**WESTMINSTER BIBLE SCHOOL; THE PARABLES AND METAPHORS OF OUR LORD - THE TEACHING OF G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

**11. THE LEAVENED MEAL**

*"He spoke another parable to them. "The Kingdom of Heaven is like yeast, which a woman took, and hid in three measures of meal, until it was all leavened."*

*Matthew 13:33*

THIS is a much disputed parable. Again we have no explanation of it given by the Lord Himself. However, in this case, especially to those who first heard it, there was no need of explanation, listening as they did from the Hebrew standpoint, and with their knowledge of the Hebrew writings, and of the symbolism of Hebrew figures of speech. They understood, undoubtedly, what was intended.

Why then has this become a disputed parable as to its true teaching? While not insisting upon it, I think it has been through medieval misinterpretation of it, in which the interpreters attempted to square the parable with what they thought was the fact concerning the enterprise in the world of the Kingdom of God. There are two interpretations.

The first is that the leaven alone is a type of the Kingdom. When our Lord said, "The Kingdom of heaven is like unto leaven," some stop there in their thinking. If that is done, then we are almost driven to the conclusion that the figure of leaven was used as the type of something good, and therefore that the idea of the parable is that the Kingdom will be completely victorious in this age. That is the view which is almost universally accepted as the interpretation of the parable.

The other interpretation is that not the leaven alone illustrates the Kingdom, but that the whole picture is required, that of leaven hidden by a woman in three measures of meal. If that be the true interpretation, then leaven is the type of evil; a principle which, in the working, harms the Kingdom rather than helps it in this age. Those are the two views.

Although the first is popular, we should guard ourselves against accepting the popular interpretation as being correct. I am deliberately convinced that the latter is the true interpretation; first, because the former one contradicts the whole symbolic use of leaven in the Bible. If in this case leaven stands for good, it is the only case in the Bible which any expositor claims that it does so. Again, the former interpretation contradicts the teaching of all the other parables so far considered, in every one of which Jesus, referring to the process of the age, always marked limitation. No parable shows all the facts. Our Lord was illustrating the working of the Kingdom principle in the age which is to be consummated by His own advent, as He Himself did show.

Seeing that all the other parables speak of mixture, if this of the leaven is taken as being good, the whole leavened, then there is no mixture at all. This would then contradict the teaching of all the other parables.

Again, I reject the earlier view, because it is disproved by the history of the centuries; and finally because the method is not in harmony with the method of the other parables. In every parable of Jesus the whole picture is needed to understand His teaching.

If we read this parable, "The Kingdom of heaven is like unto leaven," and stay there, we are violating a principle. Jesus did not stop there. He said, "The Kingdom of heaven is like unto leaven, which a woman took, and hid in three measures of meal, till it was all leavened." It is not so that the Kingdom of heaven is like leaven. It is not the leaven alone that is the illustration of the Kingdom of heaven.

Having then cleared the ground a little, let us turn to an examination of the parable, taking our usual method of looking at the picture suggested, and then deducing the teaching.

As we look at the picture, we must carefully examine the symbolism. There is the essential fact of the picture, and the facts which affect the central fact. What is the central fact? Leaven? No, three measures of meal. What are the facts affecting it? Two, a woman, and leaven.

"Three measures of meal." When Jesus said that, He was not using occasional language, but employing a phrase that had a definite meaning and value to those who heard it. It is often very valuable to find where the phrase first occurs in the Bible, and then to trace it through. To do that in the case of these words, we shall find it used in Genesis, before the time of Moses, before the law was given. It occurs in the eighteenth chapter of Genesis, in a wonderful picture. It was used of the home, which was a tent erected under the oaks at Mamre. Abraham lived there. He had left Ur of Chaldea, and had pitched his tent under the oak trees, or the terebinths as it should be rendered. He was living there. One day there came visitors to him, all of them evidently supernatural. He recognized One of them as supreme, and the other two subservient. I imagine Abraham did not know at the beginning Who this supreme Visitor was. He recognized that He was a supernatural Visitor, and immediately they prepared and offered hospitality. In that connection we are told that Sarah prepared "three measures of meal." What was it? It was a meal of fellowship, of hospitality; a meal in which the supernatural Visitor, Whom Abraham soon found to be God Himself, having angelic form, and human language to communicate with him was to take part; and Abraham spread a meal for Him, "three measures of meal." So the phrase went back to that early time, indicating the preparation of a meal.

