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Grace Fellowship Church, Port Jervis, New York

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The Leaven in the Dough

Matthew 13:33

Prayer: *Father we just again, we thank you for who you are, we thank you for being our great God, for the God who we can turn to, the God who supports us, the God who walks along side us, the God who enlightens us and informs us, the God who has given us the gift of his word. And, Lord, this morning once again we are going to open up your book and look into it, and again we pray for the presence of your Holy Spirit who enables us to make it make sense. Give us your wisdom, give us your ability to make it make sense, give us the power to make it of lasting value, and we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Well, we've been looking at the parables of Jesus as we find them in Matthew 13, and so far we've seen that Jesus is using the parables as a means to teach his disciples some pretty hard truths. And these were truths about how God was unveiling this mystery called "the church." The parables of the sower and the seed showed us that the church was going to be a mixture of rocky and thorny and good soils and that only the good soil would be the place where

good believers would be found. The wheat and the tares parables showed that God intends his church to be intimately in the world but not of the world. The mustard seed showed us that God's church would have humble beginnings and at its height when the mustard tree was big enough for birds to nest in, it would still not have the external trappings of power that worldly kingdoms did. And all of these teachings came as profound shocks to the disciples. Jesus was literally turning their whole way of thinking upside down or to put it more correctly, right side up. And to this day the kingdom of God still represents a radical departure from everything that the world sees as normal. In the kingdom first is last, fools are wise, and dying is the key to living.

And so this morning we're going to look at yet another parable of the kingdom that Jesus taught and it's certainly the shortest but it speaks volumes as to how we are to advance this kingdom of God. It's found in Matthew 13, verse 33. It says: He, that's Jesus, *he told them still another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into about sixty pounds of flour until it worked all through the dough."* Jesus says the kingdom of heaven is like yeast, like leaven, but even that statement is controversial. There are many commentators who claim that leaven is simply a metaphor for sin. Well it's understandable because there's many instances of God in the Old Testament and Jesus in the

new warning about leaven. But what in fact they are warning us about is not sin per se, it's really about influence, good and bad. In *1 Corinthians* Paul warns his readers about bad leaven with regard to boasting. This is what he says. He says: *Your boasting is not good. Don't you know that a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough? Get rid of the old yeast, so that you may be a new unleavened batch -- as you really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Therefore let us keep the Festival, not with the old bread, leavened with malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.*

Now this bread leavened with malice and wickedness is clearly the bad influence of Egypt. Paul's reference to getting rid of the old yeast goes back to the days when the Jews were getting ready to leave their slavery in Egypt and at that time God instituted this Feast of Unleavened Bread. And so for one week the Jews would eat their bread without leaven remembering their Exodus from Egypt. Then on the first day of that week Jewish women cleaned their household of every single trace they could find of leaven. It reminded them that when they left Egypt they were to leave it in haste without even waiting for the bread to rise and they were to leave with no trace whatsoever of Egypt's influence remaining, not even the leaven in their bread. And Jesus often spoke about leaven also as influence, both good and bad, and oftentimes he was

misunderstood even by his disciples. We have one instance in scripture where we see Jesus clearly growing frustrated with the disciples' dullness of hearing. He's told them repeatedly about yeast and repeatedly they just -- they just don't get it. This is Matthew 16, it says: *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 the 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 that 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 the 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. Well clearly even Jesus understood yeast or leaven not as sin but as a type of influence or teaching that could be either very good or very bad. And when Jesus or Paul spoke out about leaven, it was always used as a metaphor not for sin but for influence. And that influence could be either good or bad, and Jesus and Paul repeatedly warned us of the dangers of even tiny

little amounts of that influence. When Paul says: "*Don't you know that a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough?*" He meant that only a tiny bit of bad influence could cause profound ruin. I mean the whole point of cleansing a house of leaven was meant to cleanse it of every single trace that could be found of the influence of the Egyptians. And when Jesus said, "*Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees,*" he was using this especially good metaphor for how profoundly good and bad influence works. He compared it to yeast, and this is how yeast does its work. I mean, leaven or yeast is a single-celled organism that feeds on sugars in bread dough and it produces more sugars and carbon dioxide. And so when leaven is mixed into dough, its sugars affect the taste and its carbon dioxide affects the texture. And we all know that the dough rises because the carbon dioxide produced by the yeast literally bubbles into the dough causing it oftentimes to double in size. And when you break dough, what happens is the dough just sets around those little tiny CO2 pockets and that's what gives bread its spongy texture.

