

THE USE OF LEAVEN
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The text this morning is from the 13th chapter of the Gospel of Matthew at the 33rd verse: “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)

If you’re familiar with the way leaven is spoken of in other places in the Word, where it appears in almost every case to carry negative symbolic meaning, this statement by the Lord, that “the kingdom of heaven is like leaven,” might sound counterintuitive. If “the kingdom of heaven is like leaven” then why was it commanded in the Law of Moses that almost all food offerings be made with unleavened bread? And what about the consequence of eating something leavened during the weeklong Passover observance, to be “cut off from the congregation of Israel?” (Exodus 12: 19) In our lesson from the Gospel of Matthew this morning, the Lord warned His disciples against the leaven of the Pharisees & the Sadducees. That wasn’t the only time he warned about the leaven of the Pharisees and he also once warned against the leaven of Herod! And yet here in our text, the Lord is comparing leaven and (importantly) the process of leavening in bread dough, to our preparation for and life in heaven.

How does this all fit together and what can it show us about the ways the Lord is leading each one of us to heaven?

We’ll begin at the beginning... at the introductory passages on the faith of the New Church that open the work *True Christian Religion* and we’ll zoom in on TCR 3 where we’re given the particulars of faith on our part.

Paraphrasing, these particulars of faith on our part are:

- (1) That God is one and He is the Lord.
- (2) That faith is believing in Him.
- (3) That evils must not be done.
- (4) That goods must be done. And,
- (5) That we must do these things as if we’re doing them on our own while at the same time believing that they are actually being done by the Lord in us & through us.

In five concise statements, this is our path to heaven... believe in the Lord & go to Him & keep His commandments and do all of that as if it’s all on us while also recognizing that it’s all being done by the Lord Himself.

Simple but not necessarily easy... and certainly not always perfect. We might aspire to live perfectly by these particulars of faith, but we’re also human. We will diverge from the path. Living by this New Church faith of belief in & obedience to the Lord, acting as if it’s entirely on us to follow through, is not so much about our effort being perfect. Instead, it’s about our effort being sincere & genuine.

Sincere & genuine. I’ve intentionally chosen those two words because (depending which translation you’re looking at) one or the other of them appears in *Arcana Coelestia* 2177 explaining the minchah, the cakes of the grain offering commanded in *Leviticus* chapter 2. We read, “Its being ‘unleavened’ or not fermented, signifies that it should be sincere, and thus from a sincere heart, and free from uncleanness.” (AC 2177: 5) Being “unleavened” in our effort to live by faith means that we are being sincere or genuine. That means we’re being “leavened” when we are insincere & fraudulent. If leaven represents things that are false & evil, and it does, then we don’t want any leaven in our spiritual life. And this is why unleavened bread was so important in the ritual, sacrificial worship of Israel & Judah and why all leaven was forbidden in the Passover observance. Keeping everything “unleavened” represents our aspiration to be sincere & genuine, as close to perfect as we can get, in our life of faith.

But... not all bread in the worship of Israel was unleavened. The feast of first-fruits is described in *Leviticus 23* and includes this commandment: “You shall bring from your dwellings two wave loaves of two-tenths of an ephah. They shall be of fine flour; they shall be baked with leaven. They are the first-fruits to Jehovah.” (Leviticus 23: 17) This is explained in the Heavenly Doctrine: “Spiritual combats or temptations are fermentations in the spiritual sense... [and they] arise with a person in the state previous to newness of life; therefore it was also ordained that when the new grain-offering on the feast of the first-fruits was offered, the bread of waving was to be baked leavened...” (AC 7906: 3)

The unleavened bread in the worship of Israel & Judah represents an uncompromising approach to evil & falsity that we should be taking in living our faith. Just like they kept out the leaven in their offering and during the Passover, we too need to keep out the evil and falsity, as much we can, whenever it arises. Teachings about repentance & self-examination go so far as to tell us to go looking for it... if there’s spiritual leaven in our lives, we should be tracking it down so that it can be shunned and avoided and as much as possible removed from our life.

