

The bread of heaven or earthly leaven?

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[0 : 00] With me, would you, to Matthew chapter 15, page 820 in the Church Bibles. The title today is The Question, The Bread of Heaven or Earthly Leaven?

That's what this is all about. Matthew's Gospel is no ordinary book. It's a book about the transformation of the universe. It claims to be about the great turning point in human history, in world history, indeed in eternal history, because that is what the story of Jesus is really about. It's a book, as we've seen, that does two things. It unfolds the story of the inauguration of the kingdom of God through the life and death and resurrection of Jesus. And at the same time, it explains and expounds the nature of that kingdom.

In the words of Jesus himself, we've seen that there are five main teaching sections spread throughout the narrative. And in recent months, we've studied these. First of all, the Sermon on the Mount in chapters 5 to 7, teaching us about the righteousness of the kingdom, kingdom life for kingdom people.

Then do you remember chapter 10, the commissioning of the apostles speak about the mission of the kingdom. And then just recently, in chapter 13, in the parables of the kingdom, we learn about what is now and what is still future, not yet, in the kingdom.

[1 : 29] We've studied all of these, but now, in the central chapters of Matthew's Gospel, in the middle of his book, Matthew is focusing our attention on a great dividing of the ways, dividing between the old world and the new world.

The breaking in of the kingdom of heaven into this present world forces division. It forces a parting of the way. It did then when people were confronted with Jesus in person, and it does so today, whenever people are confronted with the message of Jesus Christ and his word.

It forces a dividing of the ways between those who will see and will understand and will submit to the lordship of Christ, follow him, and those who will not see, who refuse to understand, who reject his lordship, who will not follow him.

And what Matthew is showing us in these chapters is that those who are being drawn to Jesus, who are being gathered around Jesus, are being formed into a new community, the community of the kingdom of heaven.

And this community is described in terms of family. It's a new family. It's a new household. God is gathering for himself throughout the world. That's what the church of Jesus Christ is.

[2 : 53] It's God's family. It's God's household. Just flick over, if you like, with me to 1 Timothy 3, verse 15, just to remind ourselves.

Paul is teaching in this book all about family values, the values of God's family. Look what he says in 1 Timothy 3, verse 15. I'm writing, he says, so that you'll know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and the buttress of the truth.

That's where the little motto on the front of our service sheet comes from every week. You see, God's household, God's church, it's God's family. And these middle chapters in Matthew 14 to 18 are all about that.

They're all about the greatest house move in history. It's about God's relocation of his family into their new home. And what is vitally important in this, and especially today, is showing us that God is gathering his whole extended family from all the earth to be with him, to be among him, to be his household.

That's Jesus' mission. It's summed up in chapter 16, verse 18, that famous verse. I will build my church, says Jesus, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

[4 : 14] That's what this section is all about. In chapter 14 and 15, we've already seen that there's a great challenge to walk with Jesus as he gathers his family to himself, not to walk away from him.

We've seen that Jesus exposes the truth about our hearts, even showing how outwardly religious people, outwardly church people, apparently Jesus type of people, inwardly sometimes can be far, far away from him.

And it's a warning to all. Because, you see, what he's saying is that now that Jesus has come, now that the Messiah, God's Son, has come to the earth and begun his kingdom, nothing else matters. Except bowing the knee to him, following him, submitting to him, obeying him as Lord and God of the new creation.

And that's what faith is. Faith is defined by membership of God's family. Trust and obedience in Jesus Christ. Faith is what defines membership in his family, in his household, in his church.

[5 : 27] Just look back, if you were, to Matthew 12, verse 50, the very last verse of chapter 12, before the kingdom parables. Jesus makes it abundantly clear that what makes you part of his family is not natural ties, is it?

They said, oh, your mother and your brothers are here. Jesus says, verse 50, Here are my mother and my brothers for whoever does the will of my Father in heaven, my brother and sister and mother.

Natural ties, yes, they can confer great privilege. You're brought up in the privileged environment of God's people. It confers great expectation, great responsibility. But it's doing the will of my Father in heaven that counts, says Jesus.

That's faith. That's what makes you part of his true family. But it is a family. It is a household. It is a real community. The gospel is not just about saving individual souls.

