

THE CASE OF THE SNEAKY HOUSEWIFE

by Ray C. Stedman

I invite you now to turn again to the thirteenth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew where we will examine another of the parables that our Lord gave on a single occasion by the Sea of Galilee. In them he sets forth in parable form the great secrets of the kingdom of heaven, the mysteries of the present age, the revelation of the forces and powers at work in the age which began with our Lord's first coming and which will end with his second appearing. Today we come to the fourth of these parables. It occupies but one verse in the chapter, Verse 33:

He told them another parable. "The kingdom of heaven is like leaven which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal, till it was all leavened." {Matt 13:33 RSV}

I have entitled this study "The Case of the Sneaky Housewife," not because I am trying for a tricky title but because that was doubtless the reaction of the disciples when they heard this little story. Our Lord arrested them with this story and shocked them somewhat. When he told them that there was a woman who hid leaven in three measures of meal they must immediately have thought, "What a dirty trick! What a sneaky thing to do!" Perhaps it does not strike us that way, but this is because we are not in their shoes. We do not understand the symbols as Jesus used them. So the purpose of our study together is to put ourselves back in their place and to hear this story as they heard it.

For this is one of those parables which has been greatly misinterpreted. It has been treated in a very cavalier fashion and its meaning has been grossly distorted into something entirely different from what our Lord intended. Most of the major commentators on this passage seem to throw all principles of interpretation to the winds and to take no notice of how Scripture uses these symbols in other places. So they arrive at a meaning which is simply a result of their own wishful thinking.

The usual interpretation is that the leaven is the gospel and the woman is the church. The church is to take the gospel and put it into the world of humanity which is represented by the three measures of meal. The gospel quietly but surely will work away like leaven, like yeast in bread, until all of humanity is reached by the gospel and the whole world is changed. Then, finally, the kingdom of heaven will come in. Though that is far and away the most popular interpretation of this parable, it is absolutely wrong! On the basis of that interpretation men have thought at various times and places that the church was going to introduce the millennium to the world, that it would bring in the kingdom, that the gospel would so permeate the affairs and the thinking of men that the outlooks and insights and moral standards of Christianity would be universally accepted all over the world.

Some of you may be old enough to remember what things were like back at the beginning of the 20th Century and you will recognize that this was the fundamental philosophy of that far away, turn-of-the-century day. Men actually thought that we were right on the verge of The Golden Age. This was back in the days when William Jennings Bryan was the great spokesman for Christendom in the United States. Under his leadership many people of that time wore little golden plowshares in their lapels to symbolize the hope that this was the day in which men would beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks and would learn war no more.

The 20th century began with a note of tremendous optimism. The thinking was that Christian teaching had so permeated life that we no longer would have strife between capital and labor, that there no longer would be any poverty or violence among mankind, and that surely wars had been brought to an end. And this interpretation of this parable was widely proclaimed as proof that our Lord had said this would come about. The church would transform the world and would end war and strife and injustice and all such terrible things among men.

That kind of interpretation sounds almost ludicrous to us today. Yet I can remember, as a boy growing up in the '20s and '30s, that this was still very much the thought of the hour even after World War I had brought its terrible devastation.

But if I were convinced that this is the true meaning of this parable I would be greatly tempted to throw away my Bible and to give up the ministry. If this is the correct interpretation then Jesus Christ was mistaken. For here we are, two thousand years after the time our Lord told this story. And there are outstanding, increasingly significant signs, from day to day almost, which indicate that we are nearing the time which our Lord at the end of this series of parables called the "close of the age." If that is the correct interpretation then we should see the world almost completely leavened by the gospel, almost entirely Christian.