But because of the nature of the world we live in and because of the human nature that we’re born with, “inclined to evils of every kind,” (TCR 612) some leaven is going to get into the dough. That’s why the priest waved the loaves of leavened bread brought as an offering of first-fruits. And that’s also the message in the Lord’s parable of the leaven... it’s not that “heaven is like leaven”; heaven isn’t like leaven because leaven represents evil & falsity. The parable takes into account that some leaven is going to have some effect on our spiritual life. Try as we might and as uncompromising as we should be to keep it out, some leaven will find its way in. And the hope the Lord offers in the parable is that, under His watchful care & in the dispensations of His providence, after the leavening process of our life of faith is complete, the Lord can gather up whatever good there is and lift it up as heavenly life.

Again, none of this is to say that there is any compromise to be made with falsity & evil. We always and forever should be rejecting evil & falsity, shunning them, running away from them, keeping them entirely separate from whatever good & truth there is in our life. That’s our responsibility as described in the faith of the New Church: that we should not do evil and we should do good as if it’s we ourselves doing it. But maybe the parable in our text is a reminder of what the Lord is doing for us providentially at the same time, how He’s working with the leavening that’s in us & around us, without much awareness or participation on our part. It’s said in the parable that the leaven was “hidden” by the woman in the bread dough, maybe in the same way that the workings of the Lord’s providence are hidden from us as we walk the path to heaven. There is going to be some leaven in our life but the Lord can still lead us to heaven.

But the title of this sermon isn’t ‘The Unavoidability of Leaven’; it’s ‘The Use of Leaven.’ The suggestion is that the Lord’s work in us as we falter on our spiritual path doesn’t happen despite spiritual leaven but happens partly as a result of the spiritual leaven that’s in us & around us. Somehow, leaven helps us on our way to heaven.

This is argument made in a sequence of passages in the work *Divine Providence*. The teaching there is that “[t]he Lord’s Divine providence causes evil and its accompanying falsity to be of service in providing an equilibrium, contrast, and means of purification, and thus in promoting the union of goodness and truth in others.” (DP 21) Evil & falsity can be of service, can be of use, in the spiritual lives of people who are trying to live by goodness & truth... and that happens by providing equilibrium, contrast and a means of purification.

That third of the three uses served by evil & falsity, as a means of purification, was the subject of our third lesson this morning from *Divine Providence* 25. That passage describes two ways that spiritual purification happens: temptations or trials and fermentations; they are described as complementary but distinct processes

in spiritual life. I've been using the term "leavening process," but fermentation is the same thing. We're discussing the Lord's parable of heaven being like leaven & the fermentation it brings on. That's what DP 25 is about.

So far, I have been speculating that the parable of the leaven describes the Lord's hidden work of providence more than it describes our own as-of-self efforts... and I'm seeing another hint at that idea *Divine Providence* 25. There are abundant teachings in the Heavenly Doctrine which describe practical methods, dos and don'ts, that an individual can apply in fighting & overcoming the spiritual temptations or trials they face when they are personally affected by evil & falsity. This passage on the other hand says this about spiritual fermentations: "[They] occur in many ways, both in heaven and on earth, but people in the world do not know what they are or how they take place." This isn't necessarily saying we can't know... but the comparison is made to rising bread dough or fermenting wine, processes that mostly happen on their own, without a lot of intervention on our part. It's also notable, I think, that fermentation is said to happen when evil & falsity are "introduced into societies." I'm seeing the use of the word "society" here as meaningfully different from reference evil & falsity being introduced into an individual person. Fermentation happens, and is something we can spiritually benefit from, because evil & falsity aren't just in us but are also in society, "in the air" as it were, in the culture. Another passage in *Divine Providence* makes the distinction by saying that temptations are severe and that fermentations are not (DP 284); they both are part of our spiritual purification but they are demanding on us in different ways.