It's about God building his church. It's about Jesus as the head of that church. The gospel is God's story. It's the story of the triumph and the glory of Jesus building his church.

[6 : 37] It's not your story or my story. We get that so confused sometimes. It becomes our story as we are taken up in the great story of God, as we join the great household of blessing and joy.

But the gospel is not just about you. It's about God and what he's doing. That's why the early fathers of the church were right. And they used to say the Latin phrase, *Extra Ecclesia Nulla Seleus*.

Outside the church there is no salvation. That might seem very dubious. 21st century years. Because we are so individualist. It's common, isn't it today, among evangelical people sometimes, to despise the church.

To say, oh, we hate the church. We love Jesus. We love Jesus. It might be that some of us Protestants are rather worried about this too, because we hear the church of Rome talking about being the mother church and there being no salvation outside of communion with Rome.

But the reformers were just as strong as the ancients on this. Listen to John Calvin. He certainly wasn't a Catholic. For those to whom God is Father, the church may also be mother.

[7 : 52] Away from her bosom, we cannot hope of any forgiveness of sins or any salvation. Our Westminster Confession of Faith that we made mention to this morning says this. The visible church is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and the family of God, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation.

It doesn't mean, of course, that God can't do what he likes, but it certainly means we can't do what we like. Well, to give us pause for those of us who think that the best thing to do is keep at arm's length from Christ's church, lest we should be tainted or not commit ourselves tangibly to the family of God, well, we ought to take it seriously.

Christ is building his church. That's the goal of history. Nothing will stop it. The church of Jesus Christ is very, very important in the mind of God.

Indeed, nothing is more important to Jesus than his church. The Bible tells us the church isn't just his family. Paul says in Ephesians the church is his beloved bride.

He gave himself. He shed his blood for his church. He loves his church. The church is the goal of history. And that's why it's a solemn time when we ordain people to leadership in God's church.

[9 : 12] It's a solemn task and responsibility. Christ cares for his church. He loves his church. The church is his goal.

And it's being gathered in history in this world now as the kingdom takes hold on the world. That's what Matthew's message is in these chapters. That's what they're all about.

It's about changing from the old to the new. It's about gathering the true family of God by proclaiming and manifesting the message of Christ's kingdom. The verses we're looking at today

focus very especially on the scope, the extent of the household of God.

The great bounds of his household. The next bit in chapter 16 speaks about the builder of the house, Jesus himself, and about the great foundation of the house, the apostolic gospel of the cross.

And we go on in chapter 17 to highlight the focus of this household. It's not on the earth, it's in the heaven. And it all leads up to chapter 18 where the next teaching block tells us about household life.

[10:19] How we're to behave, how we're to live, how the household of Jesus Christ as church is to be. That's what we're going to look at over these next few studies. But let's look at our passage today then with that background and see just what a wonderful picture it is of a great house with doors open to welcome all, all who will come to Jesus.

That's what it's speaking about. Only Jesus has the bread that will satisfy. And he has bread enough for the whole world. That's the wonderful truth of these verses. And he's calling his whole family to the supper table.

That's what he's doing. And you show that you really belong to his family if you also have learned to rejoice in the priority of that heavenly food, what it is and who it's for.

In other words, if you've understood the message of the kingdom, if you've become taken up with its great messages, your one great preoccupation in life. If the bread of heaven fills your heart and mind and has ousted the earthly leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees, the earthly leaven of self-preoccupation and self-focus, that's what it's about.

We're going to look at it under three headings. The generosity of Jesus, the judgment of Jesus and finally the warning of Jesus. The second half of chapter 15 speaks to us of the wonderful generosity of Jesus.

[11:51] It's Jesus' invitation to come and feed at his heavenly table. The doors open wide to all who will see the truth that's in him, for all who will respond to him. There's not just a few crumbs of his grace, there are basketfuls to overflowing of the grace of God.

His saving grace is sufficient for all, even those who are the furthest away, even those who are the complete outsiders. There is an abundance to spare.

That's what this is telling us. That's what Jesus is teaching his disciples as they look at him and they follow him. It's what Matthew is passing on to us as Jesus' followers today.

You need to see this about Jesus and see your place in it all. The key to the whole story is in verse 21.

