does the power for this transformation come from – and where does it *not* come from?

A. ~ The power and the energy for our transformation into the perfect likeness of Christ does not come from us, but it lies hidden *within us* in the Gospel (see the first half of page 5).

~ The *Gospel* penetrates (spreads) throughout *all* of me until I am completely and entirely transformed (when Jesus returns).

Q. In light of the leavening power of the Gospel, what is our responsibility?

A. See the last paragraph under the Conclusion and the concluding quote from Ryle

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<sup>1</sup> See Hendriksen for the concept of the kingdom’s leavening influence on society as a whole.

<sup>2</sup> I worded the question like this because I want it to be personal. However, we must be careful not to imply to our (possibly) unregenerate children that they are “automatically” Christians. Feel free to qualify all questions and answers accordingly.