

## **The Parable of the Leaven (Mt 13:33)**

**Intro: Nearly thirty years ago Martha and I moved to Charleston, WV. Several of the members of the church lived in a residential area on the high elevations on the northwest side of the city and the route to these subdivisions caused us to pass by a local bread factory. Even if you weren't hungry, it was hard to resist the tempting aromas that permeated the atmosphere around that factory. One day as drove by we were discussing what it would be like to eat bread that had just been cooked there at the factory. Pulling into the factory we made our way back to the only area where it appeared we could find people working and I shared with the supervisor on the dock what we wanted to do. I wasn't sure whether he would look at me and say, "You got to be kidding; or don't you think we have better things to do!?" But instead he said, "Wait right here!" and few moments later he came walking toward me a freshly wrapped loaf still hot from the bread line and charged me \$1. I'm not sure there was much that loaf left before we got to our destination.**

**It's hard to find anyone who does not enjoy the taste of a freshly baked loaf of bread. We can do that relative ease. There are even bread machines that allow you to just dump in the ingredients and go off and leave it; but in ancient times making bread was a tedious task that became perfected over a long period of time.**

**The ancient people appear to have first simply tried to eat whole grain softened by liquids. It would not have been very pleasant to eat, even if good for you. Later they developed a process of milling that cracked the wheat kernels by grinding them between circular stones and then mixing it with water they baked the batter on hot rocks or in ovens, turning it over like a pancake. A great improvement, though there was always the risk of small pieces of stone in the bread.**

**And it appears that leavened bread came to be discovered by accident among the Egyptians nearly 5000 years ago. Perhaps someone left the mixture of flour and water longer than intended and it began to rise. It was simply due to the natural microorganisms that float in the air that cause things to ferment. These plant-like organisms (yeasts) would break down the sugars in the flour and produce acid that gave it a more sour taste and gasses that would cause the bread to rise. They didn't know why it worked; they just new that it did. In the case of the ancient Egyptians, it was said that the god Osiris observed that the journey from Earth, to the land of the dead, was a difficult one and decided to lighten their burden, by giving mankind the ability to make leavened bread, so that their travel could be made with a lighter load. Louis Pasteur would figure all of that out many centuries later by discovering the microorganisms that made the fermentation process work.**

But the ancient people also learned that if they saved a portion of this sour dough, it could be mixed with the next day's batch of flour to cause it to rise. This lump of sour dough that was saved from day to day or baking to baking was called "seor" in Hebrew or "zume" in Greek. Even today you may have done the same thing when someone gave you a "starter" for a sour dough recipe.

For many centuries this was the only way to make bread that would rise. However in the latter half of the nineteenth century, two Australians brought with them to America a yeast which they had used to make bread and opened up a factory to produce yeast cakes which they showcased at the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition in 1876. It was a hit. Later they would learn how to preserve this yeast in dry form. And most of you ladies are still using their product or another improved version. The brothers were Charles and Max Fleishman, the inventors of packaged yeast for bread making.

Jesus used the ancient process of leavening by mixing old fermented dough with new dough to teach an important lesson about the kingdom of God.

*He spoke another parable to them, "The kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took, and hid in three pecks of meal, until it was all leavened." (Matthew 13:33)*

#### Observations about the parable

*The leaven of which Jesus speaks is "zume", a piece of fermented dough that is added to fresh flour to make the new dough rise.*

*The "meal" is more than likely whole wheat flour.*

*Perhaps the ladies in the audience would have perked up and maybe even laughed when they heard the quantity of flour being used. Three cups of flour are plenty to make a loaf of bread for a family; 3 pecks (a little less than a bushel) would have been enough to make enough bread to feed hundreds of people. The amount gives especial emphasis to the power of the leaven.*

*And perhaps the women in the audience might have taken special note of the word "hid". That's not a word you commonly see in recipes. "Mix", "stir", "add", but not "hide". But Jesus obviously chose the word intentionally. After being added to the fresh dough, the leaven is invisible. It can't be detected from the rest of the lump.*

*Of course, the point of illustration is that these fungi introduced into the dough would continue to do their work until the whole lump was affected.*

