

# The Parable of the Leaven

Matthew 13:33

*Halifax: 9 October 2005*

## **Introduction:**

Today we come to the fourth parable of the kingdom that Matthew records for us in chapter 13:

- The parable of the leaven in Matthew 13:33.
  - This parable illustrates how the kingdom of heaven will permeate everything!
  - Jesus tells us that the kingdom is like leaven that a woman takes and puts into three measures of meal...
    - and the leaven spreads into the lump of dough until it is all leavened!
    - This is how the Kingdom of God will grow!

What an encouragement this parable must have been to Jesus' disciples!

- He had just told them two parables that were rather unsettling to them...
  - It had always been their understanding (and the common understanding) that practically everyone in Israel would gladly receive the Messiah when He came...
    - But in the parable of the sower, Jesus told how many who would hear the gospel of the kingdom would never bring forth fruit—
    - And in the parable of the tares, He told how there would be false sons in the kingdom that would not be sorted out until the day of judgement.
- Jesus had to explain these parables to His disciples because they did not seem to fit with their expectations of what was supposed to happen when the Messiah came...
  - And besides this,
    - Jesus also told of the mustard seed which surprised them because it spoke of a small and inglorious beginning to His kingdom...
      - something they did not expect,
      - but at least it had the encouragement of the promise of extensive growth!
  - But now He tells them this parable of the leaven that greatly encourages them because it speaks of how the kingdom will remarkably spread!
    - It was an encouragement to them
      - and this morning I want to encourage you with this parable:

## **I. Here are three encouragements for you from this parable.**

A. First, be encouraged that it is the kingdom of God (not something else) that will spread like leaven.

1. Some people get confused because Jesus uses **leaven** in this parable...

a. And when we think about leaven,

- we think of something bad...
- We think about the Passover and how God told Israel to clean all the leaven out of their houses for the feast of unleavened bread:
  - In Exodus 12:15, the LORD said:
    - Ex 12:15: 'Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread. On the first day you shall remove leaven from your houses. For whoever eats leavened bread from the first day until the seventh day, that person shall be cut off from Israel.
    - Leaven was forbidden in all the Old Testament grain offerings that were offered to the Lord by fire.
- In the New Testament, Jesus warns of the leaven of the Pharisees which is bad doctrine,
  - And in 1 Corinthians,
    - Paul urges the Corinthians to purge out the leaven of malice and wickedness before they eat the New Testament Passover (that is, the Lord's Supper).

b. These negative associations with leaven have caused some Christians to suppose that Jesus must be talking about something evil in this parable...

- They have supposed that the leaven must refer to corrupt doctrine that will come into the kingdom of God and spread...
  - Or that it is sin that will infiltrate the entire church.
- But this is an awful doctrine!
  - It is an awful doctrine because the parable says that the leaven will permeate everything—
    - it will leave nothing that is not leavened!
    - The whole kingdom will be ruined.
      - All you can do with this interpretation is hope that the end will not happen in your lifetime!

TRANS> But I would argue that even if leaven was always used negatively in scripture, this would not exclude the possibility of a positive use here...

- A certain figure can be used in different ways in the Bible, depending on the context...

- Satan is called a lion in scripture,
  - but so is Jesus...
- Satan is frequently called a serpent,
  - but in John 3, Jesus is the serpent that is lifted up for salvation.
- Even if leaven was always used negatively elsewhere,
  - it still would not exclude a positive use in this parable...
- c. But the truth is, the Jews did not think of leaven as a bad thing...
  - It was generally looked upon as something good—
  - 1) It was something they enjoyed in their bread almost every day except for the one week each year when it was forbidden.
    - It was a tradition for a mother to give her daughter a bit of leaven when she got married so that she could put the leaven in the bread she baked in her new home and remember her mother.
  - 2) Leaven was something the Rabbis often used to illustrate good things...
    - For example, one common saying among the ancient Rabbis was this:
      - “Great is peace, in that peace is to the earth as leaven is to the dough.”

TRANS> But even more importantly, the Bible itself speaks of leaven in a positive way...