It's been theorized that thousands of years ago someone left some dough stand and some leaven that was there somehow contaminated the dough and caused it to rise and it produced a much lighter and tastier bread. And what's more, they found it could be reproduced by adding just a small bit of old dough to the new dough. And over

the years in different times and places, they found they had different batches of yeast and each one would produce a unique type of bread. And by taking a piece of the old dough and mixing it with the new, you could use leaven to do three things: It would penetrate, it would permeate, and it would transform this "staff of life" into something that was far greater than it once was. Well for Jesus, this was a perfect metaphor for what the kingdom would do through the church. See, according to Jesus it was the church that was to penetrate, permeate, and transform the dough of the culture.

It was to first penetrate the culture, bringing with it something very new and very different and yet at the same time very old and established. Well, that's what God expects us as the church to do. Again: *"The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into about sixty pounds of flour until it worked all through the dough."* The flour or the dough, it's your work, it's your school, it's your family, it's your neighborhood, it's your friends. Whatever, whenever and wherever God has placed you, it is not by chance and it is not by accident. It is his design to use you and me as the leaven in the dough and leaven is just influence.

And the Egyptians and the Pharisees and the Sadducees, they were what was known as bad leaven. They were used by the enemy to

extend his kingdom and his influence and no one can doubt his success. And remember what Jesus is doing here. Jesus is using these parables and he's speaking primarily to the disciples and he's laying out his war plans for the kingdom. And so first and foremost he's trying to tell them the kingdom has to penetrate the culture to exert his kingdom's influence. And that's not just a task for missionaries because every day the battle for who gets to penetrate the culture gets laid at the feet of all of us. I mean we already know that the overwhelming majority of the leaven in this culture is bad, and we pretty much know where it comes from. In an article entitled: *"Hollywood's Four-Letter Word: GOD"*, Brent Bozell says this:

"Atheist activist Sam Harris recently proclaimed on National Public Radio that America needed a lot more mockery of religious belief. 'I think the criticism of irrationality just has to come from 100 sides all at once,' he declared. 'In the entertainment community, maybe you'll just have people making jokes that are funny enough and true enough so as to put religious certainty into bad light.' Harris said he's been trying hard to make contacts among the mind-benders in the news and entertainment media to find those God-scorning people who feel 'a profound sense of relief that comes with hearing somebody call a spade a spade.' Why does taxpayer-funded NPR, or anyone else for that matter, care what

atheists like Sam Harris think? They are squarely in opposition to public opinion. According to a recent Zogby/American Bible Society poll, 84 percent of adults are not offended when they hear references to God or the Bible on network television shows, and 51 percent say entertainment networks should develop shows with positive messages -- and even specifically refer to God and the Bible. So who is paying attention to Sam Harris? The entertainment television industry."

I mean the author goes on to point out this amazing fact that Hollywood is still disparaging faith even when it knows that that position isn't popular. You might say they have a religious devotion to mocking faith even at the cost of their own revenue. And so we ask why? And Bozell continues, he says this:

"A tiny atheist minority controls the creative cards in Hollywood. You think I exaggerate? Consider this study finding: Roughly six out of ten of the portrayals of religion on reality-based -- which is to say, unscripted -- TV shows were positive. That still doesn't reflect public opinion, but it's close. Unscripted shows were responsible for only 4.5 percent of the negative portrayals this study team found. The other 95.5 percent come from Hollywood's professionals, who are at their most comfortable attacking that which you and I and most Americans hold sacred."

You might say why even if it costs them money to do this, and you say why would they do that? Well, if you understand the fact that ever since the Garden of Eden there's been a war going on between two kingdoms, then Hollywood starts to make sense. If Jesus was speaking to us today, he would say beware of the leaven of Hollywood and Madison Avenue, because that's where the enemy's leaven originates, and it's a leaven designed to poison folks to the gospel. In order to do that, it seldom attacks the gospel itself. That's far too dangerous. Instead it goes after the people who practice it: churches, ministers and Christians themselves are the target, and boy, do we make attractive targets.

