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The Pervasive Power of Leaven

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The Pervasive Power of Leaven

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June 24, 2017

Josh Bootsma

Daily Scripture Texts

[Psalm 69:7-10 \[11-15\] 16-18](#)

[Jeremiah 20:1-6](#)

[Luke 11:53-12:3](#)

I've always been a fan of bread—especially donuts. I've had a Boston Crème donut in Boston, I've had a pistachio donut from a gourmet shop in Chicago, and, of course, I've had a midnight cinnamon twist from the Dutch Bakery in Orange City, Iowa. You might say I have a soft spot for donuts (and I can show you where it is)! So, when I read stories at a young age about the Israelites partaking of bread without leaven—that is, bread that didn't rise—I was confused. Why would someone want bread that was flat? A two-dimensional donut isn't fun for anyone!

The reality, however, is that the concept of leaven is an important one in the Bible. The leavening process took significant time, as the yeast had to spread throughout the dough and cause it to rise. Therefore, God's command to bake unleavened bread before the Passover is indicative of the hasty exit upon which the Israelites are going to embark. In fact, God says in Exodus 12 to eat “with your belt fastened, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand” (v. 11)

But unleavened bread is not only mandated as a pre-Egypt-exit meal. God required his people to partake of unleavened bread as a remembrance of Him passing over the Israelites' homes and setting his people free from their bondage to Pharaoh. Each time they would eat of it, God's people would remember the great exodus from Egypt, and would in turn remember God's deliverance. The flatness of the bread at which my young self scoffed actually served the Israelites as a stark reminder of God's power, grace, and love (displayed in his guiding them out of slavery). So, in today's passage, when Jesus speaks of leaven, his audience knows exactly what he's talking about.

In the last two verses of Luke 11, we learn that the Pharisees are trying to catch Jesus saying or doing something inconsistent with Scripture, or possibly with what Jesus himself had said earlier. In response, Jesus warns his disciples in chapter 12 to “Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy.” He goes on to explain that even the most secret and hidden thoughts and words will one day be brought to light.

So why does Jesus choose to use the metaphor of leaven when he describes the Pharisees? I think there are a few legitimate reasons. First, as we read in 1 Corinthians 5:6 and Galatians 5:9, “a little leaven leavens the whole lump.” That is, the hypocrisy of the Pharisees in this instance is not simply a mistake on their part—they didn't just have a slip-up in which they wrongly questioned Christ. They are completely and totally hypocritical. Their hypocrisy might have started out as a pinch of leaven, but it has spread, and now the whole lump is affected—the Pharisees are hypocrites through and through. They are entirely devoted to pointing out the inconsistency in Christ's teaching, when the real inconsistency lies with their own teaching.

Second, the use of leaven as an example serves to illustrate Christ's point that all the hidden words and desires of the heart will one day be revealed. If just a bit of leaven changes the physical character of the entire lump of dough, than it stands to reason that a leavened lump of dough will always eventually be recognized as such. In other words, because the dough will inevitably rise, there's no way to for the dough to hide that it is leavened, much like the Pharisees will be unable to hide their sin. Unavoidably, Christ says, the secret plans, hidden motivations, and gross hypocrisies of the Pharisees will be brought to light.

So, what is the significance of leaven for us today? Is the message simply to say we shouldn't be like the Pharisees and hide our hypocrisy? Although this is true, and we would do well to understand that even the most hidden desires and motivations of our hearts will not be immune from God's judgment, I think leaven has something more to teach us.

In the very next chapter of Luke, Jesus uses leaven in a positive way. He says, in verses 20 and 21, "To what shall I compare the kingdom of God? It is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, until it was all leavened." Christ says the same pervasive and inevitable qualities of leaven also apply to his kingdom. The three measures of flour mentioned would have made enough bread to feed 100 people. And this bread needed only a small amount of leaven to affect the entirety of the dough. What pervasive power a bit of leaven must have to make bread for so many! But more importantly, what a pervasive power Christ must have in order to grow his kingdom so exponentially!

This is truly a beautiful picture of God's kingdom. Even from the most humble, weak, and small beginnings, God can accomplish his purposes. In fact, he promises that he will. Much like leaven will inevitably leaven the whole lump of dough, so too will Christ inevitably build his kingdom to completion. The process is a slow one, and it is often hard for us to determine where we are in timeline of the "already-not-yet," but at the end of the day, just as we are confident in the fact that just a bit of leaven will leaven the whole lump, we also can have confidence in the fact that Christ will build his kingdom from even the most humble of beginnings. And He will continue to do so until we join Him in glory.

So, as we partake in the blueberry-glazed leavened delicacies this world has to offer, let us think upon our Savior, and the pervasive power with which he builds and sustains his kingdom.