

Parables of the Heart
“The Parable of the Woman and the Yeast”

Passages: Psalm 108:1-5
 Matthew 13:33

Have you ever heard the story of the identical twin boys? One was an incredible optimist-- an “Everything’s coming up roses!” sort of optimist-- while the other boy was a hopeless pessimist—a “woe is me for I am ruined!” type pessimist.

Well, the worried parents took their two boys to a psychologist for an assessment and this is what the psychologist advised: *“On their next birthday, put them in separate rooms to open their birthday presents. Give the pessimist the best toys you can afford, and give the optimist a box of manure.”* The parents dutifully followed the psychologist’s instructions and carefully observed the results. (Remember, this is only a story!)

When they peeked in on the pessimist, they heard him complaining to himself: *“I don’t like the colour of this computer; I’ll bet this game will break; I know someone who has a better toy than this one.”*

Tiptoeing across to the room where the optimist was opening his presents, they overheard him giggling with glee. When they looked in, they saw the boy throwing the manure up in the air, as happy as you please! He looked up at his parents and cried out, *“You can’t fool me! With this much manure, there’s got to be a pony nearby!”*

Like these twin boys, Christians can be both optimistic and pessimistic.

Pessimistic Christians look at the world around them and focus in on how everything in life has been distorted and perverted by sin; they shake their heads at the destructive influences of evil; they bemoan the fact that truth is under siege. As such, they live out their Christian lives constantly retreating from the world, circling the wagons around them. They point to the diminishing number of people in church on Sunday and believe that the whole world is turning away from faith in Jesus Christ! The only hope they have lies in

the Second Coming of Christ who, when He finally comes, will right the wrongs, destroy God's enemies, and bring His people to their final victory in heaven.

Indeed, when it comes to today's parable about the yeast, pessimistic Christians will easily interpret through a negative lens. In their minds, *the woman* represents Satan...and *the yeast* represents evil that has been mixed into our *world* (represented by the dough). Christian pessimists can see evil infiltrating into every part of our world. For them, Satan's evil plans are increasingly corrupting and destroying God's Kingdom.

And you know what? This pessimistic vision has a lot of Biblical support! In many passages, yeast is filled with negative connotations. Didn't Jesus warn His disciples; ***"Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees"***? The Apostle Paul also used yeast in a similarly negative way. In speaking about an immoral situation in the church of Corinth where a man was living in incest with his father's wife, Paul exhorted the church to ***"remove this man from your midst"***. Why? Because, ***"a little leaven leavens the whole lump."*** Paul's use of yeast is clearly a negative one!

In fact, if you continue in that same passage, Paul goes on to encourage the church in Corinth to ***"...keep the feast, not with the leavened bread of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth."*** Of course, the feast Paul was referring to was the OT Feast of Unleavened Bread, when the Israelites were commanded to go through their houses and eliminate any trace of yeast. During this week-long festival, yeast was understood as a symbol for evil which needed to be eliminated from your house, and from your life!

And so, if you are a pessimist and have understood today's parable in a negative way, there is much warrant for your approach! You could even connect your negative reading of this parable with the negative image given to us by *the Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds* (that we looked at three weeks ago). Remember? The weeds were sown into the field of wheat by Satan. Satan's greatest desire is to corrupt the plans of God and His Kingdom.

But, is there any validity for having an optimistic reading of this parable?

Many Christians, like me, have difficulty in believing that any parable about God's Kingdom could be all gloom and doom! In fact, we optimists see Jesus as

the most optimistic of all people! Surely, He wouldn't have left us with a parable that leaves us with such a disastrous vision of this world that we feel crushed by it all!

So, can this parable be read in an optimistic way? I believe you can!

To start with, those who think that yeast was only used in the Scriptures as a metaphor for evil have overlooked the fact that, as far as the *daily* life of Israel was concerned, **yeast was good!** Think about it: For more than 11 months of the year, OT Israel ate *leavened* bread. They drank drinks fermented by *yeast*. They also used *leavened* bread in two, very significant, Temple sacrifices; the *peace* (or fellowship) *offering* and the *wave offering*. What this means is quite simple: Although, *for one week of the year*, leaven symbolised evil and had to be gotten rid of, *for the rest of the year*, yeast was a symbol of the positive influences of goodness, fruitfulness and the abundance of life in God's Kingdom. Yeast was also a symbol of joy, unity and fellowship as God's people!