Sam Harris is the atheist who's trying to get folks to mock faith, and he has a book entitled "*Letter to a Christian Nation*," and in it he attempts to explain to Christians why their belief system is not only absurd but that it's dangerous. And he opens up his book with this statement, he says this: "Thousands of people have written to tell me that I am wrong not to believe in God. The most hostile of these communications have come from Christians. This is ironic. As Christians generally imagine that no faith imparts the virtues of love and forgiveness more effectively than their own. The truth is that many who claim to be transformed by Christ's love are deeply, even murderously, intolerant of criticism. While we may want to ascribe this to human nature, it is clear that such

hatred draws considerable support from the Bible. How do I know this? The most disturbed of my correspondence always cite chapter and verse."

I wonder if those Christians who wrote to condemn Harris to hell with chapter and verse, did they really think that that was being helpful? I mean is that really what the scripture calls us to do? What about *Romans 12* which says: *Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good*, or *1 Peter 3*, which says: *Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect*. I'm sure Sam Harris is delighted, delighted to get angry, nasty letters from Christians. They only serve to enforce his notion that Christianity is a fraud and that Christians are just whacked out, angry people.

So how do we counter this and all the other false leaven that has penetrated this culture? Well, the answer is according to Jesus's logic is that we penetrate the culture as well. I mean I have a friend that I first met when I was still working as a cabinetmaker and he was actually a client of mine, I want to work for him. And he was kind of a talkative fellow and shortly after we met we got to chatting and I quickly learned that he really detested religious people. He couldn't stand conservatives especially what he called

"those fundamentalists," and I considered myself more or less all of the above. And before we met, this fellow had this notion of Christianity and Christians that was based entirely on the leaven, on the influence of Hollywood, of TV and popular culture. And it was extremely easy for my friend to say how much he could not stand these -- quote -- "bible thumpers." I mean, in his mind they were rigid, unthinking, uncaring, pharisaical hypocrites. But then he actually met one. And in this case it was me. I mean and I didn't do anything special. I did give him an account for the hope that was within me but I did it with gentleness and respect. And he wound up asking lots and lots of questions and if I didn't have an answer, I said, hey, I don't know that but I can find out for you, which I did. And we had a great working relationship and I was able to push back against all of the stereotypical thinking that he had about Christians. And so we finished up and he went his way and I went my way. Some two years later I got a phone call. I remember Janice saying that this fellow was on the phone. I picked up the phone, he said, "I just want you to know that Jesus is my Lord and Savior." Wow. Folks think that you have to be some great Bible scholar to represent Christ, when all you have to be is not what the leaven claims you are: rigid, unthinking, uncaring, pharisaical hypocrites. You've got to understand, that's not a really difficult task, I mean, the bar is set pretty low here. We penetrate the culture by doing the most basic thing that Christians

can do, it's what Jesus commanded of all of us, we love our neighbors as ourselves. And I have to point out here that that doesn't mean just loving other Christians.

You know, when Jesus was asked, "who is my neighbor," he told the story of the good Samaritan. And he purposely used the Samaritan because he knew it was a Jewish man asking him that question and Jesus knew that Jews and Samaritans hated each other. They wouldn't be caught dead together. Oftentimes that's how we Christians feel about unbelievers. I mean, how do we penetrate the dough of this culture with our leaven, our influence, without building relationships with our unbelieving neighbors? I mean I can think right now of at least three different relationships that I have with unbelievers that have gone on for years with no appreciable progress in these folks coming to faith even though we get to talk about it rather often, but that's okay. You see, it's not my job to make these folks into Christians. It's my job to give an account of the hope that's within me, to pray that God would grant them the gift of salvation. That's how I penetrate the culture. You see, it's actually God's job to open up their eyes. And I find when my first concern is how am I loving my neighbor, then God will give me opportunities.