- 3) In fact, the Lord commanded them to use leaven at their harvest festivals—
  - For example, at Pentecost—they were commanded:
    - Le 23:17: ‘You shall bring from your dwellings two wave *loaves* of two-tenths *of an ephah*. They shall be of fine flour; they shall be baked with leaven. *They are* the firstfruits to the LORD.
  - They ate this leavened bread to rejoice before the Lord in the new life He had given them in the land!
    - This leavened bread was the bread of prosperity and rejoicing!
  - In contrast to this,
    - the unleavened bread that was eaten at the Passover was called the bread of affliction...
      - It represented how they had to eat in haste when they departed from Egypt—without time for their bread to rise...

TRANS> So you should not think of the leaven in Jesus' parable as representing what is bad or evil...

- It is the kingdom of heaven itself that will spread like leaven—
  - This parable is meant to be an encouragement for us!
- 1. Consider how excellent this kingdom is that Jesus speaks of here!

a. It is the kingdom of heaven!

- 1) The kingdom of heaven is the same thing as the kingdom of God...
  - The two appellations are used interchangeably in the gospels...
    - Matthew often favours “kingdom of heaven” because he is writing to Jews who customarily avoided the use of God’s name and so preferred to speak of the “kingdom of heaven” rather than the “kingdom of God.”

TRANS> So just what is the kingdom of God?

- 2) The kingdom of God is that which is under the rule of God.
  - Of course there is a sense in which everything is under the dominion of God as to His right and power...
    - And in that sense, everything is a part of His kingdom...
      - But the Bible does not ordinarily speak of the kingdom of God in that way...
      - It is a kingdom that not all are a part of...
  - The kingdom of God in the Bible is made up of those who willingly obey God as their king...
    - Those who desire to do the will of God on earth as the angels do in heaven.
- 3) And I would point out that this is what every human being ought to do—
  - a) We ought to all be like Jesus who said of God the Father,
    - “I always do the things that please Him.”
    - Jesus, taking on the human nature at His conception, was the ideal man—the perfect man...
      - The perfect man is the one who has no other purpose but to do the will of God.
      - He knows that He is here for God’s glory and that he has no glory in himself apart from God...

- He wants nothing else but to be in perfect harmony with His Creator.
  - He wants to please Him in all things,
    - anything else is repulsive to him.
- b) But this world is fallen so that we all come short of the glory of God.
- We are not the perfect man but the fallen man...
  - We do not do the will of God because of our sin...
    - God is not pleased with us...
      - He has sentenced us all to His eternal dungeon in the Lake of Fire.
      - That is where we rightly belong for rejecting His will.
      - We are cut off from His kingdom because of our sin.
- c) But Jesus came into this sinful world to establish God's kingdom of righteousness here—
- right here in this fallen sinful world!
  - He Himself became a man, and as a man, He was perfectly under the rule of God—without spot or sin...
    - And so He is the beginning of the kingdom of God!
    - He is the first one to do what every human ought to do!
      - He is the first one to truly be under the rule of God.
  - But He did not come here in order to set up the kingdom of God for Himself alone...
    - He came in order that He might bring others under the rule of God too...
      - And to do that,
        - He had to give Himself as an offering to take away the sins of all those that would be brought into this kingdom!
        - They were guilty of sin, and He had to pay the penalty of their sin so that God could accept them!
      - And so it was that by His death on the cross,
        - He prepared the way to bring many sons into God's kingdom.

- And besides dying for them,
    - He also must change their hearts so that they will want to serve God and come under His rule...
      - To bring about this change in them, He gives them the Holy Spirit who changes their hearts and makes them willing subjects.
    - This is how He brings us into the kingdom of God!
- b. Now the wonderful thing is that it is this kingdom that spreads like leaven!
- 1) It is not rebellion that Jesus speaks of here that spreads...
    - It is this kingdom of people who are reconciled with God.
    - It is these people out of this world who do the will of God.
  - 2) What marvellous thing it is!
    - They are accepted of God as well pleasing to Him for Jesus' sake!
    - They glorify Him by their attachment to Jesus and His death for them which demonstrates the righteousness of God—
      - showing that He could not accept them on any other terms...
        - without so great a sacrifice...
    - And they glorify Him by bringing forth the fruits of eternal life as His people...
      - growing in love for Him and for one another...
      - serving Him with greater and greater fidelity in the face of temptations and persecutions.
      - worshipping Him in Spirit and truth...
      - rejoicing in Him more and more

TRANS> This kingdom is a beautiful kingdom.