But what are the actual facts? Well, you know as well as I that never in all of history has there been more hatred, more crime, more violence, more injustice, more wretchedness, more vicious evil among mankind than there is in our day. Of all the centuries, historians agree, the 20th is the bloodiest. There is more persecution of Christians in the 20th century than there ever was in any other, including the 1st. The world is a hundred times more pagan today than it ever was in the days of the Apostle Paul. In fifty years, a godless, materialistic philosophy called Communism has grown from just a handful of men to spread over half the earth. More than a billion people are under the control of this completely atheistic system. Even in our own so-called Christian country, a poll taken not long ago rated the birth of Christ fourteenth in a list of important events in history. Though more Bibles are being sold than ever before, still 50% of the people of this country cannot name even one of the gospels. So Christ must have failed or else something has gone desperately wrong with his program if the common interpretation of this parable is to be accepted.

But if we will listen to this story as that crowd did, and react as they did, we will recognize that interpretation as entirely wrong. This parable does not teach that, and never did. And that is not what is happening in history. Our Lord did not interpret this parable to his disciples because he evidently expected them to know what the meaning was. In fact, a little later, when they were in the house, he asked them if they knew what these parables meant and they said they did.

Jesus is using here a very common picture from any Hebrew household, and everyone present knew that he meant that this woman did an evil, and sneaky thing when she hid this leaven in the meal. So we want to look at this as they would have, with their background and their understanding of what these symbols mean.

Let's begin with the meal. It is the central thing in this story. The woman and the leaven both did something to the three measures of meal. That is what our Lord is trying to get across to us. So the central question is: "What does the meal represent?"

This crowd of Jews would know instantly what he had in mind because with their Judaistic background and training in the Old Testament, their minds would flash back immediately to one of the most common offerings in Israel -- the meal offering, consisting of three measures of meal precisely prescribed to be unleavened, i.e., without any yeast in it at all.

Very likely many of them would think back to the very first time the phrase "three measures of meal" appears in the Scriptures. It is in Genesis 18. Abraham was in his tent by the oaks of Mamre one day and he looked out the door and saw three strangers approaching. He went to meet them, for strangers were an uncommon sight in those days and anyone passing by was offered hospitality. He welcomed them and offered them, according to the Scripture {Gen 18:6-7}, three measures of meal baked into bread which Sarah made in the tent while they were fellowshiping together out under the trees. During their conversation it suddenly broke upon Abraham's astonished intelligence that God himself was visiting him, accompanied by two angels. That was the beginning of the use of the three measures of meal as a symbol.

What did it mean? It is clear that it became a symbol of the fellowship of God with his people and their fellowship with one another. Meal is a beautiful picture of commonality of life. In the Bible, it is always a picture of humanity, a humanity which is all alike. Just as each grain of cereal or meal is like all the other grains, people are alike and share in the same quality and nature. And they blend together to make up something valuable. So, very early in the life of the Jewish people the three measures of meal became a picture

of the people of God sharing the life and the fellowship of God. So when the Old Testament people offered the three measures of meal they were describing in beautifully picturesque language what was very precious in God's sight -- the oneness of God with his family, God with his people, the life they shared with each other under the Fatherhood of God.

Later on, in the book of Judges, when Gideon was suddenly confronted with the angel of God, he brought him an offering of three measures of unleavened meal. When Hannah, the mother of Samuel, went to worship God in the temple she took with her an offering of three measures of meal, unleavened. So this is a common symbol throughout the Old Testament and it was familiar to these Jews to whom Jesus spoke. They knew instantly what he meant. It is we who tend to impose some artificial and foreign meaning upon this. But they instantly understood that Jesus was talking about the fellowship of God with his people, a precious thing in the sight of the Lord, and about their oneness with each other as well.

You recall that in First Corinthians 1:9, Paul said to the church at Corinth that the key thing about their lives as Christians was that they were called unto the fellowship of God:

God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. {1 Cor 1:9 RSV}

That is the key to that great letter. That is what Christianity is all about. It is the sharing of the life of Jesus, together. We share his life and all that he is. And when John opens his first letter he says,

That which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you may have fellowship with us; and our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. {1 Jn 1:3 RSV}

So there is the meaning of the three measures of meal, the unleavened bread of sincerity, honesty, and truth. It is very precious to God that his people become honest and open and accepting toward one another, with nothing hidden between them. They are to understand one another, bear one another's burdens, uphold one another, and share together the life of God in their midst, the life of a living Lord. That is what our Lord introduced into the world by bringing the gospel, this marvelous seed dropped into the heart of humanity which produces a willingness to be open and to stop hiding behind facades and to be honest in sharing the forgiving grace of Jesus Christ.