You know, if we go back to the parable that Jesus told about the

good seed sown in good soil that was over sown with bad seed, the servants asked Jesus, should we pull up the weeds? *Jesus says, "No," he answered, 'because while you are pulling the weeds, you may uproot the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.'*" And what Jesus is telling us there is that much of the good seed is going to start out looking just like weeds, and the only way they're going to complete the transformation from weed to wheat, from one kingdom to another, is by the gospel penetrating the field where the good and the bad seed are both growing, and the field, according to Jesus, is the world. So we penetrate the culture by forging relationships with those who are outside the kingdom.

So first we penetrate, next we permeate, and we permeate the flour with the good leaven of the kingdom. Again, let me go back to the parable. *"The kingdom of heaven is like yeast" -- or leaven -- "that a woman took and mixed into about sixty pounds of flour until it worked all through the dough."* Now the woman is mixing the leaven into sixty pounds of flour to point out that all it takes is this tiny little amount of leaven to influence an enormous amount of flour. And that's because when leaven is worked into flour, it starts reproducing itself until it raises up the whole loaf. Well,

just apply this to Jesus. Go back to where Jesus is speaking to his disciples. It's just Jesus and twelve guys with no money and no status and no power, and all they've got is the leaven of the kingdom penetrating, permeating and transforming the dough that it's touching. And 2,000 years later those twelve disciples have become 1.5 billion Christians. Christianity in numbers alone is now the greatest of all religions. It has permeated the entire world and it's done not by political or military power but by the power of individually transformed lives. But understand, there are plenty of places where a false form of Christianity is politically and militarily powerful and it's permeated the world as well. This is the leaven that Jesus is warning us about. You see, Jesus was constantly drawing lines between his kingdom and the phony pseudo-kingdoms that masqueraded as his. Because leaven is leaven and whether it's good or bad it's still going to permeate the whole batch, Jesus was concerned. *"Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees,"* Jesus would say, because the influence of the phony can be overwhelming.

I watched a very brief debate the other day between a conservative evangelical pastor and a quite liberal progressive pastor. And what was interesting is that they were in essence debating which one of them represented real Christianity. The progressive pastor decried the conservative as being narrow and restrictive and

unloving and uncaring, saying that the essence of the gospel is love and that this conservative pastor who insisted on sticking to what the Bible itself taught was clearly demonstrating a lack of love towards his fellow man. The conservative pastor protested that he was none of these things that he was being accused of and that truly loving his people meant staying faithful to what Jesus had revealed in his word as to what is true and right and good and what is false and demeaning and deadly. So they're going back and forth and what stands out in my mind as I'm looking at this debate is that both sides are now representing themselves as "we are the real Christianity. That one's phony." Which is to say that the true and the phony forms of Christianity have now equally permeated the culture leaving the viewers of this debate to have to choose which one is real. Well, I instantly thought of two scriptures. *Matthew 24* says: *For false messiahs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect.* And *2 Timothy* which says: *Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage -- with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths.*

Clearly the pastor who stood on the word of God as Jesus' revealed word represented, in my view, the good leaven. But I'm thinking about lots of people who are watching this little debate and I'm imagining them being torn as to trying to decide what's real and what's not. And to be sure, the pastor's vision seemed open and expansive and broad and inclusive. Very attractive. And I thought of another scripture that Jesus said. He said: *"Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it."*

Now you got to understand, when Jesus said that, he wasn't drawing a line between sinners and saints, at least in terms of their own opinion of themselves, he was in fact drawing a line between what's real and what's phony. And oddly enough, it was the phonies who thought of themselves as on the road to life and the real folks who thought of themselves as unworthy sinners. And when you think about it, that's the line that Jesus was constantly drawing. He drew it between the Pharisee and the publican, he drew it between the prodigal son and his older brother, he drew it between the sheep and the goats. I mean, if you step back a few steps, you realize what Jesus is saying here is it is extraordinarily easy for Christianity to be counterfeited. And Jesus knew that a little leaven leavens the whole loaf and that a false faith can reproduce itself with disastrous consequences. In *Matthew 23* he said this,

he said: *"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when you have succeeded, you make them twice as much a child of hell as you are."* And you think how could the Pharisees make somebody's situation worse? Well, Jesus says by substituting this false sense of righteousness, they could take a person from ignorant, which is bad, to self-righteous and absolutely convinced of their own goodness, which is terribly worse, and then they leave them worse off than if they had simply remained ignorant. So permeating this dough is bounded on both sides by grave difficulties. On the one side we have Hollywood and its influence, changing everything and affecting every single thing that it touches, on the other side we have the claims of false religion taking people from a bad place to a situation that's even worse.