Do you see it there? Jesus went away and withdrew. He deliberately took himself away from the hostility and the rejection of organized religion.

[12:53] The established church had a rotten heart. Verse 19 that we saw last week spoke about that. Their hearts were rotten. Their hearts were rotten. full of religious talk, full of spirituality on the outside, but hearts full of everything that defiled them.

And they would not come to Jesus for forgiveness. They would not come to him and repent. The only cure for their condition. So Jesus withdraws from that attitude and we'll come back to that. But where did he go? Verse 21. He goes to Tyre and Sidon. He goes to Gentile territory. He goes to enemy territory. Just read in the prophets, Ezekiel and some of the others, railing against the wickedness of Tyre and Sidon, the perpetual enemies of God's people.

In verse 29, you'll see that he's still in Gentile territory. You see, he walked beside the Sea of Galilee. Remember in chapter 4, Matthew introduces Galilee. It's called Galilee of the Gentiles. That's why in verse 31, they glorified the God of Israel. They were outside the sphere of the God of Israel normally. So here we are. Here's Jesus in his own territory, in the natural house of Israel.

[14:08] What does he find among the leaders, among the Bible people? Only rejection. Only blindness. Blind guides leading the blind to destruction.

That's what he called them. And yet, Jesus' kingdom will not be frustrated. I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail. So here, in enemy territory, in Gentile territory, Jesus finds real faith.

He finds it in abundance. And where he finds faith, he extends his grace in great abundance and superabundance.

First of all, we see it in verse 22 with an individual. We're told she's a Canaanite woman. It's the only time in the New Testament I think that word is used to describe anybody. It highlights that she

was an enemy of Israel.

The Canaanites all the way through the history of Israel were enemies. And yet, in total contrast to the blindness of God's people, here we have amazing sight.

[15:14] She's the only person in the whole gospel to be told, you've got great faith. It's rather like the centurion, the Gentile also, back in chapter 8, when Jesus said, I haven't found faith like yours anywhere else in Israel.

But you've got great faith. It's extraordinary, isn't it? It reminds me of the story in 1 Kings 17 when the whole of the nation of Israel under Ahab is turning away from the living God.

They're worshipping Baal, the god of Sidon. Remember, Ahab had married Jezebel, the queen of Sidon. And Elijah has to run away out of Israel and where does he go?

God sends him to Sidon, the home of the enemies. And what does he find there? Well, the widow of Zarephath feeds him, cares for him, comes to know that the truth of the God of Israel speaks through this man.

And it's just so here. Here she is. She sees Lord, son of David. She understands that he's the Messiah. She's some woman in this. It's an amazing encounter, isn't it?

[16:19] Here she comes to Jesus. She's heard about Jesus, obviously. Mark's gospel tells us clearly that. And faith comes by hearing. We know that. But notice, it's not just an intellectual thing.

It's not just an understanding. Faith drives you to Jesus. To a personal encounter. She comes to him. She throws everything at Jesus' feet. That's what real faith is.

And look what happens. It's extraordinary, isn't it? Normally when that happens, Jesus opens his arms and welcomes, doesn't he? What does he do? Verse 23, absolutely silent.

The answers are not a word. The disciples come to him and they say, please, please, give her what she wants and send her away. This dame's driving us mad. That's in the original Greek, that bit. But look what Jesus says to them about his house, his family. I came to call the lost sheep of the house of Israel, not Gentile dogs like you.

[17:21] That's what he's saying to her. It's offensive. He's using that offensive language of the Jews of Jesus' day that the Gentiles were scum, they were dogs.

But surely, Jesus here has a twinkle in his eye. He's sparring with this woman. She's a feisty woman. And she shows, doesn't she, that she understands the Old Testament faith far better than the teachers of the Old Testament, the people of Israel.

Yes, she says, but even the Gentile dogs, even the foreigners, even those outside the people of Israel, well, they've been able to find blessings spilling over from God's people, haven't they?

By clinging to God's people, by clinging to the faith of the God of Israel. Just like the widow of Zarephath, just like Rahab the harlot, just like Ruth the Moabiters, just like Naaman the Syrian, many others who clung to the God of Israel, who put themselves with the people of God, God's family.

