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Parables 05 The Parable of the Yeast

Matthew 13:33
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The parables of the mustard seed and the yeast were given as a pair, without any break between them, because they describe the same thing from two different perspectives. Some view the parable of the mustard seed as representing the growth of the kingdom in a positive sense and the yeast as representing the spread of the godly influence of the church. Others who interpret the growth of the mustard seed as representing the unnatural growth of the institutional church also see the leaven as the ungodly influence that the false brethren, who are represented by the weeds in the parable of the wheat and the weeds, will have on the true church. Although only one of these interpretations can be right, both parables need to be considered together when interpreting them. Regardless of which interpretation someone embraces, the focus of the parable of the mustard seed is on the outward growth of the kingdom of heaven and the parable of the yeast describes what is taking place on the inside.

- READ MATT. 13:31-33 -

1.) **The Elements of the parable-**

a.) **Yeast** - The leaven, or yeast, that Jesus was referring to was not the clean packages of yeast from the grocery store that we are familiar with. In biblical times it referred to a piece of decaying bread that was permeated with yeast. Yeast is a type of small single celled fungi that causes fermentation as it consumes a food source. The yeast in this piece of leavened dough would then begin multiplying rapidly throughout the entire lump of dough. As the yeast feeds on the carbohydrates in the dough it produces little carbon dioxide gas bubbles which causes the dough to rise and become fluffy bread when it's baked. In biblical times when you prepared some dough for baking bread you would take a small piece of leavened dough that you had been saving, and mix it in with the new batch of dough. Then after the new batch of dough was permeated throughout with the yeast they would take a small piece and save it for the next batch of dough. This process would continue unbroken until the Feast of Unleavened Bread. The Jews were commanded by God to remove all of the leavened bread, and anything else that might contain yeast, from their houses in preparation for the Feast of Passover and keep it out of their houses for a period of 7 days (Ex. 12:15). God had the nation of Israel do this as an illustration of the need to remove sin from our lives before seeking fellowship with a holy God (1 Corinthians 5:6-8). Leaven was not allowed to be included in any of the sacrifices made to the Lord by fire (Leviticus 2:11).

b.) **The three measures of meal-** The word Greek word for measure is "Seah", which is about 7 quarts. Three measures is about 3/5 of a bushel. Some commentators see a significance the fact that Jesus described the dough as being "three measures" in this parable. Someone has suggested that this is a reference to the Jews, the Samaritans, and the Greeks. Someone else has said that this represents all of the people of the world because everyone has descended from one of the three sons of Noah, Shem, Ham, and Japheth (Genesis 10:1-32). There is nothing however in the immediate or extended context of this parable that would indicate that either of these considerations is key to Jesus' point in the parable.

Jesus may not have intended any special significance to there being three measures of dough because this was a common amount of dough that someone would prepare for baking bread. When the three visitors came to Abraham in Genesis chapter 18 he had Sarah prepare three measures of dough to make cakes (or loaves) for his guests (Genesis 18:6).

