

The Parables Of Matthew 13 (Part Five): The Parable Of The Leaven

by Martin G. Collins

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In Matthew 13, we see how Jesus Christ used parables to foretell certain situations that would affect God's church down through the centuries until His second coming. In the Parable of the Mustard Seed, He forecasts that the church would begin small and that evil, outside adversaries would try to subvert it from within. In the Parable of the Leaven (Matthew 13:33; Luke 13:20-21), He forewarns of internal doctrinal distortions.

Matthew 13's first four parables, which are in two pairs, all consistently reveal the church's future progress: In the Parable of the Sower, God's Word is rejected. In the Wheat and Tares, God's work is opposed. In the Mustard Seed, attempts are made to thwart God's plan. In the Parable of the Leaven, God's doctrines are corrupted. This parable has three specific but interlocking parts; the leaven, the woman, and the meal.

1. What does leaven represent? Matthew 13:33; Luke 13:21.

Comment: Physically, leaven is a lump of old dough in a high state of fermentation, or a substance that causes dough to rise (yeast). A natural reason for leaven's negative symbolism is the idea that fermentation implies a process of corruption. In the Old Testament, it is generally symbolic of sin and evil. In every instance that leaven appears in the Bible, it represents evil; the only exception, some say, is Jesus' use of leaven in this parable. Knowing its Old Testament significance, however, He would have used the symbol in the same way.

While some commentaries interpret this parable as depicting the spreading influence of the gospel, such explanations go against Jesus' use of this symbol. He uses it to refer to the evil doctrine of the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and Herod (Matthew 16:6-12; Mark 8:15), and this could easily apply to later corruptions of doctrine by those who place more importance on the traditions of men than on the Word of God.

Paul uses leavening as a type of sin in its development (I Corinthians 5:6-8). His reference to Christ's sinless sacrifice, and his statement that believers, as such, are *un*leavened shows the typical significance of leaven. In Galatians 5:7-9, its diffusive quality describes the harmful effects of false doctrine. He calls leaven a persuasion, something that exerts a powerful and moving influence, which hinders people from obeying the truth. Such a thing, he declares, is not from Him who calls us.

In the parable, the leaven alone is not what relates to the kingdom, but the entire concept in the parable, the progress of the church in history. The leaven is hidden in the meal, representing the way Satan subtly strikes against the truth. Leaven is symbolic of things that disintegrate, break up, and corrupt. The leaven of the Pharisees was hypocritical

formality. That of the Sadducees was skepticism. Herod's was of shameful self-indulgence in worldly desires. The leaven of those who have distorted doctrine down through the ages has been greed, pride, control, and worldly desires.

2. What does the woman represent? Same verses.

Comment: Whenever we find the symbol of a woman in the Bible, she represents a system of beliefs and practices that influence other people. Nations or political groups and religions or churches have specific unique beliefs. All human-based belief systems go contrary to God because "the carnal mind is enmity against God" (Romans 8:7). What the woman does and how she acts determines what belief system she is representing.

The woman in the parable takes leaven and hides it in the meal (Matthew 13:33). *Hid* is translated from the Greek word *enkrupto*, from which comes the English word "encrypt." The root word, *krupto*, means "to conceal" or "to keep secret." Hence, this woman is surreptitiously placing the leaven of false doctrine in the church. She is an opponent of Christ and infuses His church with corrupting ideas. Elsewhere she is called "Wickedness" (Zechariah 5:7-8), "Jezebel" (Revelation 2:20), and the "great harlot" (Revelation 17:1).

3. What are the three measures of meal? Same verses.

Comment: Three measures of meal would be a huge amount even for a large family—perhaps as much as is needed to make about a dozen loaves of bread. More importantly, most of the Jews listening to Jesus would have recognized the three measures of meal (an *ephah*) as the meal or grain offering (Leviticus 2). This offering was never allowed to contain leaven (Leviticus 2:5). The meal offering represents the offerer's service and loyalty to his fellowman and is typified in how Jesus Christ offered himself in service to mankind (Matthew 20:25-28). It portrays the second great commandment of Matthew 22:36-39: love of our fellow human beings. Thus, the three measures of meal represent love, service, and loyalty to others, specifically our brethren in the church.

Jesus warns in this parable that false doctrines would be infused by stealth into the church, and these evil beliefs would corrupt, erode, and destroy relationships. If the false doctrines are allowed to grow, affection and loving concern in service to one another are thwarted. The phrase "till all was leavened" is a sobering indication that the church would be plagued by insensitive, uncaring, self-absorbed, self-centered attitudes that would spread through the church just as leaven spreads through bread dough. The apostle Paul tells us "through love serve one another" (Galatians 5:13), which is an antidote to the woman's devious subterfuge.