

UNDERSTANDING LEAVEN

The past teachings have pictured leaven as being bad. This has resulted in an understanding that leaven equals sin. In I Cor. 5:6-8 Paul equates leaven with malice and wickedness and by contrast unleavened with sincerity and truth. *“Your glorying is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Therefore purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, since you truly are unleavened. For indeed, Christ our Passover, was sacrificed for us. Therefore let us keep the feast, not with the old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.”* Leaven here is put in a bad light.

In Galatians 5:7-9 Paul gives a stern warning about being led away from the truth. A little leaven in pure flour is like a false teaching being mixed with truth, resulting in more false teaching until the whole is destroyed.

When the instructions of Exodus 12:14-20 and Leviticus 23:6-8, require that leaven be put out of one’s home, the connection of leaven being sin can easily be made. As Paul says, we are to become unleavened - equating leaven with sin.

I Cor. 6:9-10, *“Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetousness, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God.”*

Paul gives us a rather complete list of the kind of conduct that would keep us out of God’s kingdom. In the past it was thought there was an exception in Matt. 13:33. *“Another parable he spoke to them: ‘The kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal until it was all leavened.’”* Here it was thought that Christ used leaven to picture the kingdom of God; that time when Christ would return to this world to bring us the millennial kingdom. This presents a problem in understanding how leaven is to be comprehended. Good or bad? It has led a few to picture some leaven as good and some leaven as bad. Can leaven change; or are there two different families of leaven, one good and one bad?

The key to understanding this parable is to know what Christ meant by “The Kingdom of God.” The parable of the flour and the woman in Matt. 13:33 is part of a block of seven teachings that He gave; four of them to the people and the last three to the disciples in private.

The Kingdom of God is the focal point of each of these parables. Without knowing what He meant by that phrase the intent of the parables is lost. When examining these seven as a unit it will show that they are pointing to a specific period of time. The first parable deals with the acceptance of the Father’s call and how the individual who is rooted in the truth bears much fruit. The time period here is pictured by the seven church eras when the adversary Satan, pictured by the birds was free to work against God’s people. This places the time frame before the millennium. Likewise, the parable of the tares has the same time setting. Its main thrust is tares, which appear as true brothers, but through stealth they bring in heresy. Why? It is because they bring in poisoned doctrine – heresy. Again, the time is pre-millennial because Satan is directing the tares which he planted.

The third is the planting of the mustard seed. The kingdom has its beginning as a small seed, just as the work of God was started by the Apostles was small. The mustard seed grows into a large plant compared to other herbs, but when compared to a true tree it is quite insignificant. It is large enough to provide a living place for birds. Remember who the birds depicted in the first parable – Satan and his workers. Christ pictures the called ones as a very visible plant, but not over powering, and even though it lacks the power and stature in this world, it is still capable of providing a place for Satan and his workers – the birds who nest in it. To the Church in Pergamos he writes in Rev. 2:14-15. *“But I have a few things against you, because you have there those who hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit sexual immorality. Thus you also have those who hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which things I hate.”* It should be clear that false doctrine would be promulgated from within the group of called ones – His church.

The fourth parable spoken to the people is about the three measures of flour and the woman who hides a little leaven

in the flour. When something is hidden it is because someone does not want it to be found out. What did Satan not want known? It is the fact that he has substituted error for truth. Using the analogy of the leaven growing in the flour Christ is saying that error would grow among the true Church of God until it has completely lost its identity.

Christ gave as an example the Pharisees, comparing their work to that of leaven. They started with God's law, and over time gradually added "do's and don'ts," until the whole intent of God's way of life was destroyed. Christ rightly condemned them in Matt: 23:15, "*Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel land and sea to win one proselyte, and when he is won, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves.*"

For us, this is seen in the historical loss of truth from the apostles to the present time. When Mr. Armstrong came on the scene the vast majority of truth had been compromised or lost. He pictured it as a wilderness of doctrine. In looking back, it is clear that these false doctrines were designed to hide the truth of God's word. This parable, through the use of leaven and how it works, pictures what took place in the early church. Jude 4 says, "*For certain men have crept in unnoticed, who long ago were marked out for this condemnation, ungodly men, who turn the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ.*"

Once again, looking at leaven and following the instructions of Ex. 12 and Lev. 23 it should be clear that the use of leaven is only restricted for one week of the year. What a strange substance; bad for one week and then alright to be used the rest of the year.

Thinking in this way causes us to miss the real message God makes about leaven. He wants us to look at a PROPERTY of leaven as it acts in flour. As Matt. 13:33 shows leaven makes a total change in flour no matter how little you begin with. It is this proclivity that we need to understand. That is why it is ok to use leaven in general. God is telling us that sin has this same proclivity as leaven. If sin gets a foothold it can destroy you.