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- c.) **The Woman Who Put the yeast (Leaven) in the Dough** - Some commentators say that the woman in this parable represents the Church because they see the yeast as something good that the Church imparts to the Kingdom of God. Others place significance in examples like the way Jezebel misled the people of Israel, and the harlot in Revelation chapter 17 as parallels to show the evil intent of the woman because they see the yeast as something bad. But for every woman deceiver in the bible you can find at least five men who were false prophets or deceivers. The preparing of the bread was typically a woman's job just as planting of the mustard seed in the previous parable was typically a man's job. So there may not be any significance to the fact that Jesus used the activity of a woman in this parable. It's important to see the main point of the parable and not to develop some separate meaning for every detail in it.
- 2.) **Interpretation #1** - Some commentators interpret the parables of the mustard seed and the leaven as Jesus' teaching that when the gospel is proclaimed throughout the world it would produce a beneficial effect in its outward manifestation as well as its internal workings.
- a.) **The Parable of the Yeast (leaven)** – This parable also symbolizes the small beginnings of the kingdom of heaven that eventually influences the entire world just as a little bit of yeast will permeate a lump of dough. As the word of the kingdom, or the gospel, that is symbolized by the yeast is spread, the whole world will be transformed by it. Although the end result may not be the conversion of the world you can at least see the influence of the Christian world view on all of the societies where the gospel has been preached. Because we have been commanded to make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:19) Christian values have spread through the whole world as a result of the faithful preaching of the gospel.
- b.) **The yeast cannot be evil**- The leaven has to represent the positive influence of Christianity because Jesus said that the kingdom of heaven is like leaven... therefore the leaven can't be referring to something evil. This unfortunately fails to take into consideration exactly what Jesus said. Jesus never said that the kingdom of heaven was like leaven. What He said was that the kingdom of heaven was like leaven *that was hid in three measures of meal.*
- 3.) **Interpretation #2** - Other commentators interpret the parables of the mustard seed and the leaven as Jesus' teaching that when the gospel is proclaimed throughout the world it would produce unnatural growth in its outward manifestation as well as impurity within among those who profess their allegiance to the King.
- a.) **The Parable of the Yeast (leaven)** - This parable is an expansion of how Jesus described the field that would be completely over sown with weeds. In the parable of the weeds and the wheat Jesus said that there would be a mixture of sons of the kingdom and sons of the evil one. He did not change the subject as he was telling these parables. The words leaven and unleavened occur 71 times in the Old Testament, and 17 times in the New Testament [1]. Here Jesus is not trying to say that the gospel is like yeast but that the kingdom of heaven is like dough that has been permeated by a corrupting agent like yeast. If the yeast in this parable represents the gospel then this would be the only place in the entire Bible where yeast is used as a symbol that represents something good. Without exception, wherever yeast or leaven is used in the Bible it always symbolizes evil or corruption of some kind.
- **False Doctrine**; In Matthew 16:6-12- Jesus warned his disciples of the “yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees”. In verse 12 we are told that Jesus meant that the distorted teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees was like yeast.
 - **Hypocrisy**; In Luke 12:1- Jesus told his disciples to also “...Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy.”
 - **False Teachers**; Galatians 5:9 Paul uses the same illustration of yeast working through a batch of dough when he warned the Galatians about the false teachers.
 - **Immorality**; In 1 Corinthians 5:6-8 Paul rebukes the believers at Corinth because they were tolerating sin in the Church. He then tells them “don't you know that a little yeast works

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through the whole batch of dough." Paul was saying that if this sinful behavior was allowed to remain in their midst it would corrupt the entire Church.

There are only two offerings in the Old Testament in which yeast was to be included in them but neither of these were offerings that were made on God's holy altar. The first one is found in Leviticus 7:13 which is a peace offering. This is a perfect representation that even in our thankfulness toward God there is still impurity. The second is in Leviticus 23:17 where God said that the two wave loaves on the day of Pentecost were to contain yeast. The two wave loaves symbolized the two people groups that would make up the Church (Jew and Gentile) and each individual in those two groups have a sin nature within them (Rom.7:14-25) that is symbolized by the yeast. In every other place in the Old Testament the prohibition against using yeast symbolized purity.

- 3.) **Conclusion-** The kingdom will not be purified until it reaches it's eternal state when Jesus puts all enemies under his feet, and delivers the kingdom to the Father (1Corinthians 15:24-25). We know that not everyone who names the name of Christ has been truly born again. Although there are some people who have trusted in the death of Jesus as full payment for their sins, who are in the process of producing fruit in their lives which is not entirely evident. There are others in the ranks of professing Christianity who are not Christians that can talk the talk and walk the walk. This should not surprise those of us who are sons of the kingdom. With this in mind, we should not to become discouraged by the lack of commitment we sometimes see in others. Some of them may not be sons of the kingdom. We should also be careful not to judge others by what we think they should be doing for God. We could easily mistake someone who is an immature Christian, or in need of a little encouragement or correction as someone who is not a child of God. This is not to say that we should tolerate doctrinal error or unrepentant behavior in the Church. Jesus and the Apostles clearly taught that the leadership of the Church needs to exercise oversight of the assembly to protect it. If anyone in the Church is stubbornly disobedient to the moral teaching in the scriptures or advocates teaching that is contrary to the teaching of the scriptures they should be excluded from the assembly (Matt.18:15-17, 1 Cor.5:1-13, 2 Thess.3:6,14). We simply need to be savvy enough to realize that not everyone who embraces the facts or values of Christianity is necessarily a Christian.

[1] All the Parables of the Bible. Lockyer, pg. 192