Come now to the time of Moses, and see the instructions for the meal offering, one of the offerings of a religious rite. Then later, Gideon, on a memorable occasion, brought to God three measures of meal. Hannah, when worshipping, brought as an offering, three measures of meal. Pass on into the prophetic literature, and Ezekiel at one time, when describing the hour of ritual and worship, used the phrase seven times over to mark a certain fact, "three measures of meal."

Coming back for a moment to the ritual of these Hebrew people, the phrase became well known, "three tenths parts of an ephah," which is the same thing as "three measures of meal," in the meal offering. In the ritual of the Hebrew people, the meal offering followed the burnt offering. The burnt offering was symbolic of the dedication of the lives of these people to God. The meal offering following, always symbolized the dedication of the service of the people, whose lives were dedicated to God. The meal offering was first the result of cultivation, and then manufacture; of careful preparation, and so of their service. Always three measures of meal. So that which we first see in the home yet had upon it that great eternal fact of man's communion with God. As Abraham talked with Jehovah, as Jehovah was represented in the angel Presence, that which commenced there we see was embodied in the sacred ritual of the Hebrew people, as an offering marking dedication to God, also marking fellowship with God.

Remembering the institution of the meal offering, every worshipper retained part, while part was devoted to God. Consequently in that division of the three measures of meal there was indicated the hospitality of the soul to God, and the hospitality of God to the soul. Therefore this phrase that we may read so easily and never really understand, these men as they listened to Jesus, understood that figure in their literature as an interpretation of life. When our Lord spoke of three measures of meal, inevitably their minds would go to the meal offering. The essential thing here is that the Kingdom of heaven is like unto leaven which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal, until the whole was leavened.

Two things are here in the picture of Jesus, first, fellowship with God, hospitality between the soul and God; and offering and dedication to God. Go on to the apocalyptic literature, and in those wonderful letters written to the seven Churches, the Head of the Church is standing outside the door of the last of the Churches. He had knocked, seeking admission, and He says, "If any man hear My voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with Me." I will come in, and be his Guest and at the same time he shall be My guest. That is perfect fellowship. In the symbolism of the Hebrew people all that lies behind the meal offering.

Jesus said, "The Kingdom of heaven is like unto leaven, which a woman took, and hid in three measures of meal, till it was all leavened," A woman, and leaven. The woman represented authority and management in the hospitality of a home. Sarah was doing that work on that first occasion, when Abraham held communion with Jehovah about His Kingship over Sodom; and Sarah had her part in that communion. Without criticizing her, she broke down, for she laughed at certain things that were said. Oh, it is better to laugh at God than never to talk to Him; and He will be patient with us, if in our blindness we laugh. I think I have often done it in utter foolishness. Here then a woman represented that communion and that authority. We speak of the Church as a mother. The great Roman system ever speaks of Mother Church, I am not objecting to it. Authority within the realm of hospitality and fellowship is provided in the figure of woman.

What did the woman do? She hid leaven in the three measures of meal. Now leaven is always symbolic of that which disintegrates, breaks up, corrupts. There was no leaven in Sarah's bread when she prepared three measures of meal. Leaven was strictly forbidden in the meal offering. It was to be excluded therefrom. To turn from those ancient suggestions and symbols to the New Testament, Paul, writing to a Corinthian Church that had become leavened indeed, in that bad sense of the word, and had lost its power of witness because it had been harbouring those corrupting, said this:

"Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump? Purge out the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, even as ye are unleavened. For our passover also hath been sacrificed, even Christ; wherefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, neither with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth."

Or again, in the Galatian letter, he said the same thing in another connection. "A little leaveneth the whole lump." Leaven is always disintegrating. To interpret the parable of Jesus by the common practices of the day, yeast, however used, is a disintegrating force, and in the end it always separates and destroys. That is of its very essence and nature. Leaven always disintegrates.

