

Lessons from Leaven

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[0 : 00] I'm with me now to Matthew chapter 13, and today I'd like to consider together the words of verse 33, Matthew 13 and verse 33.

! He told them another parable, the kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour till it was all leavened.

As you'd expect, I'm usually asked a number of questions about my retirement, the most common one being, how is retirement?

How many times I've answered that question, I'm sure everybody who's retired has found the same after they retire. But another question is, what are you doing with yourself in your retirement?

Well, I'm preaching most weeks, but one thing I've taken up doing since I retired is making bread. Making bread. And I enjoy making bread.

[1 : 04] Making bread is a very interesting process. Okay, I've got a bread machine. I don't have to do all that kneading, all that pulling and manipulating of dough and waiting for ages until the whole thing's ready to go in the oven.

You shove it all into the machine and it does the work for you. Even the baking of it. You just take out the finished loaf. But you need to be sure that you've put all the ingredients in that the loaf requires.

And that they are in exactly the right measurements according to what you're given in the guidance for making the different types of bread. If you don't keep to the guidance accurately, your bread's not going to turn out the way it should be at all.

But it's an interesting process. And one of the most interesting things about it, as in making of bread at any time, is the use of yeast. Yeast nowadays, you can still get the old type of yeast, but yeast nowadays is mostly dried yeast, just powder.

And that has to be added to all the other ingredients or else the bread will not rise. And yeast has fascinating properties. It's a fascinating material.

[2 : 20] It has a fascinating in its substance, in the way it works. Because as soon as it begins to work, it affects, as we'll see today from the study, the whole batch of ingredients or the dough, if you like, as it's mixed together.

The yeast does its own work so that eventually it produces what turns out to be a loaf of bread. And the Bible uses yeast, or leaven as it is here.

This is the word leaven that's used, the same thing, leaven, yeast. The Bible uses that illustratively. It uses yeast to illustrate, for example, the workings of sin.

Because just as yeast works and spreads through the whole batch of dough, so sin is like that in our lives individually or in the life of any group of people.

If it's left unrepented of, undisturbed, it'll grow in its own way. Sin is never static. It's never a neutral negative thing.

[3 : 25] It always has growth properties unless the growth is stemmed by the addition of grace or the power of God. But yeast is also used positively, as it is in this verse here.

The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour until it was all leavened. The positive element that yeast is, is also used here in the Bible to emphasize a positive result.

The yeast was put into the batch of dough until the whole batch was leavened and ready just to be put in the oven to be baked as bread. That's the good use of this illustration, the use of the illustration in a good sense in the Bible.

So what does that actually tell us today? What are we learning from this brief verse or reference to yeast? Well, two things. Look at the second one mostly.

But first of all, yeast is actually a living organism. You might not think that as you take the wee sachet of powdered yeast or dried yeast and put it into the dough.

[4 : 34] But yeast retains its own properties so that when the liquid is added to it, it begins then to use, it begins then to affect the whole batch of dough.

And if you take what used to be the yeast that was kept in a little jar or a little bottle, you just took a little bit of it, added it to the dough, and the bit that you left behind still kept on growing, you could use it again and again.

It has in itself this property. It is itself a living organism. That's what makes it so fascinating. That yeast has within it the properties that it shows once it begins to work.

And that's true of the kingdom of God. Now, the kingdom of God, we could spend ages actually trying to define what the Bible means by the kingdom of God. But the kingdom of God is essentially where God's influence or God's grace reigns and spreads throughout humanity, spreads throughout any people or even any individual.

Where the grace of God is at work, the kingdom of God is in that person, the kingship of God is being shown in that person, allegiance to God as king is evident in that person, or in a congregation like yourselves, where you find that congregation growing spiritually.

[5 : 53] That's the advancement of the kingdom of God. The God as king is made evident through the way you're showing allegiance to him as a congregation.

And whenever you find the influence of God through his people advancing, the kingdom of God is seen in that. The kingdom of God shows itself and grows in that.

