

T. Austin-Sparks:

The Gospel by Matthew, chapter thirteen, and verse thirty-three: "Another parable spake He unto them; 'The Kingdom of Heaven is like unto leaven, which a woman took, and hid in three measures of meal, till it was all leavened'" (ASV). This is the fourth parable on the kingdom, and like the ones before it, it has two interpretations. Bible teachers are quite divided on the meaning of this parable. The most popular interpretation is that the leaven is something good. Indeed, it is the Gospel of the Kingdom, and the Gospel of the Kingdom is going to spread all over the world until there is nothing bad left. Indeed, the world is going to become wholly good in this dispensation, I say, that is the most popular interpretation. It is popular because it is just what we would like it to be. We would very much like that to be true. But is that the true interpretation of the parable?

The much less popular interpretation is that the leaven is something bad. And that evil is going to spread more and more over all the world. Well, that is not a popular interpretation, and it is not popular because we do not like that idea. However, it is never a matter of whether a thing is popular or unpopular. A doctor's medicine is not a popular thing because we do not like it, but it is the right thing. And there are many quite nice things that are not good for us. So it does not depend upon whether the thing is popular. The thing is, is it true? Which is the right interpretation?

For myself, I come down on the second interpretation; that the leaven is not something good, but something evil. And I am going to tell you why I believe that is the true interpretation. If you look into your Bible, and trace this word leaven all the way through, beginning with the first mention of leaven in the Book of Exodus, chapter twelve, and moving right through the Bible, until you come to the First Letter to the Corinthians, chapter five, you will find that with one possible exception, leaven is always something bad. It is always something which God will not allow. In the Old Testament, God gave very, very careful instructions about leaven. The passover bread was to be unleavened bread. In every Jewish household, to this day, on the eve of the passover they light a lamp and the wife or mother takes the broom and sweeps every room and every corner to see if she can find any leaven. This is what they believe to be God's attitude toward leaven. So that wherever this word is used right through the Bible, it is almost, if not altogether, an evil thing.

You will remember that when we were speaking about the parable of the mustard seed, we pointed to the law of consistency. And we said that Jesus in His teaching never contradicted Himself. Never did He, in one address, use the same thing for two opposite meanings. So when we had the parable of the darnel (the tares), the darnel was the work of the evil one. When we had the parable of the mustard seed, the birds of the air which lodged in that tree are the same birds as in the parable of the sower. In the parable of the sower, Jesus said, "The birds of the air are the evil ones." In the parable of the darnel, it was an evil one that did this thing. The law of consistency demands that we interpret this parable of the leaven as being something evil. Jesus is teaching that in this dispensation, we are to expect to find evil things in this world.

Now you notice that these parables all relate to this present age. And in the last parable, the parable of the drag-net, Jesus says, at the end of the age, He will send forth His angels, and they shall gather out of His Kingdom all things that make to stumble. The law of consistency demands that we say, they will gather out all the leaven and destroy it. Now I want to know where you stand on this matter. If these parables relate to this present age, which ends with the coming again of the Lord Jesus, is it true that the whole world is being converted? Is it true that all evil is being taken out of this world in this age? Is it true that the leaven of the Gospel is transforming the whole of this world and nothing evil is left in it? Is there anyone here tonight who believes that? If I ask for a vote, I am quite sure that everybody would say, 'There is more evil in the world today than ever there was.'

The final argument is this, the Bible does not teach that the whole world is going to be saved in this dispensation. But it does teach that "evil men will wax worse and worse." It does teach that "because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold." So we are thrown back upon this second interpretation. We come down upon what the Bible says about this. The leaven represents evil, and leaven is everywhere forbidden in relation to the things of God. I can only make that statement, but if you would like to look at your Bible, you will find it is quite true.

So we are going to first of all look at the nature and the effects of leaven. Of course, you know what leaven is and what it is used for. If the brothers do not know, the sisters do. It is that which you put into the dough to make your bread. But what is its nature and what are its effects? First of all, leaven always sets up fermentation. Have you seen the effect of the leaven when it is put into the dough? The dough was a very quiet thing until you put the leaven in. There is no disturbance and no excitement until you put the leaven in the

dough. But as soon as you have put the leaven in, you find something begins to work up excitement. Everything becomes disturbed. This leaven stirs up everything. Now you know that this is the same principle of alcoholic liquor. Alcohol is simply another form of leaven. And you know quite well that if you take alcohol, you begin to get excited. There is an inward disturbance. And if you take too much, you lose your senses, and then want to fight, and a lot of disturbance takes place. This thing ruins homes. It ruins lives. It ruins businesses. Indeed, alcohol is a curse. And that is only another name for leaven, for it is the same thing. That is the nature of leaven, and those are the effects of leaven to begin with. Just keep that in mind and we will come back to it.