Now let's look at the leaven. The disciples would quickly recognize its meaning. It is used all through the Old Testament and it is always used the same way. Never once is leaven ever used as a symbol of anything good. Everyone in this crowd knew that this woman had no business putting leaven into these three measures of meal. That was to destroy the very meaning of this significant offering, for Scripture had taught them that the three measures of meal were to be unleavened.

You remember that in Egypt, before the Jews ate the first Passover, God sent them all through their houses with candles and lamps looking for leaven. They were to clear every bit of it out of the house lest any of it get into the three measures of meal, or the Passover feast, and destroy the beauty of the symbolism. They were to search meticulously, to look in corners, on shelves, and back in the closets. Perhaps this is where the custom of Spring house cleaning began, because Passover is in the spring. The Jewish people still do this today as a result of that teaching way back in the time of Moses.

In the New Testament you find five distinct usages of leaven and they all mean something bad. Never, ever in the Scriptures does leaven symbolize something good; it is always a type of something evil. Jesus frequently spoke of leaven. He said to his disciples, "Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees," {Matt 16:6, 16:11, Mark 8:15}. And, lest we misunderstood what he meant Luke adds: "The leaven of the Pharisees is hypocrisy" {Luke 12:1}, i.e., pretending to be something you are not, pretending to a status before God which you don't actually possess, being phony, putting on an outward garb of religiosity but inwardly still having the same old evil thoughts and angry moods and bitter attitudes. That is the leaven of the Pharisees -- hypocrisy.

Then Jesus spoke of the leaven of the Sadducees {cf, Matt 16:6-12}. That is rationalism, the idea that life

consists only of what you can taste and see and touch and smell and hear and think about, that there is nothing beyond that, no supernatural activity of God in life, no resurrection, no angels, no life after death. That is the leaven of the Sadducees -- rationalism.

And he spoke of the leaven of the Herodians, the followers of King Herod. Their leaven was materialism. They taught that the great value of life is to be powerful and wealthy. If you can acquire wealth and power then you have the secret of life. Many today are following the philosophy of the Herodians, holding the attitude that what makes life worthwhile is the possession of things. That is evil, Jesus says. That is not the way you properly measure manhood or the value of a life.

In his epistles the Apostle Paul spoke of leaven. In First Corinthians 5 he cites the case of a man who was actually living in incest with his father's wife and Paul says that sexual immorality is leaven within the church, destroying its fellowship. He goes on to say,

Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens [ferments] the whole lump [of dough]? Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump [fresh dough], as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our paschal lamb, has been sacrificed. 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. {1 Cor 5:6-8 RSV}

There is what the bread stood for: sincerity, honesty, truth, and openness -- a recognition of one another and a transparency before each other. Anything which wrecks or ruins that or distorts it and puffs it up is leaven.

Finally, in the book of Galatians {5:9}, Paul again speaks of leaven, this time in connection with legalism, with trying to put people under the Law, under a set of rules by which to live, and expecting that they will have the power to obey simply by their own effort. The very secret of the gospel is that Christ has come to set us free from that. The world has been trying to live on that basis for centuries and it has never been successful. Every effort to obey a rule and thus to satisfy God even with internal obedience, let alone external, is doomed to failure before it begins if you are depending upon yourself for the necessary power. That way of life is called leaven. It too destroys the fellowship of God's people.

So leaven, obviously, is anything which disintegrates, breaks up, and corrupts, or causes a puffed up, swollen condition, destroying honesty and obscuring reality. That is what yeast does when you put it into bread. The housewife says that it lightens the bread because it puffs it up, swells it up. At a certain point she arrests the action of the yeast by baking the bread in the oven. But leavened bread will always spoil far more quickly than unleavened. Leaven is disruptive and corrupting.