And she knew that, and she recognized that Jesus was the one to cling to. She sensed that now he was what really mattered, that it was him that he alone had the bread of life, that could give her the overspill of blessing.

[18:47] Jesus says in verse 28, great is your faith. Yes, you have got it. You've understood. And you will have what you seek. In that instant, her prayer was answered.

And I think that we're meant to see that what she saw was that Jesus was Israel's Messiah. And that his mission was first to the house of Israel, but also that she knew that that was also going to mean salvation, not just for the Jews, but for all the nations, for the whole world.

Because Jesus goes right on here to show that his mission wasn't going to be just to a few individual Gentiles of great faith, but it was going to be to great crowds of them.

Look at verse 29. Great crowds came to him. They came with expectation. It has to be expecting. They were bringing their lame, their blind, the crippled, the mute.

And he healed them all. And he glorified the God of Israel. And that's a picture, it's a foretaste of what we were singing about in Psalm 47.

[19:52] All the peoples clapping their hands, shouting to God with songs of joy. The peoples of the earth joining with God's people all as the offspring of Abraham.

All as the people of the God of Israel. It's as though Jesus is saying, yes, you understand what God's plan was always about. A spillover of grace from Israel to the whole world, to the universe.

And now, now the day of small things, the crumbs, the Naaman here and the widow of Zarephath there and the Rahab there. That day of small things is over.

Now, now it's the day of great basketfuls of the bread of heaven, shed out over the whole world.

You see, that's why we have this second feeding miracle right afterwards.

The feeding of the 4,000. Why would you bother to record a miracle like this again when just in the previous chapter we've had the feeding of the 5,000? We've seen that Matthew's so selective.

[20 : 53] He passes over dozens, hundreds of miracles other times in just a few words. Why would he record this again? Well, because this is among the Gentiles. This is Jesus giving a deliberate manifesto for his mission, telling them where it's going.

This miracle has a message for the disciples and for us. Yes, Jesus' own personal ministry was mainly to be conducted among the Jews, the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

But he's already told his disciples that his kingdom is going to fill the whole earth, the parable of the mustard seed, remember? And he's showing them where it's all heading. He's showing them where their mission is going to be.

This is going to be their mission. This is going to be their great job. You see, verse 32, I have compassion on these crowds. Jesus, in Matthew's Gospel, always has compassion.

That word is only on the outsiders, those not yet within his fold. I won't send them away. They will be fed. They too will be seated at the table in my household.

[22 : 03] He's showing his disciples what his great concerns really are for the lost, for the outsiders, for the world. He's showing his disciples his power to satisfy every need and hunger of men.

See verse 37? They ate and they were satisfied. The only other time that you find that word in Matthew's Gospel is in the Beatitudes. Up to 5, verse 7.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. These are spiritually hungry people too.

That's the point. That dwarfs their physical needs. And all such spiritually hungry people who come to Jesus shall be satisfied.

He says, Jesus, come to me and I will give you rest and satisfaction. I am the bread of life, he says somewhere else. And the invitation to my table is for all nations.

[23 : 05] The world won't just have a few crumbs from Jesus, it will have satisfaction. The outsider, the ignorant, the perplexed, all of these are welcome. And the insider's job, the disciple's job, is to take that bread and to offer it and to feed the world.

Verse 36, Jesus gave the bread to the disciples and they fed it to the crowd. That's what my household is for, those of you who are already inside it. That's what he's saying. It's to bring my invitation to the world.

It's to carry the bread of life to all the world. It's all about teaching the disciples about Jesus' heavenly bread, the spiritual nourishment of his kingdom, the bread of life, the only way into his kingdom.

That's why in verse 36, these four verbs are so important. He gives thanks, he breaks, he gives, and they eat.

Just as in chapter 26 in the Last Supper, Jesus gives thanks, he breaks, he gives, and they eat.

And he tells them what it means, this is my body, this is my blood, given for the forgiveness of sins.

[24 : 24] It's the offer, it's the invitation, it's the way in to Jesus' family, to his household, to his church. And you are to take this bread of the gospel, the bread of heaven, the gospel of the cross.

