

Taken at first glance—this appears to be a pretty simple parable

Woman adds yeast to flour and it rises—the yeast permeating the flour causing it to grow

The flour is transformed by the yeast

Kingdom of God is all about growth and transformation

But there are some unexpected irregularities in this parable... Leaven—Hid—Amount of flour

A more literal translation is... <sup>20</sup> *Again he said, "To what shall I compare the kingdom of God? <sup>21</sup> It is like leaven which a woman took and hid in three sata<sup>1</sup> of flour, until the whole was leavened."*<sup>2</sup>

Leaven—frequently translated as yeast and we think of it in positive terms

According to the Oxford English Dictionary there was a shift in language around 1800

Prior to 1800 leaven had a negative sense—after 1800 leaven had a positive sense

Additionally, most scriptural and ancient literature use of leaven was a symbol of evil influence

And if it was allowed to stay, it would corrupt the entire thing

Leaven is a small portion of fermented dough that would ferment the other dough and rise

The common bread of Old Testament times was made with leaven

Bread made with leaven or honey, was never to be used as offerings burned on the altar

both were associated with fermentation and thus a source of corruption

(Lev. 2:11–12).

Unleavened bread was also prepared in times of haste (1 Sam. 28:24)

and was required for the Feast of Unleavened Bread at Passover

This unleavened bread, or bread of affliction,

reminded the Israelites of their hasty departure from Egypt

and warned them against corruptive influences (Exod. 12:14–20).

In the New Testament leaven is a symbol of evil influence that can corrupt the body of believers

Jesus warned His disciples against the leaven of the Pharisees, their teaching and hypocrisy

(Matt. 16:5–12; Luke 12:1).

Paul urged the Corinthians to remove wickedness from their midst and become fresh dough,

Unleavened bread of sincerity and truth (1 Cor. 5:6–13).<sup>3</sup>

Two things that are surprising with regard to this parable...

Fermented dough saved for the next batch of bread would rapidly become foul in a hot climate

Interesting that something with evil or negative connotations would represent the Kingdom of God

The next word that is odd—the woman "hid" the leaven in the flour

Greek ἐγκρύπτω (ēkruptō) means hid in or to conceal in—instead of mixed in like in the NRSV

She did not knead it or mix it into the rest of the flour as one would expect to do in making bread

Why?

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<sup>1</sup> Greek σάτα. According to Josephus (*Ant.* 9.85; cf. 9.71), a σάτον is one and a half times the Latin *modius*, and so about twelve quarts.

<sup>2</sup> Nolland, J. (1998). *Luke 9:21–18:34* (Vol. 35B, p. 729). Dallas: Word, Incorporated.

<sup>3</sup> Bruce, B. J. (2003). Leaven. In C. Brand, C. Draper, A. England, S. Bond, E. R. Clendenen, & T. C. Butler (Eds.), *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (p. 1022). Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers.

Last is the amount of flour—NRSV says 3 measures—I assumed 3 measuring cups of some amount  
But reasonable amount for making bread  
Greek σάτα (sata)—According to 1<sup>st</sup> Century Jewish historian, Josephus (*Ant.* 9.85; cf. 9.71) ...  
a σάτον (satōn) is one and a half times the Latin *modius*, and so about twelve quarts  
Therefore, 3 sata of flour is equal to about 50 to 60 lbs of flour  
That is a lot of flour!

This much flour suggests Old Testament stories when God or his angels meet people  
And the people responded with hospitality—Abraham and Sarah, Gideon, Hannah  
It suggests some kind of epiphany of God coming to meet people

Until all was leavened... the final end is not bread, but leavened dough  
But? If leaven has a negative connotation that if left alone spoils the whole lot  
How can this be a picture of the Kingdom of God?

Most commentaries mentioned these elements... Leaven is negative and the vast amount of flour  
Conclusions were true but unsatisfactory because they didn't deal with the problems  
The leaven permeates the entire batch of flour  
Kingdom of God in Jesus' ministry has a power that belies its size  
In the end, the whole world is transformed, and the Kingdom of God comes in fullness

Rather than being a metaphor for the Kingdom of God as in most parables—with similarity or likeness  
This parable is a paradox, with words or images that are dissimilar or disjointed  
In its exposure of the dissonance, it demands that one find the unexpected truths

Additional implications of this parable...<sup>4</sup>

- The kingdom does not come with observable signs, but is hidden  
It is the upside-down Kingdom
- The kingdom of God is both sacred and secular—the boundaries are removed  
The rules of sacred purity are broken so that one can't predict what is good  
The parable follows the mustard seed and has a similar message to the messy garden  
The kingdom is mixed and doesn't follow rules—yet another scandalous thought  
Who are we to call unclean, that which God calls clean?  
As we Quakers say—all of life is sacred  
The Kingdom of God is present among the marginal  
The parable calls into question our attempts to predict where the kingdom is active  
Especially when based on our knowledge of the holy and the good  
The kingdom is free to appear anywhere—even when it seems to masquerade<sup>5</sup>  
Pay attention to the nuances and learn to see God in the unexpected places
- There is a delay between its beginnings and its completion, yet it is pervasive and transformative
- It has the power and festive character of an epiphany—it makes a lot of bread!!  
It calls forth hospitality and celebration as God has come and is fully present to everyone

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<sup>4</sup> Ball, Michael, *The Radical Stories of Jesus: Interpreting the Parables Today*, Regent's Park College, Oxford, p 117

<sup>5</sup> Scott, Bernard Brandon, *Hear Then the Parable: A Commentary on the Parables of Jesus*, Fortress Press, pp 321-329.