- Be encouraged that it is this excellent kingdom that will spread
  - That is the first great encouragement of this parable.
- A. Second, be encouraged that this kingdom will spread in the same **way** that leaven spreads.
1. Leaven spreads by being placed or hid in the lump of dough.
    - a. Understand that leaven is not quite the same thing as yeast—
      - Leaven is dough that has risen,

- and a chunk of this leaven was taken from the dough before it was baked to be used in the next batch of dough...
- And so the leaven was passed from one batch to the next so that each new batch could rise.
- And all a woman had to do was put the leaven in the new dough and it would spread its influence to the whole lump.

TRANS> This shows us how God's kingdom spreads...

- a. Jesus Himself came in our human nature,
  - He was like us in that He came in our flesh...
    - He was another piece of dough...
  - But He was unlike us in that He was leavened...
    - That is, He is full of the life of God—
      - full of righteousness...
      - full of that eternal life that pleases the father...
  - And so it is by His being placed among God's elect that God's elect obtain life through Him...
    - And once we have obtained life in the kingdom, we pass along this life to others who are next to us...
    - And so it continues from one person to the next until all are leavened.
1. Paul refers to this in Romans 1 when he speaks of how the gospel of Christ is the power of God unto salvation...
  - and that in the gospel, the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith...
  - a. By "the righteousness of God,"
    - Paul means the righteousness that God requires of us as men and women...
      - It is this righteousness of God that comes through faith in Jesus Christ, and is revealed "from faith to faith."
      - A person who believes the gospel reveals it to one who doesn't,
        - and then that one is added to the kingdom...
        - There is a succession of those who point to Jesus.
  - b. It all began with Christ who trusted in God's declared acceptance of His own sacrifice for our sins...

- He tells His disciples that God has accepted His offering for their sins...
    - They believe—they trust Him as the way of righteousness—
      - By faith, they become righteous...
    - Then they tell others that God has accepted Jesus' sacrifice,
      - Others believe so become righteous through faith...
      - And they tell others...
        - and so the kingdom spreads from faith to faith...
    - It spreads the same way leaven spreads—
      - from the part of the dough that is leavened to the part next to it that is not yet leavened...
      - It keeps spreading until all is leavened.
2. The great encouragement here is that God's kingdom spreads through you!
- As soon as the life of Christ finds its way to you,
    - it then spreads from you to others and from them to still others.
    - It keeps on going from one person to another and from one generation to another.
  - It does it in a very quiet way...
    - It is not by the decrees of the rulers of this world or by ingenious marketing techniques...
    - It is simply from one person who has faith in Him leading the next person.
      - It is for you to bring others to hear His word and to tell them what God has done in establishing His kingdom in this world.
  - It is marvellous that eternal life is conveyed to the whole lump through this simple method...
    - God has put you among others in this world as leaven!
      - You have eternal life and that life is contagious!
      - God is pleased to use you to influence others to come to Christ.
        - It is by His mighty power that gospel moves forward!

TRANS> So we have seen two great encouragements so far...

- First, that it is the kingdom of God (and not something else) that spreads like leaven...
- Secondly, that the kingdom of God spreads in the same way that leaven spreads... once it reaches you, it spreads from you to others near you.



A. Third, be encouraged that it will spread as extensively as leaven spreads.

1. Jesus says that the leaven will spread until **all** the dough is leavened!

a. First, this indicates that it spreads into the whole person...

- When God's kingdom breaks into your life, it reaches into every part of you.

1) It leavens your affections so that you delight in what God delights in...

- Instead of loving sin, you love righteousness!
- Instead of being like a pig who rolls in the mud, you clothe yourself with the garments of righteousness...

2) It leavens your attitude...

- Instead of looking at God as if He has cheated you in what He has given you, you are filled with gratitude...
- Instead of complaining, you rejoice even in your afflictions as sent from God for you to glorify Him.

