

“Beware of the Leaven; Be Leaven”
Matthew 16:5–12
Dr. Stephen Cloud
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Matthew 16:5–12 says [5] *When the disciples reached the other side, they had forgotten to bring any bread. [6] Jesus said to them, “Watch and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.” [7] And they began discussing it among themselves, saying, “We brought no bread.” [8] But Jesus, aware of this, said, “O you of little faith, why are you discussing among yourselves the fact that you have no bread? [9] Do you not yet perceive? Do you not remember the five loaves for the five thousand, and how many baskets you gathered? [10] Or the seven loaves for the four thousand, and how many baskets you gathered? [11] How is it that you fail to understand that I did not speak about bread? Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.” [12] Then they understood that he did not tell them to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.*

The word bread ignites so many of our senses. If you didn’t eat breakfast this morning then already you are thinking about that bread. We can smell it, see it, taste it and when it’s brought to a table it could be sliced, bagged and wrapped. It’s baked in our ovens and enjoyed at our tables. I realize this is resolution time and you’ve made that resolve or maybe you have already fallen off the wagon because that’s usually how it goes. When I say the word bread you probably think of the bread sticks at Olive Garden. They bring you a salad and then ask you if you want bread sticks. What a ridiculous question! What about that nice waitress at Cracker Barrel that says ‘would you like biscuits or corn bread?’ How about both! Bread is around us all the time and we enjoy it.

If you lived in the Old Testament era or the New Testament century you would probably think about it a lot more than you do now, because that was the era before sliced bread. A daily task back then was baking the bread for the day. When Jesus talked about ‘giving us daily bread’ in His prayer they understood that even more so than we do. In the Bible there are a number of miracles with bread and fish, including the one in Matthew we just read. There is the Passover in the Old Testament and the Lord’s Supper in the New Testament. They were probably more familiar with the aspects of leaven and unleavened than we are but we can still understand it.

There is a context to this passage in Matthew 16. Mark has this same event in Mark 8 and in both Gospel books those are turning point chapters. Later in Matthew 16 is Peter’s great confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. According to the Gospel of Luke after this Jesus will turn His face toward Jerusalem to die for our salvation. Earlier in Matthew 16 the Pharisees want Jesus to give them a sign and yet signs had been all over during this time. They knew about the miracles of the raising of the dead and feeding the large crowds and yet they wanted another sign. Jesus graciously dealt with them and gave them the sign of Jonah which they really didn’t understand.

Then they get in a boat to go to the other side. One of the things I say in teaching and preaching is ‘then’ is now and ‘they’ are us – the Disciples. Jesus told them to beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and they look around and say ‘we didn’t bring any bread.’ They didn’t understand what Jesus was saying when He said this. Jesus then patiently shares with them what He meant and they finally understand it.

It's this Gospel complex of Matthew, Mark and Luke where we're basically told that there are three types of leaven that we need to beware of. There is the leaven of the Pharisees, the leaven of the Sadducees, and the leaven of Herod (the Herodians). I love what J.C. Ryle says in his commentary about this passage in Matthew 16. He says "The Great Physician knew well that Pharisee-doctrines and Sadducee-doctrines would prove the two great wasting diseases of His Church, until the end of the world. He would have us know that there will always be Pharisees and Sadducees in the ranks of Christians. Their succession shall never fail. Their generation shall never become extinct. Their name may change, but their spirit will always remain. Therefore He cries to us, "take heed and beware." Let us remember, that we live in a world where Pharisaism and Sadduceeism are continually striving for the mastery in the Church of Christ. Some want to ADD (Pharisees) to the Gospel, and some want to TAKE AWAY (Sadducees) from it."

This is what Jesus is talking about when He tells them to beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees. The Pharisees were really good at adding to the Word. They had so many regulations about the Sabbath that the meaning was lost. They had so many meanings of washing hands that the meaning of washing hands was lost. Everything was had so much ritual. We too can be guilty of adding to the Scriptures.