As a matter of fact, the original reason why Israel ate unleavened bread during the annual Passover meal was not because yeast symbolised evil. (That understanding came much later.) The Jews ate unleavened bread because, on the night that God commanded the Israelites to leave Egypt, they had no time to let their bread rise. Back in Deuteronomy 16, God gave His people this instruction: "*Do not eat... bread made with yeast, but for seven days eat unleavened bread, the bread of affliction, because you left Egypt in haste...*" (Deuteronomy 16:3). First and foremost, the absence of yeast at Passover was to remind Israel of the urgency of faith that was needed to follow God's lead out of Egypt!

What I'm trying to say is this: Although yeast has become a metaphor for evil, it wasn't always equated with evil! And that's the *first* reason why I believe that it's possible to read today's Parable of the Yeast from an optimistic perspective.

But there's a *second*, even more important, reason...a reason which tells me that it's not only **possible**, but **preferable** to read this Parable through an optimistic lens. The fact is that **a positive interpretation fits far better with the overall trajectory of the Bible...** a trajectory in which the sovereign purposes of God and His Kingdom will not fail, even when assaulted by Satan's lies and

deceits (see Psalm 108!). For the undergirding truth of this parable is that God has not abandoned this world to Satan but has come to redeem this world in the person and work of His Son! Isn't this exactly what Jesus had already begun to reveal just one chapter earlier when He cast out demons and healed the sick, saying ***"If I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, then surely the Kingdom of Heaven has come upon you!"***????

That's why, in my opinion, the woman of the parable is not Satan—she's **Jesus!** This is an important starting point because, by placing Jesus as the central character, we are following the exact same pattern found in all the other parables of this chapter! If you notice, **the main character** in every other parable (be it the farmer of the first parable, or the man of the second and third parables) **is always Jesus**. He is the One who "plants" the seed of God's Word into the earth, regardless of whether that seed be corn, or wheat, or a mustard seed. In today's parable, the woman (Jesus) is "planting" (mixing) the "seed" (yeast), into dough, which represents the world!

In fact, when Jesus says that the woman mixed the yeast into ***"a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough"***, what we have here is a testimony to the mysteriously positive and universal influence of God's Word. Not only does it work its way all through the dough, but the dough is enormous--the Greek text tells us it was "three sats", or approximately 60 pounds! Now, why would Jesus be so specific about this quantity? Because no average Jewish woman could possibly work with 60 pounds of flour at one time! It's clearly hyperbole! And the hyperbole is meant to provoke in us a sense of awe about the woman and what she is doing! Jesus is this super-woman, and the tiny, imperceptible grains of yeast that He uses have such incredible power that they are able to completely infiltrate and influence the entire batch of dough! For those who have eyes to see, here is a beautiful metaphor for the supernatural power of Jesus and the Word of God which He speaks, bringing life into every part of this world!

This idea ties in with a second point that I want you to notice: The Greek word translated in the NIV as *"mixed"* should really be translated as *"hidden"*. In other words, the yeast was *hidden* in the flour. Why is that important? Because when the Gospel of the Kingdom first came to Israel in the person of Jesus, it was "hidden" from the powerful and revealed to the weak. Every time that

Jesus spoke in parables, their meaning was “hidden” from the wise and revealed to the innocent. As the number of disciples grew and the church was born, the glory and power of God’s Kingdom was “hidden” from the rulers and authorities and revealed to those who were humbly seeking the truth.

As you can see, I’m convinced that the best way to read this parable is from an optimistic viewpoint! This is a parable about the way the Kingdom of Heaven penetrates this fallen world with the good news of salvation and the first fruits of heaven! It’s a parable about Jesus, God’s Son and key agent of transformation, who works the yeast of God’s Word into every nook and cranny of this planet.

Now, let’s stop for a minute and ask ourselves a question: If I’m right and this parable was meant to be read in an optimistic manner, how does it apply to us, as Christians living in the 21st century?