3) It leavens your conduct...

- Instead of taking from others, you start giving to them and serving them...
- Instead of hating, you start loving them and sacrificing for them as Jesus did for you.

TRANS> Nothing is left untouched—the leaven spreads everywhere.

- But it does much more than leaven you as an individual.

b. It also leavens the things around you...

- It keeps leavening until all three measures of meal are leavened.

- It works its way into your family,
  - into your city,
  - into your nation,
  - into all the world....

- And in doing so, it changes everything in all these places...

- It changes every aspect of culture and life—
  - it leavens music and art,
  - it leavens politics,
  - it leavens literature,
  - it leavens education,

- it leavens business,
- it leavens industry,
- it leavens medicine...

TRANS> Jesus says plainly that the leaven works until all is leavened!

2. But note well that it is not every person that is leavened...

- it is the three measures of meal that are leavened.
  - a. Three measures of meal refers to a pre-determined amount...
    - Jesus has made it clear in the previous parables that not everyone who hears the gospel will be saved...
      - In the parable of the sower, there were four kinds of ground that received the seed of the gospel...
        - but there was only one that brought forth fruit.
      - And in the parable of the tares, the tares were sown among the wheat and were separated out at the end.

TRANS> There is no contradiction here...

- The parable of the leaven is not saying that everyone will be saved...
  - b. Jesus is telling you here that all the elect will be saved...
    - The three measures of meal represent the elect people of God, chosen by God from before the foundation of the world...
      - God the Father has given a set number of people to His Son to be saved by Him,
        - and everyone of these will come to Jesus—not one will be excluded—
        - As Jesus said, “All that the Father has given to me will come to me, and I will lose nothing.”
        - As many as have been appointed to eternal life will be saved.
  - c. And in saying this, we must not suppose that only a few will be saved...
    - God promises that He will bring many sons to glory!
      - The kingdom of God will cover the earth as the waters cover the sea.
      - Though it will not spread to every person, it will spread to every place and every language and people.
    - All seventy of the families of the earth that were separated at Babel will be blessed through Jesus Christ.

- God promised to Abraham that “in your seed, all the families of the earth will be blessed.”
- What a marvellous thing it is to see, as we considered last time, how far the kingdom of God has already spread...
  - God was not satisfied to only give Christ the nation of Israel,
    - He promised to give Him the nations as His inheritance...
    - And that is what we see happening before our very eyes today.

TRANS> And so you see these three encouragements from the parable of the leaven...

1. That it is the glorious kingdom of God that will spread...
2. That it will spread like leaven from one person to another...
3. That it will spread until all the elect are completely brought under God—not one will be left out.

**I. But what if you look out and you do not see the kingdom spreading as you would like? What then?**

A. Do not despair. This parable was given for encouragement in such times.

1. When Jesus spoke these words,
  - a. He was already facing a great deal of rejection...
    - He was surrounded by many in Israel who were not the three measures of meal, but the chaff...
    - He had only a small and lowly band of disciples that were leavened...
    - What’s more,
      - He knew that the days were soon coming when He would be rejected by His own people and delivered over to the Romans to be crucified.
      - He knew what a discouragement this would be to His disciples...
        - to see the One they had hoped to be the Messiah cut off and rejected by the leaders of their nation.
  - b. It was indeed a time of hardening and judgement in the land of Israel.
    - The vast majority of the nation was blinded so that they could not recognise the Messiah...
    - And God had determined that in 70 AD,
      - He would bring the Romans upon them to destroy them for shedding the blood of Jesus and all the prophets.