Now we come to the last symbol and the key question. Here we have these two elements:

1. The fellowship of God's people which, as Jesus looked down the age, he saw as something very precious and important that he intended to introduce into society, and
2. Something which corrupts that by introducing this five-fold evil of leaven into the fellowship.

Who does this? Who is this woman? Well, this may seem like a strange text for Father's Day but the French, you know, have a little saying they use whenever trouble arises: *Cherchez la femme*, "look for the woman." This may be the origin of that saying, I don't know.

Some of the commentators have tried to identify this with a specific woman in history and it is amazing what they have come up with. Some suggest it is Joan of Arc, believe it or not. She is supposed to have destroyed the fellowship of the church by introducing false doctrines. Others have said, No, it is Mary Baker Eddy, the founder of Christian Science. It is amazing how many cults have been begun by women. I remember meeting some people back in the '40s who identified it with Eleanor Roosevelt, of all people. It may be that some today are tempted to say that this is the Woman's Liberation Movement introducing these evils.

But when a woman is used symbolically in Scripture it always means the same thing -- some religious authority either out of place or doing the wrong thing, some misuse of a relationship with God. It is clear that

the woman belongs in the story. A woman is an authority in the home, one who had the right to prepare the bread of fellowship. This woman was in her rightful place, in her kitchen. It was her job to prepare the bread. But she had no right to hide leaven in it. And the very fact that she hid it indicates that this is something sneaky or crafty that she is trying to get away with, something she knew was wrong.

Now bring the picture together. Our Lord is looking down the centuries to follow and he sees the thing which is most precious to God about the work which he himself has begun among mankind. This is the fellowship of God with his people, the sharing of life with each other and with God, the family of God, the oneness of the body of Christ, with all the members sharing life in openness and honesty together under the love and forgiveness of the Father. And into that wonderful fellowship these false, evil principles are introduced by those who had the right and the authority to preserve this fellowship, i.e., the leaders of the church. It is they who introduce the leaven into it, who permit it to come in and do not exclude it as they should. Those who are charged with the responsibility of developing the fellowship of God's people nevertheless allow hypocrisy, formalism, ritualism, rationalism, materialism, legalism, immorality -- all of these things -- to come in. And when these things set into a church they destroy the fellowship of God's people.

What an instructive parable this is!

As we apply it to ourselves we can see that this is what has been happening. This is why churches are oftentimes charged with being cold and unfriendly -- because there's no fellowship. It is too often only on the most superficial basis that people come and sit together in the congregation, not as members together of one great family, but as individuals listening to a service but not relating to the person next to them. But that isn't Christianity as it is intended to be manifested. That is only a form, only a moment in the Christian life. The major part is to be the sharing of each other's concerns, the bearing of one another's burdens, the confessing of our faults one to another, and praying for one another that we may be healed, the opening of our lives and the transparency of our actions before others. This is the great fellowship that our Lord is seeking.

As you trace this pattern down through history you can see how leaven has been working. The very ones who were responsible to keep God's house free from it -- the leaders, the pastors, the elders, the teachers within the church -- are the ones responsible for allowing these conditions to come in and to prevail. And each time they have done so they have destroyed this marvelous fellowship.

Now, openness and oneness of the body together is the key to all revival. Every time the Spirit of God has ever moved in history, he has always begun here. He has restored to the church the sense of belonging to each other and to God together, the sense of openness and honesty and transparency, of the need to bear each other's burdens and to uphold one another before God, to be concerned and to care for each other, and to demonstrate it by deeds of help and mercy toward each other -- all because we share the life of God. We are free to do this because we do not have to be hung up with defensiveness about ourselves. We have received the forgiveness of God, the grace of God, and that frees us to be at one with someone else. This is the most precious thing in the world in God's sight. It is that three measures of meal which marks a humanity undivided, a humanity which belongs to each other.