Well, here is what he's saying. The kingdom of God is like leaven, like this yeast that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour. And as it's true of the yeast that it has, as a living organism that has this property in itself, it makes it a very suitable illustration for the kingdom of God.

Because the kingdom of God, it doesn't depend on us to grow. Yes, it's something in which we contribute our life, and in which we contribute as we'll see the things that we can bring to others about the gospel and about Christ.

But the kingdom of God has within itself the properties of growth. Because God is at work in the growth of his kingdom.

[7 : 01] The spirit of God is at work in the growth of his kingdom. Where you have the word of God, where you have the faithful preaching of the word of God, where you have the sacraments, where you have prayer, where you have God's people worshiping together, where you have that witness and commitment to God going on in any congregation or any individual.

There you have, within that commodity, the principles, if you like, of growth, of effectiveness. You add the power of God.

You add the grace of God. And all of that comes together for the advance of the kingdom. The kingdom has within itself the capacity, the influence, that by the grace of God, by the work of God's Spirit, it becomes a living force.

It moves in such a way as to bring people into its provisions. The kingdom of God is like leaven. It has in itself that capacity.

It's a living organism. It's not neutral. It's not static. It's not negative. It's positive. And it has that capacity.

[8 : 18] But secondly, more fully, the kingdom of God, like yeast, yeast is a change-bringing organism. Not just a living organism. It's a change-bringing organism.

When you add yeast to the batch of dough, it immediately begins to change things. It permeates for a start. It permeates the whole batch.

You see what the verse is saying? This woman took this leaven and she hid it. She placed it in three measures of flour until it was all leavened.

She didn't actually do this and then almost immediately try and bake the dough into bread. She left it until it was all leavened, until the yeast had done its work through that whole batch of dough.

And Jesus is saying, that is what the kingdom of God is like. In other words, your Christian influence is designed to permeate that society, that batch of human dough, if you like, into which God has placed you as an individual, into which God has placed you as a congregation.

[9 : 27] You are here in this town, you are here in this community, as God's living organism, God's living yeast, God's living leaven, so that you see yourselves as a congregation, as actually placed for a purpose, where God has placed you here in Stornoway, so that the influence of your life will

permeate the whole batch of humanity, hopefully, prayerfully, that God has placed you amongst. That's the growth that you're praying for and looking for. It's designed to permeate the whole of society around you.

You don't leave any aspect of that society out. You don't leave any kind of person out of that influence of the grace of God working through you. The doctrines that you believe in, the lifestyle of a Christian, all of those things are designed to act as the leaven in the part of the dough.

And your part and my part is to be that leaven in our society. You leave the change to the Holy Spirit. You can't bring about the conversion of any individual. Nobody can.

But you have to be, as Jesus put it elsewhere, in the position of making disciples. Bringing the leaven of your Christian life and influence to bear upon the people around you.

[10:57] You're leaving the work of regeneration, the work of bringing to life spiritually, to the Holy Spirit. You can't do it anyway. But the Holy Spirit is not going to do what the Bible requires you and me to do.

That's to be leaven in society. It's a bit like what Jesus says elsewhere, you are the salt of the earth. Just like salt has an influence on the whole, whatever food you're adding salt to, it doesn't just salt a tiny wee bit of it, it spreads through the whole lot.

It affects the savor of the whole thing. So the leaven spreads throughout the dough. So the congregation that you are in this world, that God has given you to be, and where God has placed you, you're a congregation to act as leaven in this society around you.

And just like the leaven begins to activate the moment, you actually add the water to it, so actually you are to seek the blessing of God, as you've been doing.

I mean, this congregation itself has so many things going on, as I've mentioned, in prayer. And as I came to know, when I was ministered here, these eight happy years that I was with you, the number of things that are going on alongside with, alongside of the preaching of the gospel, the worship of God every Lord's Day, every midweek, alongside of that, fits all of these activities that you have going on in the congregation.