#### But what the message of the parable?

*This parable it appears was designed along the parable of the mustard seed to encourage and assure the disciples of success in their work in teaching. If the parable of the mustard seed reminds us that "great things start small", the parable of the leaven reveals the corollary truth; the kingdom's influence would be quiet and inauspicious yet sure, pervasive, and complete.*

Many Jews thought the kingdom would appear in a blaze of glory. The Messiah would come with power and with great armies subdue the enemy. Instead Jesus envisions an entirely different scenario. The kingdom would influence the world inconspicuously and quietly. Just as leaven does it work with less than noticeable effect, so the spreading influence of the kingdom would be unnoticeable, but real nonetheless! The kingdom of God would be “hidden” in the Roman world. Jesus indicated this in his statements about the kingdom:

*"The kingdom of God does not come with observation; nor will they say 'See here!' or 'See there!'" - Lk 17:20-21a*

*"For indeed, the kingdom of God is within you." - Lk 17:21b*

*Though the day of Pentecost was an awesome display of the power of God to believers, it would not have made the back page of the news section of the Roman Times or even the Jerusalem Gazette. Three thousand converts impresses us; but the populations in Jerusalem numbered in the millions.*

*Likewise, the kingdom would influence the world quietly.*

*In keeping with the Messiah's character, the citizens of the kingdom would not seek to work people into a revolutionary frenzy, but instead would persuade them one by one to believe in Jesus as the resurrected Lord, thus changing their lives forever.*

The kingdom would influence the world surely and completely.

*Jesus said "till it was all leavened." No part of the "loaf" (world) will be untouched by the influence of the kingdom.*

*This completeness of the "reign of heaven" was to be manifested in three associated ways:*

*In the form of the gospel (the "word" of the kingdom, Mt. 13:19), as it is was proclaimed to all creation - cf. Mk 16:15-16*

*In the form of the church, which spreads as people accept the gospel*

*In the influence of the Word and the church, as their influence is felt in society*

*Paul later described the fulfillment of this promise:*

*if indeed you continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel that you have heard, which was proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, was made a minister. (Colossians 1:23)*

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*which has come to you, just as in all the world also it is constantly bearing fruit and increasing, even as it has been doing in you also since the day you heard of it and understood the grace of God in truth; (Colossians 1:6)*

**The message for us!**

***Don't lose faith in the power of the kingdom!***

Don't measure the growth or success of the kingdom solely by visible standards. The spread of the kingdom (the rule of God) is taking place wherever the "word of the kingdom" is being sown, and fruit will be borne as it falls on "good and noble hearts".

Remain confident that what started in one small portion of the loaf will eventually spread through the whole loaf. Sometimes we can look around and see a lot of changes that need to be made in our homes, in our work places, in our schools (raw dough needing the leavening influence of truth.) Don't lose faith in the power of the gospel, the church, and godly living to influence this world.

***Do your part to be a leavening influence!***

Allow the "leaven of the kingdom" to permeate your own heart and life.

*Take the Word of God into your own heart.*

*Study and meditate upon it, and then seek to apply it!*

*Allow that Word to produce fruit in your life, so that others can see it transforming you!*

By doing so you will become an leavening influence for the kingdom of God!

*By word, as you share the gospel of the kingdom with others*

*By deed, as you do good works that glorify God*

**Conclusion: Clearly the two parables—the mustard seed and the leaven are doublets intended to complement one another. Just as the kingdom of God, from small beginning, has grown to a great tree, so it has worked quietly yet surely to permeate the whole world.**

**I was intrigued by the TV series Rome and while watching it, I took note of the fact that almost nothing was said about Christianity. I even commented to myself; they are leaving out one of the most important events in the history of the Roman Empire. Then it dawned on me that this was just another confirmation of the truth Jesus was teaching. Christianity was scarcely mentioned by Roman historians. To them it was nothing more than a vague superstition destined to pass away. But oh how wrong they were! The empire that they thought would never die came to an ignominious end; but the superstition they thought would never live continues to grow gloriously throughout the world. Leaven indeed!**