As I say, this is speculation, that fermentation, the leavening process, is more the Lord's job than it is ours... But what's clear is that we surely do have our own as-of-self part to play, and that is when we resist within ourselves the evil & falsity that we find in self-examination. And our responsibility isn't just to ourselves. All of us do indeed have responsibilities on the societal level: "it is permissible," we read, "for everyone to think about the moral and civil life of another, and to judge of it; without such thought and judgment concerning others no civil society could subsist." (AE 629: 14)

As a concluding thought, we turn our attention to a judgment of others that the Lord invited His disciples to make when He said to them: "Take heed and beware the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees." (Matt. 6: 16) As we heard in our lesson, the Lord had been confronted by the Pharisees and the Sadducees together, which would have been unusual as these two factions in the Judaism of the day were rivals. They had demanded a sign from heaven and the Lord refused. The internal sense here is that people of that time, exemplified by the Pharisees and Sadducees, were not prepared to recognize the Lord as the Son of God, in contrast to Peter, who declared exactly that just afterward. But between the encounter with Pharisees & Sadducees and Peter's declaration of the Lord's divinity, the Lord warned the disciples about the leaven of the Pharisees & Sadducees... They were at first confused and thought the Lord was telling them about bread but then came to realize that He meant the doctrine of the Pharisees & Sadducees.

It's interesting that both the Pharisees and the Sadducees had some element of truth in their doctrine, though not the same elements. The Sadducees denied the existence of an afterlife, but the Pharisees embraced the idea. (Acts 23: 8) And while the Pharisees taught that the rabbinic tradition (the so-called "commandments of men" [Matt. 15: 9]) was as authoritative as Scripture, the Sadducees gave authority only to the Torah, the written Word itself. (Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 13.10.6)

Despite these facts, though, the Lord's warning to beware the "leaven" or doctrine of the Pharisees & Sadducees is characterized in the Heavenly Doctrine as a warning against false doctrine. (AC 7906) So even if the doctrine of these two factions had some truth to it, overall it was a false doctrine... because what made it false was not its content *per se* but the use they made of it. The Pharisees & Sadducees were rivals and usually disagreed, but they both enjoyed status & authority in the society of the time. In dismissing their demand for a

sign, the Lord called them “hypocrites” from a “wicked & adulterous generation.” The Sadducees were concerned with temple worship. The Pharisees were concerned with the Law and its strict interpretation. But were they concerned with the well-being & uplifting of their fellow man? Were they looking for the good of the people?

This was the ferment in society at that time. The Lord’s disciples and many more were hungry for truth and goodness, but where to find it, whom to rely on to provide it was an increasingly hard question to answer... until the Lord Himself made His coming. The leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees and the spiritual fermentation it led to made the good & truth that the Lord brought into the world at His first coming that much clearer & more high quality for anyone who wanted to receive it. The kingdom of heaven is leaven hidden in three measures of meal and left to ferment until it is all leavened.

It sounds like there was a similar ferment at the time of the Lord’s second coming. There are two passages in the Arcana, one which compares the Pharisees to Christians of the eighteenth century (AC 2354: 2) and another which makes same comparison for the Sadducees. (preface to the second Latin volume, between AC 1885 & 1886) Both point out the falsities of those Jewish factions (that they denied the Lord’s divinity and/or denied the afterlife). And yet the two passages say that the Pharisees and the Sadducees, both of them, “did better” than those of Swedenborg’s time who claimed to believe in the Lord & the afterlife while denying it at heart because they had their own concerns primarily with themselves and their status & authority. It sounds like there was “leaven” or doctrine, with its resulting fermentation, at the time of the Lord’s second coming that was the same or even worse than at the time of His first coming. But the use of leavening or spiritual fermentation is that it leads to purification. And isn’t what was revealed to us at the time of the Lord’s second coming, the Heavenly Doctrine, isn’t it so clear and so high quality?

How about today? Is there similar leaven? Are we in a time of ferment of some kind? I’ll let you decide that for yourself. I have my opinions and I imagine you do, too. Maybe we’d agree. Maybe we’d disagree. But now is not the time for that.

Whatever the degree of leavening & fermentation in our world today and whether or not we’re able to do something about it, what all of us can do now is understand that there are processes we are unquestionably responsible for in living a life of faith. God is one and He is the Lord and faith is to believe in Him. Evils must not be done and goods must be done. And all of this is for us to do as if of ourselves while also believing that it’s the Lord’s work in us. We might find ourselves in severe spiritual temptations. Or there may be not at all severe fermentations going on in us or around us. All of it, in the Lord’s providence, can lead us to the peace & joy of heavenly life.

The Lord said,

“Do not fear, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom. 33 Sell what you have and give alms; provide yourselves money bags which do not grow old, a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches nor moth destroys. 34 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” (Luke 12: 32-34)