You see in the early church how this oneness was very evident. This was the secret of the book of Acts. Notice how warm and sweet and precious is the fellowship together of the people of God in that book. We read, "They had all things in common," and the word "common" is the very word for fellowship. It was not that they pooled all their property, like the Communists, and doled it out to each other. That isn't the idea. It means that in owning private property they recognized the claim of their brothers and sisters upon it, as well as themselves, and that if God gave them something he gave it to be used for all. They were therefore generous and open with each other. Since they recognized that they all belonged to one family, anybody who was in need could ask of anyone else and that need would be met. This is the level of life on which they lived. You find this all through the book of Acts and the result was that "they had great power in witnessing, and great grace was upon them all," {Acts 4:33b}.

That is what is often lacking in the church today. We have taken away the *koinonia*, the commonness of the body of Christ. We have lost that to a great extent in the church in general. But we have held onto the *kerygma*, the preaching, the proclamation. We expect to convince everybody by an intellectual presentation of

truth. But the reason why the evangelical church of our day is rejected and set aside in so many quarters is that people who come to it are disappointed because they hear great words but they don't see great lives; they don't see warmth, they don't see love and acceptance, they don't see understanding and forgiveness. What they too often run into is strife and bickering and fighting and quarreling and unforgiveness, jealousy and bitterness, grudges and splits and feuds and divisions, hostility and anger, worry and anxiety. They listen to the preaching of these great words that the church has to say and then they look at our lives to see how it works. And what they see convinces them that the words are not true. What they see is exactly what they find in their own lives and homes.

So they say to us, "What are you Christians talking about? What's the difference? What do you Christians have that we don't have -- without the inconvenience of having to go through all the rites you go through. What is so great about this message? Why doesn't it do something for you? Why should we believe it and go to all the trouble of becoming a Christian when we can live the same way ourselves? We don't need the church or the Bible to teach us how to fight. We don't need the gospel to help us to be angry and resentful and bitter and divided against each other. We can do all that without it." And so there is an immediate loss of attention to the message that we are proclaiming because there is no evidence of the witness of communion. What is missing is the oneness, the precious fellowship together of the people of God living the life of God.

Our Lord knew this would happen. He knew that leaven would appear within the church, allowed there by those who had the authority to keep it out if only they would.

First there came the leaven of the Pharisees -- hypocrisy. The Pharisees said that you please God when everything involving the externals of your life is right, when you watch your language so that you don't use blasphemous words and pay all your debts and keep up your church attendance, then everything is all right. Your heart can be filled with all kinds of bitterness and hatred and enmity and lust and fear. But as long as you maintain outward appearances you are acceptable before God. That is a deadly bit of leaven and it will destroy the warmth of the fellowship of God's people with himself and with each other. But that is what has happened so often.

Remember how Ananias and Sapphira even though they were Christians began to pretend to a degree of dedication and commitment which they really did not have. God judged it to show us what that was. It was leaven at work and it destroyed, it brought sudden death into their midst, as it does into our lives today the minute we try to pretend something.

This is what has happened to the meetings of the church. A spirit of formalism has come in. Formality is a way of making the exterior appear to be right while inwardly your heart can be anything that it may happen to be at the moment. But you do not have to show it to anyone. Formality is coming into church and looking pious and dedicated and evangelical, or whatever you want to call it, but inwardly being quite different. That is formalism, ritualism, and it is the leaven of hypocrisy.

I think that right here this morning we are suffering from a bit of leaven which has accumulated in our midst from the tradition of centuries. I am distressed by the widespread attitude these days that the only way you can worship God properly is to be "reverent," which means to be quiet, that it is wrong to talk when you come into a church service, that a service ought to be conducted in silence. Very often I get notes from people who complain that other people talk before the service begins. I suppose nothing is more commonplace in Christianity than the idea of encouraging people to come and sit quietly before the service begins. Don't say anything to anybody, just come and sit and bow your head. Don't even look at your neighbor when he sits down or greet him in any way.

That is a hangover from days of the Jewish temple, when the presence of God caused a spirit of great awe to settle upon the people. This was carried over into Catholic and Protestant churches, with their cold, formal architecture. People coming into church were taught that they were coming into the "house of God," and that the only way to act before God is to be reserved and half frightened.