Jesus said, "The Kingdom of heaven is like unto leaven, which a woman took, and hid in three measures of meal, till it was all leavened." The Kingdom of heaven is likened to that which happens when something is introduced which makes fellowship on the highest level impossible, because it has a corrupting influence: leaven swells, and puffs up. The Bible is a wonderful literature. So many things that seem to be miles apart belong to each other. What was it that stilled the complaint of the soul of the prophet Habakkuk, and made him sing his great song at last, after all his trouble? The announcement by God of a principle of life. Speaking of Cyrus the enemy, and the proud oncoming armies that God was using, under His control, He said, "Behold, his soul is puffed up," that is, swollen, "it is not upright in him but the just shall live by his faith." Take that picture of evil, of pride and crookedness, acting like leaven, until men of a nation become puffed up, swollen. Jesus said that would happen to the working of His Kingdom in this age, that there should be the hiding of leaven in the three measures of meal, until the whole was leavened.

Turning from that attempt to understand the figures of speech, and to gather up its teaching, take the three measures of meal, representing the feast of hospitality and fellowship between God and men. If the Kingdom testimony in the world is to be powerful, it must be based upon the fellowship of the people of God with Him in incorruptness. That needs no argument. We all agree to it. The measure in which our fellowship with God fails to be maintained in incorruptness, freedom from disintegrating forces that destroy it, is the measure in which we fail to bear a Kingdom testimony, or are of value in the world.

Go back once more to Abraham and Lot. Look at the difference between them. Lot was a good man. The New Testament tells us that he was "a righteous man," But he first pitched his tent towards Sodom. Then he went to live in Sodom. Finally he became so identified with Sodom that he lost all his influence. When the crisis came there were not five men in the city whom he had influenced towards righteousness and God. Abraham stood under the terebinths in fellowship with God, and he was able to exert that influence that nearly saved Sodom. So come on down the ages, and see the influence working for the incoming of the Kingdom of God.

We learn then that testimony to the Kingdom is weakened in the measure in which the Church in her management has ever permitted the intrusion of the things which disintegrate, and so mar her testimony to the Kingdom of God. Listen to the Lord Himself upon other occasions. "Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees." Or as Mark records it, "Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Herod." Or as Luke has it, "Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees which is hypocrisy." Pass on to Paul, and remember the context in Corinthians. He was dealing with the fact that the Church was tolerating within her own borders an incestuous person, guilty of immorality. The Church was unable to deal with that person. Purge yourself from the leaven, said Paul. Or in the word quoted from Galatians, the context shows that Judaizing teachers were attempting to graft on to the Christian movement a ritual that had no force and value; and so were placing a burden upon believers that they never ought to bear, the leaven of legalism within the Church. Take that little group of Scriptures, and read them, and think the matter out.

What is the leaven intermixed, which has weakened the testimony of the Church to the Kingdom of God? The leaven of hypocrisy, the leaven of rationalism, that showed in the Sadducean questioning of the supernatural, for they did not believe in angel, spirit, or resurrection. The leaven of materialism was embodied in Herod, who sought for power and greatness upon the basis of material things; "the leaven of Herod." The leaven of the toleration of evil, the failure to exercise a high discipline to keep the Church clean and pure; and the terrible leaven of mere formalism, content with rite and ceremonial, devoid of power. Jesus said, The whole will be leavened. It does not mean that the whole will become leaven, but the influence of leaven hidden in the measures of meal, that illustrate fellowship, will permeate the whole movement.

Here then in the four first parables of Jesus, He saw the Kingdom influence in the age. First, the seed, the fact of the giving of opportunity. Secondly, the good seed planted in the world's field, similar in intention to the first. Thirdly, the mustard seed that grew abnormally until it became a great tree. Finally the meal into which is introduced the principle of disintegration, breaking in upon the fellowship of man with God. Take these four and notice how in every case He marked the fact of comparative failure in the age, the failure of the seed, only one quarter of it fruitful, three parts of it scattered, and not fruitful at all. Side by side with the work of the Son of man sowing in His field, the world, with His wheat, He saw an enemy sowing the imitation, the darnel. False development into a great tree, magnificent in appearance, a lodging place for the fowls of the air. Then the degeneration in power, breaking in upon fellowship, and so marring the witness of men and women to the Kingdom of God.

To use a phrase employed in our previous study. Whatever we may think of the process of affairs in this age, Christ was under no delusion. He looked on, and saw exactly what has happened. Everything has happened, and is happening according to His teaching. There are other aspects which succeeding parables will unfold. Those to which we come next were spoken to the disciples alone. To cover the whole ground of the two groups of four, the first four were spoken to men of sight, to the disciples and to the crowd; the second four were spoken to men of faith, and were spoken to the disciples only.