The next effect of leaven is inflation; it makes things unnaturally big. I have noticed that in your market and outside your churches there are a lot of men selling balloons, hundreds and hundreds of balloons. Well, they are made to look very attractive with many pretty colors, but what are they? Well, you take this very thin skin and you begin to blow into it. You fill it with wind and you make it larger and larger with wind. And then you take a very little pin, and you prick it, and the whole thing is gone. It is an artificial inflation that cannot stand up to anything. It is something which has been made unnaturally big. An artificial increase of size.

When I was a very little child, I was sometimes sent to stay with my grandmother. And on Friday night, in the kitchen, the servants always made the bread for the next week. They made the dough in a big bowl, and having put the leaven in, they worked it with their hands and with their fingers, and then they just put it in the bottom of the bowl and they covered the whole thing over with a cloth, and they went to bed. The next morning I was up early, I went into the kitchen and I lifted the cloth, and the dough had filled the whole basin. In the dark, it had grown and grown. It had become something very big, the leaven made it do that. Hold that and we will come back to it.

Another thing that leaven does, it breaks things up, it disintegrates. You see the holes coming in the bread. The leaven tears the dough asunder. It makes the loaf into a thing with many, many parts and many holes in it. It just breaks things up and divides. Hold that and we will come back to that.

Then the last thing, unleavened bread is not very pleasant to the taste. Leaven is put in to make the bread taste nice. It is something to make an appeal to the natural taste. Unleavened bread is not very nice to taste, and so that we may be very pleased, we put leaven in. It appeals to our natural taste.

Now do you see the meaning, the nature and effects of leaven? There has come into this universe something that disturbs the universe. All these terrible wars, about which you know something, are the result of this disturbing influence which has come into the universe. There is something in this universe that stirs up human nature. Like alcohol, it makes men fight against one another. It keeps the world in unrest. It produces all this excitement of the human evil nature. Then, again, this something that has come into this universe results in an enlargement that is quite unnatural - a false development. That is a thing that we have seen in these last few years. In the case of the wars, there has been an attempt to develop this world in an unnatural way. Anything that results in unnatural development and enlargement is evil.

The Apostle Paul said, "Through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think; but to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith." Anything that makes us unnaturally big is evil. Whether it be the individual life, or whether it be what is called the work of God, trying to make it bigger than its real spiritual measure, inflating it beyond its genuine spiritual degree, that is something evil, that is leaven.

Anything that results in divisions and breaking up - disintegration is evil. Do not let us excuse our divisions. Do not let us look favorably upon the divisions amongst the Lord's people. If there are only two of us who are divided, let us not make excuses for that, let us say, 'This is wrong, this is evil, this ought not to be, there is some evil at work to divide us.' And what may be true between just two people, is true amongst all the Lord's people. We must not look upon divisions as being good, they are bad. And we must know that God is against divisions. He does not accept this working of leaven.

Then what about this leaven that makes things appeal to our natural taste? Paul said to Timothy, "The time will come when they will not endure sound teaching; and they will heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears." And he goes on to say that they will believe the lie instead of the truth. Why is that? Because these teachers appeal to the natural life. These teachers cover over evil. Indeed, they will sometimes call evil good. People do not like the teachers who tell them what is wrong, that this thing and that thing are contrary to God. They like leavened bread, it pleases the flesh.

Well, these are the effects of leaven. And I am quite sure that there is no one here tonight who will argue that

any of those things are good. You see, it is all bad. Now let us look at the symbolism of leaven: We will listen to the Lord Jesus and then to the Apostle Paul on this matter. Jesus gave three warnings to His disciples. First, He said, "Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees. Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees." And what did He say was the leaven of the Pharisees? He said, it is hypocrisy - pretending to be something that you are not, something that is quite artificial and unreal. You have only got to watch those Pharisees to see it. They make long prayers in public. They look at a poor sinner and they say, "O God, I thank thee that I am not like that man." They send somebody in front of them to blow a trumpet and say this wonderful righteous man is coming along; Jesus says, it is all hypocrisy. It is all false and unreal. And if there was one thing that Jesus hated more than another, it was unreality - pretending to be something that you are not, making a lot of noise amongst the people of God with nothing behind it. Indeed, the life behind is quite a contradiction.

Well, that is capable of a very wide application, but that is the principle of the Pharisees. Jesus said, "Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy." I do not know what the word means in your language, but in the Bible language, it means, acting a part. It is the picture of an actor on the stage. He may be dressed up to represent a great king, but he is not a great king. It is only his dress. Or he may be there acting the part of something else, but he is not that something else. He is just pretending to be that. And that is the real meaning of the word hypocrisy. Jesus said, "Beware of play-acting in the things of God."