This is wrong! You don't find this in the New Testament. Their practice was to come together and to relate to each other and to God. When the body of Christ comes together we are to recognize each other and love each

other. God does not dwell in temples made by hands, he dwells in the bodies of believers. His life is a warm, open, accepting life. And we worship God when we enjoy fellowship with each other. I think a church is healthy when there is whispering and talking and visiting and relating one to another until the service begins.

I know there are moments in a service when we should be quiet, when everyone is quiet before God. Naturally I appreciate the fact that you are not talking now, while I'm speaking, because that is necessary in order to hear what is being said. And there may be other times when it is well just to pause and meditate. But there is nothing irreverent about visiting with one another, relating to each other, before or even after a service begins, nothing at all! It is what ought to be, in the presence of God. The idea that it is wrong to react in church, or to find out how people are and what they are doing and to pray with them a bit, is absolutely foreign to the New Testament concept of the church. The church is to love one another and to manifest this when they come together. That which teaches the contrary is introducing the leaven of hypocrisy into the church.

You know how rampant legalism is in the church today. Christians are trying to control themselves and their children by law and not by grace, by trying to make a list of rules according to which people are to live. This is absolutely destructive of the Christian life. The idea has been that if we teach our children what is right, that if we hold up before them a moral code or standard complete with all the little variations of our own -- no-no's that we have added here and there -- that then we have discharged our responsibility as Christian parents. But that is basic and fundamental legalism, and it will produce rebellion -- as it is now and has been producing all along.

Law is necessary, of course, at the beginning of our children's lives in order to maintain order in life and in the home, and the Scriptures teach this. But the whole idea of being parents -- and here I speak to fathers and mothers on this Father's Day -- the whole idea is to teach children that there is another basis from which they can react to situations. There is a basis not of demand that: "You must do this or I will not love you," but of: "I already love you, and whatever you do I will love you. Nothing is going to destroy our relationship. And you have a relationship with God from which you can draw upon his strength and his grace to respond to that which life is requiring of you." That is what we are parents for -- to teach them that basis.

We need to remember that, as parents, our responsibility is to teach our children how to respond to a demand, by what power, to teach them that Jesus Christ, living his life within us makes it possible to meet these demands. We must first demonstrate this as parents. Then we must teach it and explain it from the Scriptures. But without the demonstration the Scriptures will be meaningless. This is what is wrong in so many Christian homes. There is no demonstration of the way to meet the pressures of life by faith in a living Lord. You haven't taught Christianity when you have merely held up the moral standard of the Ten Commandments. You have taught Christianity only when you have shown that Jesus died for us in order that he might live in us and that his life imparted to us is the basis from which we respond to his Law. Anything other than that is the leaven of legalism.

Then there is a leaven of rationalism -- and how that has come into the church! Men have forgotten that the Word of God is a revelation which God gives of truth that we could never know if he had not told it to us. Therefore it is superior to, and beyond, that which is available in our universities or anything that man can find out for himself. This Word of God sits in judgment upon that; not that upon this.

Then there is the leaven of materialism whereby many Christians have actually succumbed to the idea that the really important things in life are to have a fine home, and lovely luxuries, and a swimming pool, color TV, three or four cars, etc. They build their lives around these things, aim at them as goals, and are distressed and disenchanted and discontented if they cannot have them. And their children pick up the idea that these are the important things in life, and that your status and prestige in the community and your image before your neighbors are paramount. That is the leaven of materialism and it destroys this sweet fellowship of God.

Then there is the leaven of immorality, and how that spreads in a church! And yet, as any honest, knowledgeable psychologist can tell you, sex practiced outside of marriage is the most dangerous and harmful way to wreck and ruin a relationship. I have had scores and scores of young people sit in my study and confirm this to me. Again and again they have told me how a beautiful relationship was developing between two people, but then they went into sex and the development was arrested at that level, they never got to know

each other any more deeply than that. This is why God excludes sex outside marriage -- because it destroys the oneness of loving and growing together and precludes really knowing each other.

