

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE NEW TESTAMENT MYSTERIES

Part IX

by Thomas Ice

“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

In our continued study of the Christ’s mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, we now arrive at the fourth parable of Matthew 13—the parable of the leaven. This parable is also found in Luke 13:20–21: “And again He said, ‘To what shall I compare the kingdom of God? It is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three pecks of meal, until it was all leavened.’” The gospel of Mark excludes this parable. Even though worded a little different, both renditions of the parable of the leaven are essentially the same. The leaven parable is second and last of the growth parables; the other one is the parable of the mustard seed. The leaven parable is also the final one spoken by Jesus to the public. After this parable, the rest are spoken in private to the disciples.

THE PARABLE OF THE LEAVEN

When it comes to interpreting this parable there are three main items to consider: 1) to what does the leavening process refer; 2) what is the significance of hiding the leaven in meal or flour; and 3) what is the meaning of the ultimate effect of the leaven in the loaf.¹ The focus of this parable is on one simple aspect—the leavening process.

“Leaven (ζύμη) was a common and necessary ingredient in the households of Palestine,” notes Mark Bailey. “It was a piece of the previous week’s fermented dough saved over to help cause the current week’s dough to rise. Leaven by itself is a fermenting agent which, when added to flour, causes it to rise and expand.”² Leaven is the same as yeast in our modern world of today. The foremost question debated in this parable is whether the leaven represents the spread of good or evil. If it refers to good then it speaks of the mysterious spread of the kingdom of heaven during the interadvent age. If it refers to evil then “the word represents evil and is used to illustrate the growth of evil within the group which professes to inherit the kingdom.”³ Even though there are some good points to the positive interpretation of leaven in this passage, I believe they are outweighed by the stronger reasons to see this passage referring to a corrupting influence during the interadvent age, which includes our current church age and the following tribulation period. Stanley Toussaint says, “It is consistent with the doctrine of Scripture concerning the evil character of the end of the church age and the tribulation (1 Timothy 4; 2 Timothy 3; Jude; 2 Peter 3; Revelation 6—19).”⁴

Leaven is used widely in the Old and New Testaments as a symbol representing evil. John Walvoord notes: “In the Old Testament, leaven is used consistently to represent evil. In sacrifices, which represent Jesus Christ, such as the unleavened bread on the table of showbread, no leaven was permitted. In cases where leaven was permitted, they inevitably represented human situations, as the peace offering of Leviticus 7:11–13, and the two loaves anticipating typically the professing church, mentioned in Leviticus 23:15–18.”⁵ The New Testament does not change the connotation of leaven; instead it continues the Old Testament emphasis. “In the New

Testament, leaven was used by Christ of the externalism of the Pharisees, of the unbelief of the Sadducees, and of the worldliness of the Herodians, and in general of evil doctrine (Mt 16:6–12; Mk 8:14–21). Paul's letters, likewise, leaven represents evil, as in I Corinthians 5:6–8 and Galatians 5:7–10.”⁶

It would seem to me that if Jesus had intended leaven to not have a negative connotation then He would have needed to note in the text that He was using it in a positive way since everything in the Jewish culture of their day points to a negative implication. Arno Gaebelin explains as follows: “Now the hearers of the parable certainly understood what was meant by leaven. No Jew would ever dream that leaven used in illustrating some power of process, could stand for something good. Leaven with the Jews means always evil. It was excluded from every offering of the Lord made by fire. Conscientiously the orthodox Jew searches his dwelling before keeping the feast of the unleavened bread, if perhaps a morsel of bread with some leaven may be hid. He purges out the leaven.”⁷

Since leaven is used only in the New Testament with an evil connotation and it is used that way primarily in the Old Testament as well, then there would need to be a clear indicator in the context that usage has shifted toward a good implication. Three other times Jesus uses the word in the New Testament (Matt. 16:11–12; Mark 8:15; Luke 12:1). “He speaks of the leaven of the Pharisees, the leaven of the Sadducees and the leaven of Herod.”⁸ The leaven of the Pharisees is hypocrisy “teaching as doctrines the precepts of men” (Matt. 15:9b). “The leaven of the Sadducees was rejection of doctrine, denying the resurrection and the existence of angels or spirits (Acts 23:8). The leaven of the Herodians consisted in changing of Jewish laws in order to conform to the non-Jewish practices of those who adhered to the Herodian political party.”⁹ Therefore, I think it speaks of a negative concept. “The parable applying to the kingdom of heaven in its mystery form applies to the professing church which will continue in the world after the true church, the body of Christ, is caught up at the time of the rapture.”¹⁰