I want to give you some examples of this and I call it pretext that are in search of proof text. For example we have already made up our minds of what we think is true that we're just going to find something in the Bible to support it. We laugh about that but we all do it. In seminary we learn about the exegesis of a text which is bringing out of the text its meaning but some of us are better at eisegesis which is putting our meaning into what it says. Here are two examples of what I'm talking about.

I have heard well-meaning solid people say 'the Bible says you have not because you ask not.' This is in context in the book of James that talks about how bad we are at asking where we ask for the wrong things for the wrong reasons. Now there is a verse that says 'ask and it will be given to you, seek and you shall find, knock and it shall be opened' and that's one way we misinterpret it. The other one is when people say 'the Bible says God helps those who help themselves.' Now there is Proverbs 6:6 which says [6] *Go to the ant, O sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise.* Let me give you some correction about God helping those who help themselves for the Bible is about a God who helps those who cannot help themselves, otherwise none of us would be saved. Because He gave and did for us what we could not and would not have done for ourselves. So we all do this, but Jesus talks about how deadly this can be where a little leaven makes a big effect on our life.

Secondly, is the taking away which is more of what the Sadducees did. One can tear down the Bible by saying it's just about loving people and we are supposed to love people but we think it's live and let live, yet the Bible talks about responsibility, accountability and people sharing with us and pouring into their lives. Sometimes accountability can mean coming alongside a brother or sister but the Sadducees minimized things to a point where they could just go along and get along with everything. Sometimes we're guilty of this when we don't really believe the Bible addresses all of our life.

This is what the Westminster Confession says; ***The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit or traditions of men.*** Do you really believe that today? Do you believe the sufficiency of Scripture? The

Scripture addresses everything about me and everything in my life that I don't need anything else for faith, life and how to be saved except the Word of God. It's all either expressly set down in Scripture or by good and necessary consequence deduced from Scripture. Yet many of us go and look everywhere else besides the Bible for solutions to our problems.

We can be guilty of the leaven of the Pharisees of adding to the Word, we can be guilty of the leaven of the Sadducees of taking away from the Word and we can also be guilty of the leaven of Herod which has to do with politics primarily. Some are like Herod where they think through politics the Kingdom of God can be brought and the Bible makes it explicitly clear that we need good men and women in office. Thank God for those who live out their faith in the office that they are elected to but the best of them know that real change is more than political change. Real change starts with the change of the individual. Herod would compromise with just about anything to keep his office, his position. The leaven of Herod is the belief that if we get the right candidate, the right party in office that everything will be fine. Politics are important but what we need is Gospel transformation, both with individuals and then with our society as we find our place in that society and live out our faith whether we're in politics or not. So beware of leaven.

Let's go through in summary the rest of the Bible dealing with leaven. Exodus 12 is the Passover and they didn't have leaven then. In fact, they got all the leaven out of the house. God was about to do something and they didn't have time for the bread to rise for He was about to save them. That is why when we take the Lord's Supper we serve unleavened bread, in connection with that Old Testament tradition. Another place leaven is mentioned is I Corinthians 5, in an interesting context concerning church discipline where someone was living in open rebellious sin and nobody was saying anything about it.

Paul says in I Corinthians 5:6-8, [6] *Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?* [7] *Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed.* [8] *Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.* Church discipline is a whole other subject to deal with concerning leaven but I want to pull this all together what we have been talking about.

I want you to think of these four words as you think about leaven. The words are small, stealthy, pervasive and positive. Let's take the first word. The size of leaven is small. The smallest error of interpretation can lead to a great departure from truth. Here is one great example of this where it came down to one letter but it was because of the language that this was a huge issue. Have you heard about the Council of Nicea in 325 A.D.? The discussion they had was all about who Jesus was – is He really God, is He really Man? That debate came down to the difference of one letter and it was the letter 'I'. There were some who believed that Jesus was only similar to God – *homoiousios*. Those who believed the truth of the Scripture said He was not just similar to God but that He is God and Man – *homoousios*. The only difference in those two words is the 'I' in the middle of homo-i-ousios.