[12:30] That is really part of the way the leavening influence of the gospel is at work. Because in the work you have with young folks, with older young folks, with the smaller ones, the tiny ones, think of all that as leavening influence.

Think of all that as an activity that's going on with a view to bringing about the leavening, the spiritual development of the whole batch of people that you are.

And everybody has their own bit to contribute to that. You know, that's how it is for our situation in life as well. We're placed by the Lord in order to seek to bring an influence by his blessing to the community around us.

You know, our tendency, the tendency certainly of the world around you is to think that people's problems are entirely external. And that if you improve people's conditions externally, then you'll find a difference in their way of life, in their outlook on life, in their behavior in life.

Well, people's behavior may to some small extent be affected by their environment and by the situations that they have from day to day outwardly. But people's behavior begins from in here.

[13:54] It begins from within the soul. And unless that is turned around and changed, that person's not going to be much different to what they always have been.

But here is where the leavening influence of the gospel, of the Christian gospel, of the Christian life, as it's set in society, it's aiming at, by God's blessing, affecting people so that they'll begin to think deeply about life, that they'll turn to the Lord, they'll become new creations in Christ.

And you're a leavening influence towards that objective. And if I may say so, one of the rewarding things that I've done more recently is to speak at the Road to Recovery that David leads here in the town.

And one of the encouraging and really thrilling things about it is that that work is based on the gospel. That work is based not on changing people's outward circumstances, though, of course, that's not neglected.

But the work is that people will come to know the Lord, that people will come to have their lives changed by the grace of God. And the leavening influence of a Christian influence is designed to bring people to that point, by God's blessing, that the leaven of the lives of those who are seeking to help those with needs such as addictions, will come to see them converted, come to see them coming into the kingdom themselves and becoming part of it.

[15 : 33] The kingdom is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in these measures of flour until it was all leavened. And you know that should be our objective as well.

Even if we're convinced that the world is not going to be completely changed before the Lord comes, we should still have it as our objective to see as much change as possible taking place. And that means through your influence as a congregation, through your influence as individuals, that you seek God's blessing to bring the change about. So that permeates, the leaven as it permeates, the whole measure of the batch of dough, so the kingdom is designed to infiltrate, to permeate, to go through society and communities.

But secondly, it's a change-bringing organism because as you see yeast at work, one of the things you see is that the yeast transfers its own properties, if you like, to the whole batch of dough into which you place it.

Because the batch of dough is there static. It doesn't move. It doesn't change. As soon as you add the yeast to it, it begins to change.

[16 : 56] And the change is brought about, not just brought about by the yeast, but the yeast is seeking to transform that batch of dough into like itself, to grow, to increase, to change in its substance indeed, to some extent.

And that's the same with the gospel. When you introduce the gospel into human society, into human communities, into human individual experiences, that gospel enters into that life or these lives as yeast is entered into the batch of dough.

It immediately begins, if God blesses it as we pray, to influence the whole batch. And it begins to transform that whole batch into what it's like itself because the yeast of God's gospel or the life that God gives to his people is something that has divine properties.

You could be mistaken about that and I don't want to mislead you, but of course, it doesn't mean we are made into something other than human beings when we come to know the Lord, when we have a spirit working within us, when we're changed from being dead sinners into living disciples, saints. But it does mean this gospel, this grace of God that works through the gospel, this grace of God that is at work in the life of God's people, it has its own divine properties.

[18 : 29] It's not been manufactured by human beings. It's not something the church has brought about in the course of history. It's not something that any individual, however talented, is actually able to produce or reproduce.

It is God at work. And God's work is always like himself. It always bears a similarity to him. And as the yeast is entered into the batch of dough, so it begins to change that batch of dough to be like itself.

It transforms that batch from within and it spreads out throughout it, as we've said, until the whole batch is affected. You don't find any other philosophy that has that capacity.

