

TWO KINDS OF YEAST

When I was a kid my mother used to bake bread. Maybe yours did too. If she did, you know what I mean when I say that the aroma of baking bread is one of the great pleasures that life affords. It is rivaled only by taste of the bread itself—with butter, of course. The thing that makes baking bread smell so good, of course, is yeast. Yeast puffs up the bread, making the inside soft and delicate while the crust gets chewy. Yeast is one of the wonders of God's creation.

So it's interesting that Jesus uses the example of yeast to illustrate something dangerous to his disciples. *"Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees,"* he tells them. At first his disciples misunderstand him completely and give him a response worthy of Larry, Mo and Curly: *"Is it 'cause we forgot to bring any bread?"* *"No, you knuckleheads,"* Jesus replies (this is my own translation). *"That's not what I meant. I meant that you should beware of the teachings of the Pharisees and Sadducees."*

Well, what *were* the teachings of the Pharisees and Sadducees, and why should we beware of them? The question is problematic because the two parties held to very *different* teachings. As a matter of fact they were bitter rivals who argued constantly over how to interpret the Scriptures. The Pharisees observed a large number of rules and customs in addition to the laws that God told Moses to write down at Mount Sinai. They taught that in addition to the written Law there were oral instructions which God had given to Moses that had been passed down orally from generation to generation. They were called the "traditions of the elders" and the Pharisees considered them just as important as the written law. They included rites of purification, prescribed ways in which animals that were to be used for food should be slaughtered, ways in which certain kinds of food need to be stored and cooked, very strict regulations for observing the Sabbath, and so forth. In contemporary Hebrew parlance, observing these laws is called "keeping Kosher." The Pharisees tried to keep these traditions scrupulously—just as contemporary Orthodox Jews strive to keep Kosher.

Jesus told the Pharisees that they had become so engrossed with observing both their oral traditions and written laws that they had lost sight of the heart of their religion, which was God's grace, His lovingkindness. The attempt to earn God's favor by keeping His oral and written laws perfectly had become the heart of their religion, rather than trust in God's willingness to forgive their sins through the Levitical sacrifices. They were basing their hopes for salvation on their ability to please God rather than on God's mercy. In other words, they were trying to earn what they could only receive as a gift. The result was that they had burdened themselves with a mountain of rules and regulations they could not possibly hope

to obey completely. Yet the Scriptures said that he who breaks the law at one point breaks all of it. So they were living in a soul-wrenching tension—between the demands of rules and regulations they could not possibly keep perfectly and the severity of God’s judgment upon them if they failed to do so. They had lost sight of God’s grace and ended up with a religion of works.

The Sadducees were almost the opposite. The only part of the Word of God they accepted as authoritative was the five books of Moses. They discounted or rejected the prophets and the wisdom literature of the Old Testament along with the oral laws and traditions of the Pharisees. Their exclusive focus was on the written Law of Moses and they paid little heed to the prophecies and promises of the Old Testament or what it had to say about heaven, hell, demons, angels, and the coming Messiah. As a result, they denied that there even were such things as angels or demons or heaven or hell or a bodily resurrection. There was only the moral law and the absolute need to obey it. Those who did so would be blessed in this world with wealth, status and happiness; those who failed would be cursed. The Sadducees were regarded as the aristocratic party among the Jews and they exerted considerable power and influence with the Jewish ruling council and the priesthood as well as with their Roman governors.

So the Pharisees and the Sadducees had taken very different paths, but they both had ended up with a religion of works rather than a religion of grace and they had both gotten there by tampering with the Scriptures. The Pharisees had added to the Scriptures and the Sadducees had subtracted from them, but in both cases they had altered God’s word, and this was the “yeast” which Jesus warned his disciples against. The urge to tamper with God’s word is dangerous yeast indeed. It was the yeast Satan used to deceive Eve. His words to Eve still worm their way into our thinking down to this very day: “Did God *REALLY* say that?” To which all too often the response is: “*God wouldn’t have said that because it doesn’t seem right TO ME.*” Or my favorite dodge: “*MY God wouldn’t have said that.*” When we refuse to bow to the authority of Scripture, we make ourselves lords OVER Scripture. That yeast may have an attractive aroma, but it produces a poisonous bread. It has lured people away from the truth and enslaved them to lies for nearly two thousand years—which is why God’s judgment on those who tamper with His word is severe. He states it clearly and unequivocally in some of the the final words of the Bible: “*I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds anything to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book. And if anyone takes words away from this book of prophecy, God will take away from him his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.*” End of story. Case closed. Divine copyright. Honor it!