You are to take it to all nations. Not just to make believers, but to make disciples, the Great Commission, baptizing them into the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey the commands I've given you, to bring them into God's family, to bring them to his table, to bring them into his church.

Do you see the picture here? Jesus is building his church. He's gathering his family from all over the world, from every tribe and tongue and people and nation. The doors of his family home are wide open.

His table spread with life-giving bread to satisfy every need of men and women. He has people in this city and in this nation and all over the world who are still outsiders, who are pagans and he has compassion and he has power to draw them into his family.

He will not see them go hungry. He's at work in the most unexpected of places and he's using his disciples to break the bread of life and to bring people into their house.

[25 : 51] Just this last week we had an email from a Chinese couple who had been with us here a couple of years ago. And had done Christianity Explored and at the end of the course had still been interested but hadn't seen and hadn't committed their lives.

We got an email this week just to say that just recently they had come to full faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and been baptised and joined a church of God's people there in China. And we were rejoicing on Wednesday night with such great joy that here the bread that had been broken to them in sharing the gospel here at last had found fruit.

God is doing this. He's building his church all over the world. And Jesus is a generous host. He's a welcoming saviour.

He will not let the hungry go away ever. He who comes to me he says I will never under any circumstances cast out. It's a picture of his lavish grace of his generosity that's unbounded.

Who could possibly ever resist such an offer such joy? Yet some do. The first four verses of chapter 16 gives us a clashing contrast doesn't it?

[27 : 11] And it shows us that as well as the generosity of Jesus we do also have to understand the judgment of Jesus. Where people persistently refuse his generosity where they will not seek his heavenly nourishment where they meet his great compassion only with cynicism and rejection well then the doors of his household must ultimately be closed and closed ultimately that kind of persistent unbelief.

Verse 1 makes that clear doesn't it? Where in verse 30 the Gentile crowds came with such expectation here the Pharisees and the Sadducees can only come with scorn they come to test him same word as is used of the devil coming to test tempt Jesus in the wilderness wanting him to fail. They hated him and they scorned him they like Satan would only have Jesus if Jesus bowed down to them give us a sign dance to our tune bow down to us it's the very opposite isn't it of the Canaanite woman who knelt down and said Lord help me but these proud religionists would never stoop to that they were far too proud to kneel down and repent at the feet of Jesus so verse 4 is inevitable but it's chilling isn't it echoes verse 21 of chapter 15 they turned their backs on him and Jesus turned his back on them and that was true then my friends and that too is true today just as Jesus gives a generous welcome to all who will come to him so also for those who refuse him he can only do this first one gives us a very very strange alliance the Pharisees and the Sadducees were total enemies in every other respect except in their rejection of

Jesus Christ that's just the way today isn't it I remember reading in the newspaper I know I was hearing on the Today program a few years ago just before the invasion of Afghanistan you'll remember that there were some Christian missionaries who were captured by the Taliban and put in prison I remember hearing on the Today program a journalist a leftist post-modern secularist pluralist journalist scorning those missionaries for daring to go and try and win converts from the people in Afghanistan and virtually justifying the Taliban in imprisoning them and torturing them so here we have the picture of a leftist post-modern liberal thinker and a fundamentalist Taliban against everything that she stood for united together by one thing hatred of the gospel of Jesus Christ yes you get very strange alliances don't you against

Jesus Christ but you see it doesn't matter how clever you are how knowledgeable and skillful you are in the things of this earth you can be totally blind spiritually these men Jesus says were great meteorologists they knew all about the sky just as some people today know all about science and arts and business PhDs galore but blind culpably blind to the glaringly obvious truth about Jesus Christ the son of the living God because whatever differences they may have in their ideas or their beliefs ultimately underneath it all is the same issue they are utterly man-centered in their hearts they are at the center of the universe not God and his son Jesus Christ they want to call the tune not God and they will not recognize that Jesus is the climax the center and the glory of all things they will not kneel down before him as this woman did and say

[31 : 26] Lord help me but that's the only way into Jesus' household it's an open way gloriously open but it's the only way and if you won't have that simple gospel of the cross if you despise that it's not enlightenment you know it's not superior education verse 4 Jesus calls it for what it is it's evil it's spiritual adultery it's idolatry it's refusal to worship the one true God and that is the one thing that God cannot have the refusal to be forgiven is the one thing that God cannot forgive and that's a stark warning to the world of Jesus' judgment but you know it's also a stark warning in Jesus' lips to

the professing church in closing let's look at verses 5 to 12 and understand for us here today the warning of Jesus he's speaking to those in his household here