So against those odds, how do we permeate the dough that Jesus is speaking about with the truth? It's a legitimate question. How in the world do we do that? Well, again, God brings us back to something that permeates, and that is aroma. Aroma is an influence that surrounds and moves us. Think of the smell of fresh perked coffee or someone cooking a spicy meal with lots of garlic in the air. Now think of the opposite. Just last week I had the pleasure of having a fully grown deer die literally five feet off my property. Thankful it was not on my property, it was on the

firehouse's property. But it was on the pathway that Janice and I walk through every day on the way to our morning walks. And by day three, I mean, I was a hundred yards away and you could just, overwhelming stench of rotting carcass, affected my nose. I mean for better or for worse, we're moved by aroma. And what permeates is what makes the aroma, whether it's perked coffee or a rotting deer carcass. Whatever permeates our character will produce its aroma. Spiritually God says the same thing, he says this in *2 Corinthians 2*, he says: *For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things?* And what it's saying is that Christ should so permeate our lives so that we literally become the aroma of Christ. And we permeate the dough simply by letting the aroma do its work. Because a little leaven leavens the whole loaf and even a small amount of God's influence can move mountains. Because everywhere the good leaven has penetrated and permeated, it has blessed. Again, we go back to the parable Jesus taught us of the mustard seed. He tells us this tiny seed and it grows into a tree and the birds of the air build their nests in it and those birds represent the blessings that the whole world sees as the result of the leaven of the influence of the kingdom. And there are huge things that accrue even to non-believers in people outside of the kingdom, things like

civilization and progress and security and even prosperity accompanies that leaven. And for us in the US, the blessing started with the Declaration of Independence, it started with this statement that says: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, and that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." From there it went through the Constitution to the Bill of Rights. See, all of these instruments are part of the leaven, the influence of the kingdom of God permeating a culture.

Now Sam Harris, our atheist friends, he hates that leaven. He wants nothing to do with it. He says that leaven should be banned, maybe outlawed in some way. And you know, we have examples of how the other kingdom permeates as well, because it, too, works its way through the entire dough. And remember, the dough is the world. I tell you about one kingdom that has been permeated by bad leaven, and that's North Korea. I mean you look at North Korea today, it's a place where rape and murder and kidnapping and sex slavery and starvation are so common that the entire population of North Korea has shrunken. The Independent reported last week that "nothing is small in North Korea apart from the people, who are on average three inches shorter than their cousins in the south." That's North Korea today. But if you read according to Open Door

Ministries, listen to this. This is their statement about Korea back then. They say:

"Before the end of World War II, there were more Christians in North Korea than there were in South Korea, North Korea was even known as the 'Jerusalem of the East.' Estimates vary about how many Christians are currently in North Korea but Open Doors places the number around 300,000, most of whom operate in secret networks of house churches. Number 2. Kim Jong Un's Great Grandfather was a part-time missionary. The current leader of North Korea Kim Jong Un, is known for continuing the trend of brutal crackdowns on Christians. Under his leadership, like that of his father, Christians have been thrown into labor camps and subjected to unspeakable conditions because of their faith. And yet, there is a history of Christianity in Kim's own family! The founder of North Korea, Kim Sung Il, was born to parents who were reportedly devout Christians. His father was even a part-time Protestant missionary! And his mother's name, Kang Pan-sok, was the Korean word for 'Peter' since she was named after Jesus' disciple of the same name."