Still, ever since Jesus ascended into heaven, men have tampered with his word. Some, like the Mormons, have added to it. Others, like the Jehovah’s Witnesses, have subtracted from it. But the Scriptures have withstood such attacks time and time again and remain inviolate: their truth and beauty still shine forth in a darkened

world. As St. John wrote, *“The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.”* (John 1:4) Someone once said, *“The Bible is an anvil that has worn out many a hammer.”*

This is not to make an idol out of the Bible. Let us be clear: we are not saved by the Bible. We are not sanctified by the Bible. It was not the Bible that was nailed to a cross. We are saved by Jesus Christ, who suffered and died in our place, and we are sanctified and made fit to live in heaven with God by the Holy Spirit Who dwells in our hearts and Who creates faith, hope and love in us each and every day. God alone delivers us out of our sins and gives us eternal life: not the Bible. The point is that God has chosen to come to us THROUGH the Bible; His Word is the means through which he makes his salvation known to man. Through His Word He creates faith in the hearts of His people and opens their minds to the truth, as Jesus says, *“If you continue in my word you are really my disciples; then you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.”* And so we don't WORSHIP God's Word, but we do treasure it and jealously guard it against being distorted because God's Word is the instrument of man's salvation, the means through which HE makes Christ our Savior known to mankind. The temptation to alter it so that it will make more sense to us or seem less offensive is evil yeast. It may smell good, but it makes bad bread.

But just as there is evil yeast, there is also good yeast. Jesus described this good yeast when he said, *“What shall I compare the kingdom of God to? It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough.”* Interesting, huh? There is good yeast and there is bad yeast and both of them have the power to leaven our lives—one for the better and the other for the worse. The bad yeast, the yeast of tampering with the Word of God and basing our hopes on what we think He should have said instead of what He said, puffs us up with pockets of hot air and leads to a collapse of the entire lump. The good yeast, the kingdom of God sown in human hearts through the proclaiming of the Gospel, leavens us with faith, hope and love, and prepares us to live with the King.

So we have two kinds of yeast working on us at the same time—and they both smell good! We have the yeast of humanistic doubt which leavens us with rebellion and puffs us up with pride until God puts His thumb in the loaf and we collapse into a lump of useless dough. *“Pride goeth before the fall.”*

But we also have Kingdom yeast working and growing in us. Whenever we sin, it leavens us with repentance and our spirits take hold of God's grace and mercy and we are borne upwards again.

The trick is to keep your eyes trained on the good yeast. As long as we keep our gaze fixed upon Christ and His gifts, He will leaven our spirits by strengthening our faith, securing our hopes and increasing our love. But when we are overcome by the pleasant aroma of the bad yeast and we taste its bread, we find that it is all hot air.

It soon collapses, and then we can clearly see its true ingredients: guilt, fear, remorse, despair, death. We find that once again we were fools and turn to the unquenchable grace and mercy of Christ that restores us and starts the good yeast working in us again.

One can only take an analogy so far, and I've probably pushed this one way past its limits. But I have absolutely fallen in love with Christ's metaphor of the two kinds of yeast—especially the good yeast that leavens our lives with the aroma of the Kingdom. Like the aroma of Momma's bread as it was baking, it makes me hunger for the final product. I hope it does you too.

Amen.

Matthew 16:5-12

When they went across the lake, the disciples forgot to take bread. "Be careful," Jesus said to them. "Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees." They discussed this among themselves and said, "It is because we didn't bring any bread. "Aware of their discussion, Jesus asked, "You of little faith, why are you talking among yourselves about having no bread?

Do you still not understand? Don't you remember the five loaves for the five thousand, and how many basketfuls you gathered? Or the seven loaves for the four thousand, and how many basketfuls you gathered? How is it you don't understand that I was not talking to you about bread? But be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees." Then they understood that he was not telling them to guard against the yeast used in bread, but against the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.