It doesn't matter what religion you look at in the world with Christianity. Whatever influences it has, it may very well have a lot of influence as you can see in our own society.

There are many religions and ideologies that have influences that bring people to follow them. But it doesn't have the divine capacity to change human life from within.

[19 : 43] It doesn't have within it that capacity, that divine power which the Spirit of God uses and shows in people being born again. That's why it's so important that you and I and this congregation act as leaven in this community.

Because you're carrying with you in the gospel, in your own Christian life, when you're committed to the Lord, you're carrying with you a power that cannot be reproduced or replicated by any other power on earth.

And you have to believe that that power is the power that's able to change people's lives radically. What's going to change this society we belong to today with all its dreadful excesses, with its rampant secularist way of looking at things, with all its atheism, with all the hate that there is there for the gospel, for the things of God, for the people of God, for the church?

What is it that's going to change church buildings that for centuries were associated with the gospel and being now changed into mosques or whatever else use they're changed into?

What's going to reverse that? What's going to change that? And friends, we need to see these changes. Otherwise, that's just going to go on month by month, year by year, and we'll be left with a spiritual wilderness.

[21 : 22] What's going to change it is the gospel, the power of God unto salvation. How do we actually set about living to that end?

Well, being, yeast being, leaven in the world. having an influence with people alongside you, neighbors, work colleagues, school friends, but you and I have to be the yeast that looks to change society by the blessing of God.

To see the kingdom of God advance. That's what we were praying for with the children, wasn't it? Where, in the Lord's Prayer, that's one of the elements in the Lord's Prayer. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Let your kingdom come. We can't be praying, let your kingdom come, and then standing aside as if that's going to happen without us being concerned to live as yeast or leaven in this world for Christ.

God's not dependent on us. Yes, God can work without us. God can do many things without us. But that's not how he's revealed in the Bible as operating.

[22 : 38] He operates through the life of his church. He operates through God's people living as yeast in the society where they're placed.

Transferring the properties of spiritual life by God's blessing to those that presently don't have it. it's a change bringing organism.

It transfers its properties to the whole batch. Thirdly, finally, it actually grows. Are we too used to seeing the church decrease?

Are we in danger of saying, well, that's just how God has planned it. That's just how God is. That's what providence has brought about. Yes. Are we satisfied with that?

Are we saying, that's how it must be? Are we seeing ourselves as just no longer acting as yeast in society? Have we lost our vision that the church is meant to grow and not to be reduced?

[23 : 49] I know everything's under the authority and the providence of God under the complete and utter authority of God that he rules sovereignly over every event, over every eventuality, over every turn in the church's life and experience.

That's how it's always been. But let's not lose our vision of growth. Let's not lose our vision that the kingdom of God, the rule of God through his people is meant to lead to growth.

A growth in his cause. A growth in people confessing him as their Lord. It's like leaven which this woman took and hid in three measures of flour till all was leavened.

In other words, the kingdom of God has that spiritual substance to it that is itself designed to grow.

And you can see that in the early church, for example, in the days of the Acts of the Apostles.

Look at the number of people, it's not about numbers, but just look at the size of that batch of disciples that left the upper room and went out to follow Christ and to bring the gospel into the world.

[25 : 06] And by the time you read through the book of Acts and you see what's happened in Athens, in Thessalonica, in Ephesus, all the other places that are mentioned there, you'll find churches established, you'll find churches growing, you'll find the kingdom of God advancing.

Why is that? Because the people of God, the disciples of Jesus, took this into the world, they acted as leaven in the society of their day. And God blessed that and God followed that and God took that and placed it into the batch of dough that that sinful pagan world was.

and as you read the book of Acts you can watch it grow. You can see its influence. You can see how seriously people took their Christian walk, their Christian confession, their Christian commitment to the Lord and to His cause.

You can see it, secondly, you can see it on revivals, can't you? If you read these excellent books on revival that you find written recently by Tom Lenny, he's got three or four books actually on revival in different parts of Scotland, including Lewis itself, which he focuses on quite a bit.