Jesus turns to his disciples his followers to his church to us and he says to us beware the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees he's saying that that attitude that attitude of failing to see what Jesus is really doing what he is really concerned with what his household is really all about heavenly things that that attitude can creep in and infect those within his professing church that's what he's saying you can be in it you can be caught up in the midst of it all and you can still be blind to what it means for you and your life and your priorities that's what Jesus is saying and the disciples answer proves that the danger he's talking about is very real because they didn't understand what he was warning them about they thought he was scolding them about forgetting the sandwiches they hadn't grasped that he was warning them about being caught up in earthly things about being blind to heavenly priorities they hadn't grasped that because they were caught up in earthly priorities couldn't think beyond the next meal

Jesus expected them to understand the spiritual realities he was teaching to them how can you be so foolish as to not understand this he says I'm not talking about earthly bread I'm not interested in earthly things I'm not interested in worldly thinking and man centered egotistical attitudes that's exactly what I'm talking about that is the leaven of the Pharisees the Sadducees and that's what will ruin you if you don't turn away from it if you don't see who I really am if you don't see what I'm doing and what I must be doing I'm gathering my family my household if you don't see what your priorities must be in the light of mine if you are part of my household you must be taken up with my kind of bread with my kind of feeding with satisfying the appetite of the world with the bread of life surely not putting yourself at the center of things not taking up with earthly things earthly leaven food for your bodies cleverness and attainment and your thinking all of these things be careful says Jesus says it to you and me beware that that leaven the evil leaven of earthly self preoccupation beware that can spread and it will spread he says even within the household of faith when those privileged to be given the word of God as the

Pharisees and Sadducees will not share the heart of God and display the mission of Christ when they won't share his invitation and carry that bread with compassion to satisfy the spiritual hunger of the world then they've lost touch with the purpose of God they've lost touch with the power of God and ultimately then they must lose touch with the presence of God Jesus leaves that attitude he departs he can't be there where everything is against what he believes in and is doing friends we have to be honest isn't it true that by and large that is the church in the west today we've had privilege galore in this land we've had centuries of freedom of worship and the gospel and goodness knows how many bibles in every household but we've scorned that we've forgotten what it means to be part of the household of God gathering his family by and large the presence of the spirit of God has departed he will build his church but he will build it where people will come to him and there are other parts of the world where people are flocking to Jesus

Christ you see it's a real warning he gave it to his disciples there he gave it to the seven churches of Asia Minor we know what happened to them certainly he's giving it to us here in St. George's Tron beware of the leaven that lets the trivialities of self-preoccupation lose sight of the bread of heaven glorious onward march of the goal of all human history the gathering of the family of the Lord Jesus Christ and the wonderful and the privileged part that we have been given in that carrying the bread of life feeding it to the world outside that Christ has compassion on carrying the message of the broken body and the shed blood of the Lord Jesus Christ as the way into his kingdom the invitation to his household the invitation to his family which alone can satisfy the hunger of the world so friends let's beware of that leaven in all its forms it loses the heavenly goal in the midst of self-preoccupation of worldly things let's keep our minds and our hearts on the open door of [38 : 09] Jesus' household and the multitudes outside that Jesus has compassion on and will not that they be sent away hungry let's let the name of Jesus and the extension of the family of Jesus and therefore the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ be above all else in our thoughts and in our words and in our deeds as a fellowship and as families and as individual believers in this church will it be the bread of heaven or will it be earthly leaven that's Jesus' challenge to us this morning let us pray for God our father turn our hearts we pray from the self preoccupation of this earth and our lives and our wants and needs and things that focus on us and keep us we pray rejoicing in the bread of heaven by which you are building your church that the gates of hell shall not prevail against keep us we pray seeing these things and doing these things for the glory of our

saviour amen well we end by singing

Charles Wesley's great hymn Jesus the name high over all in hell or earth or sky angels and men
before it fall and devils fear and fly now