I want you to compare the state of North Korea then to the state of North Korea now. And you realize it doesn't take a rocket scientist to see how the good leaven of the kingdom blesses and the

bad leaven of the enemy curses. It's all a matter of which gets to permeate the culture, and that's where we come in. You see, permeating and penetrating the culture is not optional for believers or for the kingdom, for that matter. But it's God alone who transforms a person, a household, a neighborhood, or a country, and we've seen that happen. We've already seen it happen in Europe and America, and now we're starting to see it happen in Africa and China. But in every single case we find out that that transformation takes place through the church, through us, his people, penetrating and permeating the pattern of this world for the new pattern of the kingdom. God says in *Romans 12: Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is -- his good, pleasing and perfect will.*

And so we look around, what's the pattern for our world? Well, the pattern for our world and our culture is evolutionary naturalist materialism. It's the prevailing attitude in our culture. We started out from nothing as slime, answerable to no one, and time and chance has evolved us into what we are today. We are highly sophisticated slime. I mean, we've evolved from nothing, are answerable to no one, we're a glorious accident of chance but now somehow we're magically significant. I mean even on the surface that makes no sense. It's just that very few people have the guts

to admit it. But on the other hand, the pattern of a transformed mind says we are fallen sinners who are loved by a God who took on flesh to become one of us, who then took on my sin on the cross to redeem us with his own blood so that we could be with him forever. Now in our culture that is largely the choice that we have. We have the pattern of this world or the pattern of the transformed mind, and each pattern is established by the leaven of both kingdoms as it works its way through the dough of the culture. Again: *"The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into about sixty pounds of flour until it worked all through the dough."*

So here's how we do it, to some. Number one, we penetrate the culture by building relationships with those who are outside of our comfort zone. Number two, we permeate the culture by producing the aroma of Christ as it permeates us. Number three, we transform the culture not by what we do, by what God does through us. Jesus says: *"Let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven."* That's how we transform the culture. We transform the culture by letting God shine his light through us.

So the question we all have to ask ourselves this morning is, okay, what kind of light am I? I mean is there something unique,

different, attractive about the light in my life? You see, it's the light in my life that produces the leaven in my life that penetrates and permeates the dough, and leaven is influence, for better or for worse. There's a real reason why Jesus said beware of leaven, and that's because leaven usually takes the path of least resistance. I love that old saying of Chuck Swindoll who asked, what happens when you plunge a gloved hand into a mud puddle? I've said this before. He says, either the glove gets muddy or the puddle gets glovey. Does your life influence those around you for the kingdom or does the world around you influence you against it? Sam Harris can cite thousands of angry, condemning Christians as leaven against the kingdom.

So what I want to ask each of us this morning is can you cite your own personal example of how you've been leaven for the kingdom? Because it comes down to you and me. We are the leaven that the woman is working into the dough. We are the mystery that Jesus is progressively unveiling to his disciples through his parables about the church. I mean we are a mixed batch of soils. We are commingled wheat and tares, we are a mustard seed that has birds nesting in its branches and now we are leaven being worked into a loaf, penetrating the culture, permeating it by reproducing other believers, and transforming it simply by being that leaven in the loaf. Paul captured it perfectly in *Colossians 1*. This is what he

said, he said: *Now I rejoice in what I am suffering for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church. I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness -- the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the Lord's people. To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.*

Now I don't know about you but for years I had a real struggle with this scripture. What in the world is he talking about? What could he possibly mean by what is lacking in Christ's afflictions? What could possibly be lacking in Christ's afflictions? Well, there's only one thing lacking and that's Christ's physical presence. What Paul is saying is that now we, we make up what is still lacking with regard to Christ's affliction. We are the ones who are here particularly physically in the flesh. We now are his body. And when you bring a meal to someone who is in need, Christ is bringing that meal. And when you stand up for injustice, the injustices of sex slavery or abortion, Christ is standing up through you. And when you weep with someone who is in deep pain, Christ is there weeping just as he did outside of Lazarus's tomb. See, the mystery kept hidden for ages that Jesus is disclosing in his parables is

that we are living out what it means to be his body, the church. Verse 27 says: *To them -- and what he's saying there, that's us -- to them. That's us. To us, God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.* I mean there it is. That's it in a nutshell. That's exactly what the leaven is talking about. God wants to make his Christ known to the world through you. It's my prayer that your leaven, your influence is that when the world looks at you, that's exactly what they see, Christ in you, the hope of glory. Let's pray.

Father, we want to be just that. We want to be the hope of your glory. We want to be the physical representation of you on this earth. We want to be your body. Lord, give us the grace, give us the ability, the power to penetrate and to permeate the culture and to allow you to transform it through the light that you shine through our lives, and we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.