The second item refers to the hiding of the leaven in the meal or flour. “In the parable, the meal represented that which is good, as it was made from wheat and not from tares,”¹¹ notes Walvoord. Since the wheat in a previous parable represents what is good, believers during the interadvent age, then the meal or flour must also be taken to have a good connotation. Further, the meal or flour would also be seen from yet another parable as the product produced by the good seed that is sown in the field. Toussaint says, “the verb used here, ‘to hide,’ is very unusual if leaven represents good. It is a much more fitting word if the leaven is to have a sinister effect. This is similar to the idea in the parable of the wheat and darnel. The way the woman hides the leaven in the meal parallels very closely the manner in which the enemy sowed darnel by night.”¹²

The woman hides the leaven in three pecks of meal, until it is all leavened. Three pecks of meal is equivalent to about 50 pounds of flour. Needless to say, that is a lot of flour. Yet, we see in Genesis 18:6, it is the amount Sarah used when hosting three men that visited Abraham: “So Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah, and said, ‘Quickly, prepare three measures of fine flour, knead it, and make bread cakes.’” Therefore, this amount of meal or flour is presented as a large amount in which the yeast will leaven.

The third item considers the meaning of the ultimate effect of the leaven in the loaf. The clear teaching in regard to the effect of the leaven in the loaf is that the loaf is fully leavened at the end of the process. What starts out as a small amount of leaven, when the process is ended, impacts the totality of the 50 pounds of flour.

CONCLUSION

Thomas Figart makes an excellent point about the interpretation of this parable in relation to the entire group of parables. “The interpretation of this parable, like all four uninterrupted ones, depends upon one’s approach to all seven in the series. If it is to be consistent with the others, then there must not only be agreement in emphasis, but there must also be a ‘*mystery*’ in each one.”¹³ If this parable is taken as a positive influence caused by the leaven, then it is saying that the kingdom will be glorious and victorious time during the present age. This has historically been known as postmillennialism, which is not taught in the Bible. Also, if the positive view of the leaven is taken then there is no mystery in what Jesus is teaching the disciples because the Old Testament presents a glorious and victorious aspect of the kingdom for Israel.

The parable of the mustard seed “had taught the disciples that the field was the world; this parable instructs the followers of the Lord as to how the message of the kingdom would outwardly be received in the world.”¹⁴ Figart explains: “The ‘*mystery*’ then would be represented in the fact that the ‘*meal*,’ the true ‘*word of the kingdom*’ would be penetrated with hypocrisy, improper doctrine and any other satanic influences working their way through until they were thoroughly mixed with the truth.”¹⁵ This view also is supported by the teachings of the New Testament, which pictures the current age as a time in which the gospel goes forth, but as that message becomes global in extent, the age becomes increasingly apostate. Maranatha!

(To Be Continued . . .)

ENDNOTES

¹ Mark L. Bailey, “The Parable of the Leavening Process” *Bibliotheca Sacra* (vol. 156, no. 621; January 1999), p. 63.

² Bailey, “Parable of the Leavening Process,” p. 63.

³ Stanley D. Toussaint, *Behold The King: A Study of Matthew* (Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 1980), p. 182.

⁴ Toussaint, *Behold The King*, p. 182.

⁵ John F. Walvoord, *Matthew: Thy Kingdom Come* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1974), p. 102.

⁶ Walvoord, *Matthew*, p. 102.

⁷ Arno C. Gaebelein, *The Gospel of Matthew: An Exposition* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1961), pp. 288–89.

⁸ Gaebelein, *Matthew*, p. 289.

⁹ Thomas O. Figart, *The King of The Kingdom of Heaven: A Commentary of Matthew* (Lancaster, PA: Eden Press, 1999), p. 269.

¹⁰ Walvoord, *Matthew*, pp. 103–04.

¹¹ Walvoord, *Matthew*, p. 103.

¹² Toussaint, *Behold The King*, p. 182.

¹³ Figart, *King of The Kingdom*, p. 268. Italics original.

¹⁴ Toussaint, *Behold The King*, p. 182.

¹⁵ Figart, *King of The Kingdom*, p. 270. Italics original.