

Kingdom Parables

The Parable of the Leaven

V. The Parable of the Leaven - Matthew 13:33, Luke 13:20-21

A. The Central Point of the Parable

The influence of the Kingdom, though small at start, will eventually permeate and affect the entire world.

B. Significant Elements of the Parable

1. The Meal

Three measures of meal is equivalent to one ephah, or about three pecks of meal. This was probably a standard recipe for bread since three measures is the same amount of bread Sarah baked for the angels in Genesis. Also, since bread was a staple item of food in those days, it would not be uncommon to bake large amounts.

2. The Leaven

Leaven, also known as yeast, is used to cause bread to rise. This adds flavor and taste to the bread.

When bread was baked in those days, a small piece was kept as a starter for the next batch. This would ensure that the new batch of bread had yeast. In fact, when a Jewish girl was married, her mother would give her a piece of the last batch of bread baked in her old home as a wedding gift. This symbolized that the girl was given all of the blessing of her old home which she would then carry into her new home.

C. Insignificant Elements of the Parable

1. The Woman

As in many of the parables of our Lord, there are details which are added to enhance the picture of the parable and have no correlation with the interpretation. The main point of this parable is the influence of the Kingdom. We cannot say that the woman is God, since God is always pictured in the Bible as male (although in actuality God is a spirit and hence is sexless). Also, the existence or non-existence of the woman has no bearing on the meaning of the parable.

The use of the woman was probably an element of the parable that served to enhance the background, especially since women were the ones who baked the bread in those times.

D. Interpretation of the Parable

This parable is more easily interpreted by noting that this parable, and the Parable of the Mustard Seed, refer to basically the same thing, the growth and influence of the Kingdom.

1. The Meal

The meal is what the leaven has been hidden in. Since the leaven is defined in Matthew 13:33 as being the Kingdom, the meal must refer to the world.

This identification fits in with the theme of the parable and the meaning of the leaven which is discussed below. Any other interpretation does not fit the context and raises problems in determining the meaning of the parable.

2. The Leaven

The identification we give the leaven directly determines the interpretation we give this parable.

There are two basic interpretations given to the leaven. The first interpretation is that leaven refers to evil or sin. This is probably the most popular view. However, another view interprets the leaven as referring to influence. The goodness, or badness, of that influence is colored by the context in which it is used.

If we interpret leaven as sin, we have the following problems:

- What do we do about Leviticus 7:13 in which leavened bread was offered to God. If leaven pictures sin, then God would hardly have wanted leavened bread.
- The same question is made regarding Amos 4:5 in which God calls for a sacrifice of leavened bread. (This passage refers back to Leviticus 7:13).
- How should we interpret Matthew 16:12, Mark 8:15, and Luke 12:1, in which leaven is identified as hypocrisy and doctrine?
- How can the Kingdom of God be like leaven, if leaven is sinful? To make this interpretation, we need to say that the Kingdom of God needs to be interpreted in the general, and not strict sense. (see previous lesson on the Parable of the Mustard Seed for this).

However, if we interpret leaven as referring to influence, which is good or bad depending on the context, then the following points all make sense.

- The Feast of Unleavened Bread, which precedes the Passover, takes on its true significance.

For example:

1. The fact that God wanted them to use unleavened bread indicated the fact that he did not want them carrying any of the

things of their old life in Egypt into their new life in the promised land.

2. The unleavened bread symbolized haste. The expulsion of the Jews from Egypt occurred overnight. The use of unleavened bread would symbolize this haste. For insight into this, look at Exodus 12:34 following.
 - The use of leaven in Matthew 16:12, Mark 8:15, and Luke 12:1 makes sense. Jesus is actually telling his disciples to beware of the influence of the Pharisees and Sadducees. In fact, in Luke 12:1, this influence is stated to be hypocrisy. In other words, the Pharisees and Sadducees had lowered religion to a set of ordinances and had forgotten the attitudes of the heart.
 - The use of leaven in 1 Corinthians 5:6-8 makes sense. Paul is actually telling the Corinthians to purge out the influence of sin so that they may be pure and holy.
 - The use of leaven in Galatians 5:9 makes sense. The problem facing the Galatians was mixing legalism with the freedom we have in Christ. Paul tells that a little legalism ruins the whole batch. A modern paraphrase could be "one bad apple spoils the whole bunch".
 - The identification of the Kingdom of God as being leaven makes sense. The Kingdom of God is not evil, as it would of necessity be if leaven was sin. (see previous lesson regarding a discussion of the interpretation of the "Kingdom of God"). Jesus is actually telling his disciples that the Kingdom of God will start out small, but will eventually permeate and influence the entire world.

As a result of the above discussion, leaven is not used in the Bible to exclusively refer to evil, but to influence. As a result, we see the influence of the Kingdom as it permeates the world.

In support of the above statement, note that the western legal system, value of life, scientific advancements, and prosperity are all as a result of the permeating influence of the Bible. When countries build upon a foundation other than Christianity are examined, there is almost a universal disregard for human life and property. (India is a prime example of this).

Another good example of this is the Church. In 2 Thessalonians we find that the man of sin will not be revealed until the Holy Spirit is removed from the earth. Since the Holy Spirit resides in us, the full influence of evil is not felt. Once the Spirit is removed, however, the full extent and depth of evil will be felt and will eventually threaten to eradicate men from earth.

E. Application of the Parable

1. The influence of the Kingdom will start out small, but will eventually influence the entire world.

2. We must not become disheartened when it seems as though the world is winning. The influence of the Kingdom will be felt even if the majority of the world is unbelieving.