The second warning was, "Beware of the leaven of the Sadducees." Now we are told that the Sadducees did not believe in angels or spirit or resurrection. They said, 'There are no such things as angels, there is no such thing as spirit, there is no such thing as resurrection.' What did that mean? They ruled out the whole reality of the supernatural. They set aside everything that was spiritual. Therefore, they were pure materialists. They lived only for the present time because they did not believe there was anything afterward. They lived only for this world because they did not believe there is another one. For them, there was nothing supernatural, all was now - just material - in this life on the earth.

You see, that is a very convenient philosophy of life. It is very convenient for this reason, that it will not accept future judgment. If there is no resurrection, if there is no life after this one, if there is no other world after this one, then there is no such thing as judgment. Judgment goes, that is a very convenient doctrine. Jesus says, 'Beware of that'; there is such a thing as the supernatural. God Himself is Spirit, He is the greatest reality in this universe. There is a life after this, for we shall all be raised: "Those that have done evil, unto the resurrection of condemnation, and those that have done good, unto the resurrection of life." Jesus says, 'Beware of anything that contradicts those great realities.'

Then He gave a third warning. He said to His disciples, "Beware of the leaven of Herod." What kind of leaven is the leaven of Herod? Herod was a man who believed in great worldly splendor. He ruled his world by a great show of magnificence. Everything that looked wonderful was Herod's idea. His was a reign of earthly glory. But this other thing also comes to life with regard to Herod; behind all that outward show, was a life which was absolutely corrupt. John the Baptist told Herod of his corrupt life, and Herod beheaded John the Baptist. Here is a life of outward show, with the inward life absolutely corrupt. Jesus says, 'Beware of anything like that. That is leaven. It must not come into touch with any of the things of God.'

The scribes and the Pharisees came to Jesus one day, and they said to Him, 'Be gone, get away, Herod will kill You.' Of course, they wanted to get rid of Jesus. What did Jesus say? "Go and tell that fox, that I work today and tomorrow, and the third day I am perfected." Go and tell that fox. You know what a fox is? Well, he is one who makes a great show, a great pretense. He looks like a very nice animal. But you let him get in amongst your chickens and see what he will do. His nature is a contradiction to his appearance. Jesus says, "Beware of that leaven."

Now just a word about this that Paul has to say. In 1 Corinthians, chapter five, you have it. Something had happened in the church of Corinth. A man had committed fornication, and by his fornication he had brought evil into the church, and the church had not done anything about it. The church had not taken account of this evil as represented by this man. They let him stay there. They even let him come to the Lord's Table. A man whose background of life was evil. Now Paul wrote to the church about that man. And he said to the church, 'You must judge this thing, and you must put that man out and forbid him the Lord's Table until he repents, because he is leaven, and he defiles the whole church by his presence, and the presence of that evil is robbing the church of its spiritual power.' So Paul says, "Purge out the old leaven." Fornication and uncleanness must not come into the house of God. And, it certainly must not come to the Lord's Table. And Paul says the church is responsible for dealing with that thing. While the church allows that, the church is defiled, God's blessing cannot be upon it. It will, therefore, lose its spiritual life and its spiritual strength. Purge out the old leaven, all that sort of thing is just the working of evil in the church.

Now we must gather this up and come to a close. In the parable of the leaven, Jesus is saying that right through this present age until He comes again, this thing will be in the world. Evil will spread everywhere like leaven. But as in the other parables, Jesus said about the sower and the seed, that while three parts of it would be bad, there would be a fourth part that would be good. As in the parable of darnel, there was the work of the evil one, but there were also the children of the Kingdom. So in this parable, He says, there will be leaven, will be corruption and defilement everywhere, but the teaching of the New Testament is: Keep yourselves pure. See that your garments are not spotted. Walk in this sinful world as those who do not belong to its nature. Although there is leaven everywhere, you be the unleavened bread. But, the world may not like you, the world will not like unleavened bread. It does not please the flesh, but the bread which is pure is pleasing to God. And in the end, He will gather out all that which offends. He will gather out the offending leaven, and He will burn it with unquenchable fire; but the children of the Kingdom, the unleavened bread of God, the pure in heart and in life, He will gather into His eternal Kingdom.

The Rule of Heaven will divide between the evil and the good, between the leavened and the unleavened bread. I think you will agree that this is the right interpretation of the parable. Because it is true to the Bible, it is true to history, it is true to what we see in the world; but it carries the warning, let us offer to God that which has none of this leaven in it.