Matt. 16:5-12, "*And when his disciples had come to the other side, they had forgotten to take bread. Then Jesus said to them, 'Take heed and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees.' And they reasoned among themselves, saying, 'It is because we have taken no bread.' But when Jesus perceived it, He said to them, 'Oh you of little faith, why do you reason among yourselves because you have brought no bread? Do you not understand, or remember the five loaves of the five thousand and how many baskets you took up? Nor the seven loaves of the four thousand and how many large baskets you took up? How is it you do not understand that I did not speak to you concerning bread? But you should be aware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.' Then they understood that He did not tell them to beware of the leaven of bread but of the **doctrine** of the Pharisees and Sadducees.*"

This scripture clears up the point that the property of leaven is what needs to be guarded against. The teaching of the Pharisees appears great on the outside but when closely examined it is there to destroy the individual. The Pharisees turned God's way of life into a physical system of living rather than the real intent of loving God above all, and man as self. They could not see that God's commandments were a spiritual guide he wanted man to have and the faith to follow them.

Leaven cannot change its property. Then what is the biblical lesson for us? If you put a little leaven in flour it will leaven the whole. This property is what God uses to give us understanding – that by allowing sin in it will affect one's whole life. This is the one characteristic of leavening that will give us understanding when used in God's word.

Christ pointedly uses three measures of flour in the parable. Is this measure of three used in any other place in the bible? Gen. 18:6 Abraham told Sarah to quickly make *three* measures of fine meal; kneaded and made into cakes. The cakes would obviously have had to be unleavened as they were made quickly.

There is an important representation in the three measures of flour that he has prepared for Christ and the two angels. The three measures of flour were made into unleavened bread, and he is giving them this bread in its most simple form – a representation of the way he lived his life.

Christ had been persuaded to accept his hospitality, and in so doing He accepted Abraham because of his character,

and the three measures of fine meal represented that character. In Gen. 26:5 God reminds Isaac that he is given the potential blessing because of the kind of person Abraham was. This verse reads: *“Because Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes and my laws.”*

There are three important pillars that made Abraham the kind of man that God used as an example to everyone wishing to please God. First God said, “He obeyed.” This required that he had to know truth. He also needed to know what was required to be obeyed. This information was acquired verbally from his ancestors – his only source. Abraham had their examples of obedience and faith – obedience to God – His laws, statutes and judgments. Men, who by the way they lived their lives, demonstrated these principles, like Able, Enoch, Noah and his son Shem. These in turn passed the knowledge down to their progeny.

In effect this was Abraham’s bible. If he was to obey the truth he needed to understand it, and to acquire the knowledge of the truth – God’s Way of Life. Once truth was acquired through knowledge he had to have the faith to live it. We come to know truth because God opens our minds to it. The more our knowledge of truth increases, as God continues to open our minds, our faith to obey increases.

In Hosea 4:1 God requires three things – truth, mercy, and knowledge of God. The word “mercy,” #2617 in Strong’s has the additional meaning of “faithfulness.” When considering Heb. 11:6 it becomes clear that used in context the word should be translated as faithful. *“But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.”*

In the parable of the three measures Christ presents the meal as the pure teaching of the kingdom, and we need those three teachings – truth, faith, and the knowledge of God to go forward in our Christian life. The woman (false church) injects leaven in an attempt to destroy God’s truth. Initially only a little, but it grows through the ages of the church until the whole is leavened.

Christ uses these first four parables to stress the point that Satan, through false teachers, would constantly be trying to subvert the truth of God, until the truth would be mostly lost. This had happened when God used Mr. Armstrong to restore the true path to salvation. Christ promised that the gates of hell would never prevail against those who were called and chosen. By this statement He gives His guarantee that His way of life would always be active.

The two remaining parables were given to the disciples to impress upon them the tremendous gift they had been given, and to obtain it all else had to be sacrificed. Today we are His disciples and need to accept this picture of placing His gift as the most important object of life. The final parable is that this life is a sorting process in which Christ judges those who are fit for the kingdom, and the destruction of those who are not.

Leviticus 23 pictures two events; the waving of the pure grain before God and then fifty days later the waving of two loaves of bread baked with leaven. It is understood that the pure grain represents Christ and the two loaves represent the Old and New Testament people called of God.

Leaven cannot affect whole grain; therefore the seven days of unleavened bread are another way of saying seven days without sin. This is a picture of Christ’s sinless life to which we are to attain.

There is a second property of leaven that should be recognized. The baking of leaven kills it. Those called are in the process of killing sin. The parallel of baking is this: We, having sin in our lives are placed in the oven of life. The first heat kills the leaven on the outside of the loaf. The inner part of the loaf is insulated and takes a greater amount of time for the heat to reach it, just as the inner sins of our life are more difficult to overcome. We are put in the “oven” to kill all of the sin. What is the goal? – That we become like Christ.

Once a convert is baptized they enter into the baking process; the killing of sin and a life of overcoming.

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