I am shocked, as you are, to hear how many churches are now taking a stand in defense of homosexuality, as though this is to be accepted as a way of life. I don't think there is any more deadly thing we can do to those who are homosexuals than to take a stand like that, because it locks them into a pattern of defeat from which there is no escape. The same applies to any other form of sexual deviancy or misbehavior. If any of these practices are accepted as something that is right they will spread like leaven, destroying all the fellowship and the openness of God's people one with another and with the Father. The church is to understand that those who indulge in these things are in the grip of terrible, difficult problems and that love and grace ought to reach out to them and welcome them and put an arm around their shoulder and help them in their struggle, but never, never compromise and say that this is something they have to live with. They don't have to live with it.

Christ has come to set us free from all forms of bondage, whether it be the bondage of legalism, of immorality, of a materialistic outlook, or whatever. Our Lord has come to set us free! That is what Christianity is all about.

What is the result of all this leaven that has come in? Well, we can see it abounding on every side, can't we? People come to church. They listen, they sing a hymn, they stand at the right time, they bow their heads at the right angle, they close the book together, they sit down. They go through the motions, but there is no exchange of life. There is no oneness, no sense of openness, no acceptance, no forgiveness. And homes which are supposedly Christian are often filled with strife and bickering and fighting, even physical attack. These things are the result of the leaven which has permeated and pervaded the body of Christ.

But God has made provision for being cleansed from leaven. By the forgiveness of the cross, by the simple method of admitting the facts and then accepting the forgiveness of God without any further quibble we can be washed, cleansed, and go on together from that point as free men and women, no longer in bondage to these things but set free by the grace of God. We can then begin to be transparent and open once again.

How wise our Lord is! How accurately he sees what is happening. How quickly and honestly our Lord has put his finger upon the course of this age and shown us the very things which destroy and corrupt the sweet fellowship of the people of God. He warns us very clearly against allowing leaven to come into our fellowship.

And this word is addressed especially to those in authority and leadership within the church, for the teaching of the Word of truth will arrest the action of the leaven.

If the leaders of the church through the centuries had faithfully stuck with the Scripture and had taught it as it is, these unhappy developments would have been prevented. But everywhere I go as a pastor today, speaking to groups of other pastors, I find out that this is the great weakness -- pastors are not teaching the Bible. They are not instructing their people from the Word of God and teaching what it actually says about how they are to live together. They aren't saying a word about that. They are discussing remote doctrinal questions and giving their opinions on the social and political issues of the day instead of instructing in what the Bible is really aimed at -- the very personal lives of individuals and their relationships one with another. If the leadership of the church were carefully going over the Scriptures together with people, unfolding the Word of God, the whole effect of leaven would be greatly minimized within the body of Christ.

Thank God for those places all over the country today where pastors have reached the end of their efforts to do it another way and are returning at last to the Word, beginning to unfold and proclaim it before the people. That is the business of preaching -- to help people understand their lives in the light of the revelation of the Word of God so that together we might share openly and honestly and transparently before one another the living grace and forgiveness of our Father in heaven.

So, when we are dismissed now, enjoy some fellowship with one another, won't you?

Say something to the person next to you. Don't just take him or her for granted. We are one together in Jesus Christ, and we need to know each other.

Let's pray together.

Prayer

Thank you, Father, for truth that opens our eyes, that reveals to us where we are. And thank you, Lord, for the beautiful symbol of the fellowship of your people with each other and with you which you have given us in the three measures of meal. Lord Jesus, you who have come into this world to break the strange and cold fetters which bind us away from one another, away from the expression of love and life together, forgive us. Grant us, Lord, that in the life of every individual present here there may be a putting away of the leaven in order that the sweetness and beauty of your life may be evident in our midst and that we may love each other in the grace and forgiveness that you have given to us. Help us to lay hold of the healing grace of Jesus Christ our Lord and to be cleansed and made whole in his strength, by his grace. We ask in his name, Amen.

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