But as you'll see the accounts he gives in all of these areas, for example, just of Lewis itself, where he has checked it out with people and followed through his research, and you'll find some really astounding, some wonderful, some exhilarating accounts of individuals used by God, placed in the darkness of their own day, and all of a sudden, spiritual life.

[26 : 49] Leaven has done its work. People come to think seriously about life. What is life about?

They come to attend church services, and they come to not only attend, but also come with concern, with weeping to church services, seeking the Lord, concerned for the name of Christ, more concerned for the glory of God than for themselves.

That's the leaven at work. And that's God blessing his word, God placing these people as the movement grew in the society of their day, so that others are added to the number.

You see, that should be our vision as well, shouldn't it, that we don't rest until the whole batch is leavened, until throughout the course of our lives, at least in this world, we've given what we can and been what we should be as God's leaven in the world.

And of course, that's the case with individuals as well. Once the work starts in an individual's life, the work of God's Spirit, where God, as it were, places the leaven of his life, the leaven of his Spirit, into any human soul, it grows.

It grows. It spreads throughout the whole of that person's life and being. It's not just something that affects your thoughts without affecting your conscience, without affecting your will, without affecting your love, your emotions.

[28 : 30] The whole of your human character is affected by the leaven of God's life entering into you. And today, friends, we're privileged to have the Gospel setting out these terms for us, to remind us that the kingdom of heaven is like leaven, that we belong to the movement of the kingdom of heaven, that we belong to that movement that itself is designed to infiltrate the world for Christ, to grow in that world, to bring about the knowledge of Christ in that world.

You put a batch of yeast into a lump of dough, you try and stop it working. It's not easy. Maybe not impossible, but it's not easy.

Because that yeast, as it grows, as it transfers its properties, the whole batch grows. You try and stop the spirit of God. Once it works, even through an individual, in any part of human society, you try and stop it.

You can't do it. Because it's God at work, for which you and I should be burdened. She didn't wait until all things were leavened.

Then she could take the batch of dough and use it for bread. God's purpose is for yourself and for myself today.

[30 : 06] Remember how Paul wrote to the Philippian church, a church that he loved, a church that loved him greatly. It wasn't a perfect church, no church is.

But when he wrote to them in the very first chapter of that short epistle, he said how much he was thanking God for them, for every remembrance of them.

He was writing to them from prison. But as he remembered them, as he reflected upon them, he thanked God for them, for their partnership in the gospel from the first day till now.

What's he saying? He's saying I'm thankful that you became part of the leaven, that as God made me leaven in your society, you joined that, you became leaven, you influenced others, you were used by God.

As he went on to say that it was right for him to think this about them. For he says where he has begun a good work, he will fulfill it, complete it, bring it to completion at the day of Christ.

[31 : 19] Friends, let's not rest. Let's not lose our sight of God at work. Let's not lose our vision for the gospel.

Let's retain that picture of God's kingdom as leaven. Let's play individually our own part in being leaven in the society we're placed into.

Let's pray. Lord, our gracious God, we acknowledge that we are so often not what we should be, that we are falling short in every aspect of our life.

Yet, Lord, as we complain about these things, we pray that you enable us to have our vision restored or maintained as to your kingdom and its work and its properties. peace.

And help us, we pray, to have a proper estimate of our own place within that kingdom. Grant that you would continue daily to throw our hearts to yourself.

[32 : 28] Remember any here today, Lord, who have not yet committed their life to you. We pray that you would enter into their life powerfully, that the leaven of your gospel might indeed carry out its own work by your spirit.

We pray that for every gathering of your church throughout the world today. We pray for your people as they continue to witness to you. Lord, make them, we pray, more and more powerful and effective in the witness that they bear.

And use us, we pray, as your people in the world, even beyond what we are able to ask or think, that whatever small ideas we may have of ourselves, we may know that in the hands of Christ great things can be achieved.