Now not every error is so easily detectable but when this debate took place those who believed orthodox faith would put their hands over ears when the other side talked about Jesus being similar, because they didn't even want to hear it. They were afraid of the heresy being espoused by those would say something that was so far from the truth of Scripture and yet it was just one letter, one jot, one tittle that made this huge difference. So leaven is small. Error can be small but it can have huge implications.

Leaven works stealthy. This word means shady, sly, sneaky, cunning, devious, and covert. It is giving to acting in secret and concealing one's intentions. Leaven, false teaching is stealthy.

Thirdly, leaven is pervasive. The influence of leaven is pervasive. A little leaven does leaven the whole lump. It only takes a little leaven, a little yeast to make the whole loaf rise and then it begins to exist in every part of the loaf. It spreads to all parts of something it effects – the whole but it is so small and stealthy that it's not noticed until it becomes pervasive. That's why we need the elimination of God's Spirit to keep us aware of the leaven, in the Word and always asking God to give us insight and understanding that we might not add to or takeaway from.

All of this is kind of negative but there is a positive and that's the fourth word which is the word positive because there is a positive leaven. You are wise enough to hold to this today – where leaven is bad and leaven is good. The Bible talks about the good leaven in Luke 13:20–21 which says [20] *And again He said, "To what shall I compare the kingdom of God? [21] It is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, until it was all leavened."* So the Kingdom of God is like leaven that royal regal reign of Him in our hearts and lives as we live faithfully in the world in which He has put us.

There at least three other mentions of three measures of flour in the Scripture and every one of them had to do when God was doing something extraordinary in the lives of people. There was Abraham and Sarah entertaining heavenly guests in Genesis 18:6 and Sarah used three measures of flour and that comes to two gallons of flours. The usual measure for a loaf of bread was three cups. So Jesus is talking about a lot of bread here and Sarah made a lot of bread on that special occasion. Gideon did the same in Judges 6:18–19. Hannah did the same in Samuel 1:24. In each of those times God was doing something extraordinary so there was a need for a lot of bread.

The word hid in the parable is the word in which we get the word encrypto – encrypted, where it was folded in, kneaded into the dough. As participants in the Kingdom of God, where are you kneaded (folded in, needed)? All of you bread makers know what I am talking about. Where is it that God wants you to be? In that neighborhood, in that community, in this church, in the choir, in that classroom, at that school, in your family – where are you needed/kneaded? You might be wondering if you can really make a difference and Jesus says you can. The Kingdom of God is like leaven. Littleness in His hands become big because a little leaven leavens the whole lump and just at it can be negative, it can be positive as well.

We are about to partake in the Lord's Supper where bread will be served and a cup to drink. It is spiritual food for the journey. What are you going to do in that journey this year? Where are you needed? Where will you be kneaded? Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, I pray that You will give us ears, minds, and hearts to keep hearing Your Word and that this ideal of the warning would cause us to fear any small departure from the teaching of Your Word, any way of minimizing what it would say and how we're to be living in our world. Lord, help us to hear Your Word today about Your Kingdom being like leaven and that Your Kingdom is within us. Your Kingdom can be lived out even here now. Give us strength, O Lord to do that and to do it well and to do it better this year than we have before. Give us a long obedience in the same direction O Lord. Give us a strong resolve to live our lives faithfully to the calling You have given us in the Gospel. We can't do that on our own so we confess that we will fail that miserably if we try to do that with our own strength but at this Table in Your Word is food that

will energize us for this work so may we eat and drink deeply this day for there is a world out there waiting that needs the light and hope that You will shine through us to them. Give us strength to do that for we pray this in Jesus' Name, Amen.