I count at least three ways: We should live our Christian lives in a constant state of **1) amazement, 2) awareness, and 3) active engagement.**

1. Amazement:

We should be constantly **amazed** by the power of the Gospel to bring about God’s sovereign purposes in renewing and redeeming the world. For although, to the untrained eye, this yeast may look so insignificant, the amazing truth is that, once it is mixed into the dough it cannot be stopped. When Jesus came into our world, He unleashed a power that must never be under-estimated! Even when our contemporaries ridicule it and cite statistics to show how the Western church is declining in numbers, we need to keep our chins up. For the truth is that, regardless of what’s happening in the West, the worldwide church is growing; it’s even predicted to double in many places by 2050! In fact, it has been predicted that, by the middle of this century, there will be three billion Christians in the world...**and only one-fifth will be Caucasian!** The typical Christian will be a woman living in a Nigerian village or in a Brazilian shantytown.

The yeast is at work! And although we can’t see it or measure it, the evidence of its work in the world is often obvious ...and given to us as a great source of amazement and encouragement for every Christian!

2. Awareness

Although I've spoken about the growth of the worldwide church, we need to remember that God's Kingdom is not really about the numbers of people in church on Sunday, but about *the way God's life is touching a dying world*. That is why Jesus used the metaphor of yeast to describe it. Like yeast, the Gospel is alive! Like yeast, it is so alive that, when it is "hidden" and worked into this world, life starts to bubbling up and infiltrating every part of it.

It is for this reason that, as Christians, we must stay constantly **aware**... **optimistically aware**... so that we might catch glimpses of the power of God's Word at work in the world around us! For example, how much are you aware that God's Word is at work in our society, bringing order, justice and reason to our civic life? Can you see it? And how much are you aware that, whenever your neighbour or your work colleague displays things like kindness and generosity, or respect and truth, he/she is actually displaying the effects of God's Word in his/her life?

Only the person who is aware enough can see the yeast is at work! God's Word is causing the dough around us to rise. The Kingdom of Heaven is in our midst! Good things are happening in our world **by the power of God's Word and Spirit!** People from all walks of life are being positively touched and affected by the yeast. In fact, whenever people do good things, it is evidence that the life of God has come to them, even if they don't know the source!

So, let's live in a state of constant **awareness**, on the watch for signs that the yeast of God's presence is bringing life to the world. Only then will we be able to give glory to the One from whom all blessings flow!

3. **Active Engagement**

Back in Matthew 10, Jesus sent out the first 12 disciples with these words of encouragement: ***"As you go, announce this: 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.' Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those with skin diseases, drive out demons. You have received free of charge; give free of charge"*** (Matt. 10:7-8).

Now, tell me, how do you think the disciples felt? Were they overwhelmed with the realities of their assignment.... or, were they excited to join hands with Jesus and be invited to be actively engaged in the expansion of God's Kingdom—to get a front row position to see the yeast begin to permeate every part of the dough of their world?

I guess the answer depends on whether they were optimists or pessimists!

And my hunch is that **they were all optimists! Why?** Because they were all eye-witnesses of Jesus' many miracles. In other words, the Parable of the Yeast was a living reality before their eyes! Furthermore, it wouldn't be long before they would witness Jesus' resurrection from the grave where the yeast of God's life bubbled forth with such force that death could not contain it! That's why the Gospel of God's Kingdom spread like wildfire from Jerusalem to Judea, to Samaria and to the utmost parts of the earth—the disciples knew the invisible power of the yeast!

What about us? Are we optimists or pessimists? Before we will ever see the Parable of the Yeast in a positive light, we all need to have eyes that see the Risen Lord Jesus, seated at the right hand of God! We all need eyes to see that His yeast is already mixed throughout the dough. We all need eyes to see that His Gospel has already begun to make an incredibly positive impact all throughout this earth. We all need eyes to see that Jesus' life has already started to infiltrate every part of this lump of dough.

If we can see these things, then we, like the first disciples, will be turned from pessimists into optimists. With grace-filled hearts, we will be **amazed, aware,** and **actively engaged** with our world.

Let's pray.