- The true Israel of God was not Israel after the flesh—those who were merely born of Abraham...
    - The true Israel of God included only those who delighted in their Messiah, Jesus Christ...
      - They were the three measures of meal that were leavened.
        - The rest were set apart to be judged.
2. And so it is in our nation today.
- There is a sense in which we can say that ours is a Christian nation,
    - God has blessed us with the gospel for many years and there are many who have been baptised in our land...
  - But there is no question that God is sending His judgement upon us...
    - Clearly He has blinded us and there is a great turning away from the gospel.
      - And unless things change, we can expect the collapse of our nation as we know it.
        - God will deliver us into the hands of our enemies...
3. But do not despair, when this happens, it is not God's kingdom that is shaken...
- God's kingdom cannot be shaken.
    - a. When Jerusalem fell in 70 AD, it was not the kingdom of God that was shaken, but that which claimed to be the kingdom of God...
      - God's people can be persecuted and afflicted, but His kingdom will continue...
        - And in fact, the times of persecution are often the times when the kingdom grows the most!
    - b. You must not confuse the three measures of meal with our nation or with some other nation...
      - The three measures of meal where the leaven works are the remnant within the nation that God will save—
        - They are the true Israel of God according to election,
          - and they will all be saved without a single exception.
    - c. When Rome fell, there were many Christians who equated Rome with the City of God,
      - They were greatly discouraged because it seemed like the kingdom of God had fallen...

- but Augustine wrote his book entitled “The City of God” to dispel that notion.
- He argued that what had fallen was not the city of God but the city of man...
  - the City of God would continue forever and nothing could stop it.
  - He was right!
    - Though there have been times in many places when it looked like the gospel was at an end, it is not so...
      - God is faithful and there is always a remnant according to election.
        - There is always the three measures of meal that will be entirely leavened
        - Just because the people around you reject Christ does not mean that God is not leavening the whole lump for Christ.
          - His purposes cannot be thwarted.

TRANS> But still, what should you do if the gospel is having very little effect?

- Should you just say, “Oh well, the elect will be saved?”
    - No! You are not to be indifferent!
- B. When the leaven is not leavening, you are **not** to despair,
- but you **are** to repent and pray earnestly that God’s kingdom would grow!
1. You are to repent because you see God’s judgement falling upon your people!
    - If they are not being leavened, it is God’s judgement!
  - a. You are to be like Daniel who prayed for Israel during the captivity.
    - He did not pray “forgive them,” but he included himself...
      - He said, “forgive us!”
        - He saw himself as part of the problem...
        - He refused to look at himself in isolation from his people.
    - Yes, even though Daniel was clearly among the elect people of God, He knew that he was still a part of the whole nation,
      - and he knew that it was because of their sins that God had hardened them and had now delivered them into the hands of their enemies.

- b. This is the same spirit you find in Paul when he prays so earnestly for the nation of Israel in his day...
    - Paul knew that the elect would be saved,
      - but he was willing to be accursed for the sake of his brethren who were not saved if that might be the means of saving them...
      - And his life backed that up...
      - He demonstrated a love for them that would not quit!
        - He was willing to lay down his life that they might be saved.
  - c. But this spirit did not originate with Paul or Daniel...
    - It originated with Jesus Christ who repented for all of us who are in God's kingdom today...
      - He prays for us and He gave Himself for us on the cross...
      - He not only was **willing** to be accursed for us if that might be the means of our salvation,
        - but He **was** in fact accursed for us that we might be saved!
2. If you do not have this same spirit of earnestness for your people,
- It is questionable if you are really leavened yourself...
    - At least, the leaven has not permeated your life the way it should!
    - Repent and pray that the leavening power of the gospel might reach to you and permeate you throughout your whole being.

**Conclusion:**

- Brothers and sisters,
  - Our Lord gives us tremendous encouragement in this parable of the leaven!
    - He shows us what the gospel is meant to do in us and among us!
  - Do not be cold and indifferent about the wonderful hope that is held forth in this parable!
    - The life of Christ is meant to spread from one person to another, but how can it spread if it is not spreading in you?
      - How can the leaven reach your children if it is not in you?
      - How can the leaven reach your neighbours if it has not reached you?
      - How can the leaven reach the people at work or the people of our city if it is not permeating your life?

- I do not say that there has to be a certain result—that so many people have to be saved...
  - but I say that there ought to be that same sort of desire that you see in Jesus and in Daniel and Paul for others to be saved...
  - If you are cold and indifferent about the salvation of your children and your neighbours, you clearly have a different spirit and you need to repent.
    - When you hear this parable,
      - you should want the leavening power of Christ's kingdom to thoroughly permeate you and to work through you to permeate others.
      - The kingdom of heaven is like leaven.