

## Eating: How Good It Is! (Part One)

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The Bible uses many things from the common circumstances of everyday life to give us clear and penetrating instruction into our relationship with God. These things work as cogent instruction because our relationship with God shares many parallels with our relationships with fellow men. Thus, we perceive God as our Father and Jesus Christ as our Elder Brother, and each of us are brethren in a spiritual Family, bearing responsibilities similar to those expected of us in a physical family. The Bible's writers use the familiar and visible to instruct us on the spiritual—the unseen but every bit as real as the physical. These parallels help us considerably to grasp concepts essential to this unseen relationship that we must conduct by faith.

These biblical parallels are remarkably close. Ephesians 5:25-30, 32, is one of the better known and provides a clear illustration:

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for it, that He might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, that He might present it to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that it should be holy and without blemish. So husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as the Lord does the church. For we are members of His body, of His flesh and of His bones. . . . This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church.

Paul writes in Hebrews 4:12, "For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart." All biblical parallels are like a two-edged sword in that they give instruction concerning both physical and spiritual life. They reveal the correct way to behave both in our relations with fellow man as well as with God. In fact, if we are converted, already having an established relationship with God, and striving to take care of one, we will likely also be submissive to the other.

In Ephesians 5, Paul compares the sacrificial responsibility of a husband and wife in marriage to Christ's sacrificial love for the church. In turn, the church has a responsibility, both as individual members and as a body, to reciprocate that love back to Him. An additional parallel taught here is that one who gives sacrificial love also benefits from the sacrifices he makes.

### Eating as a Parallel

Besides marriage, courtship, walking, talking, drinking and a host of other common human experiences, a major parallel drawn from daily human life—especially in terms of frequency of use—is eating. *The Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* states:

With seven hundred references to the act of eating (not counting references to drinking and food), we can say with confidence that eating is a master image of the Bible. No biblical image combines the literal and the figurative, the physical and spiritual, more

inextricably than does the imagery of eating. In the Old Testament ceremonial laws, rules governing eating are at once physical reality (a health measure) and covenant sign. The references to eating serve as a reminder of the physical identity of people in the world, but they are equally a reminder of the spiritual realities of biblical faith. Both literally and figuratively, eating communicates the paradigm of a providential creator and dependent humanity. It also demonstrates the news of God's most gracious acts. (p. 226)

"God's most gracious acts" refers to His providence in providing food for all of His animal creations besides mankind. We can conclude from a survey of biblical examples that how God provides depends upon our circumstances combined with what He is working out. An obvious example is the wide differential between what God has provided the Israelitish nations as compared to many Gentile nations. Because of God's promise to Abraham, the blessings poured upon the Israelite nations are an almost overwhelming gift.

Deuteronomy 29:5-6 gives another perspective under a different circumstance:

And I have led you forty years in the wilderness. Your clothes have not worn out on you, and your sandals have not worn out on your feet; you have not eaten bread, nor have you drunk wine or similar drink; that you may know that I am the LORD your God.

These verses serve two purposes: They are a reminder and a warning. He reminds them that He miraculously provided in their time of need due to the unusual circumstance He devised. The wider context shows this to be a warning that, despite all He did for them, His aid was ineffectual because they did not take His instruction to heart and do it. Consequently, they received God's grace—His gifts or favor—in vain.

The apostle Paul draws upon this and writes of it in a spiritual context in II Corinthians 6:1-2:

We then, as workers together with Him also plead with you not to receive the grace of God in vain. For He says: "In an acceptable time I have heard you, and in the day of salvation I have helped you." Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation.

Now is our time for God to help or provide for us in a miraculous way. Sometimes, He will help us physically, of course, but God's emphasis will be on the spiritual to prepare us for His Kingdom. We need to learn that God uses these ordinary, everyday things like eating, drinking, walking, food and water as the vehicles to convey far more serious instruction. Though they are common and everyday, they are not spiritually unimportant.

Notice another example of circumstance dictating how God provides. I Kings 17:4-6 is highly unusual, but it shows God's creativity in providing:

"And it will be that you shall drink from the brook, and I have commanded the ravens to feed you there." So he went and did according to the word of the LORD, for he went and stayed by the Brook Cherith, which flows into the Jordan. The ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning, and bread and meat in the evening; and he drank from the brook.

Thus, God miraculously fed Elijah. In verses 8-16, because a widow passes a test by providing her last food for Elijah's meal, God rewards her with an inexhaustible food supply until the drought ends.

Two of Jesus' major miracles involve God providing food, once for 4,000 and a second time for 5,000. However, at times, the Bible does not look positively on providing food through the normal means of laboring for it. For instance, in Genesis 3:19, God pronounces a curse upon mankind after Adam and Eve's sin: "In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for dust you are, and to dust you shall return." It is not that working is a curse; God had previously told them they were to dress and keep the Garden. Rather, the curse is the burden of providing for oneself in a world that has turned its back on God.

Ecclesiastes sometimes seems depressing because it frequently pictures this burden: "All the labor of man is for his mouth, and yet the soul is not satisfied" (Ecclesiastes 6:7). The sheer repetitiveness and monotony of having to provide food for oneself—and even eating itself has a burdensome, nagging, never-ending, profitless and hopeless aspect to it—makes life seem like pacing a treadmill going nowhere. Sin has dragged mankind into a confusing cycle of similar events repeated endlessly throughout history. It has robbed mankind of a life of abundant hope and enjoyment without fear, replacing it with the burden of not knowing God or why one was born. This leaves life essentially directionless in terms of its most important aspect. Life and all its daily repetitions become burdens rather than joyous pleasures as God intended.

### **Biblical Banqueting**

The Bible places a high value on hospitality and eating, and sometimes banqueting is the focal point of that hospitality. In Genesis 18:1-8, Abraham is the first person shown opening the door of his home in hospitality to others, in this case to the Lord Himself!

Then the LORD appeared to him by the terebinth trees of Mamre, as he was sitting in the tent door in the heat of the day. So he lifted his eyes and looked, and behold, three men were standing by him; and when he saw them, he ran from the tent door to meet them, and bowed himself to the ground, and said, "My Lord, if I have now found favor in Your sight, do not pass on by Your servant. Please let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. And I will bring a morsel of bread, that you may refresh your hearts. After that you may pass by, inasmuch as you have come to your servant." They said, "Do as you have said." So Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah and said, "Quickly, make ready three measures of fine meal, knead it and make cakes." And Abraham ran to the herd, took a tender and good calf, gave it to a young man, and he hastened to prepare it. So he took butter and milk and the calf which he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree as they ate.

The meal, hastily prepared by their time standards, is unusual in that Abraham does not even eat with them! We often feel that we cannot spare the time to do such things, but here is God, the Creator, who finds time in His infinitely busier schedule to sit and wait while Abraham and Sarah prepare a banquet for Him and His companions! The point, however, is that food and eating is the focal point of Abraham's hospitality. Important events frequently occur on such occasions.

Banquets are never merely mealtimes or celebrations. It is wise to pay close attention to them in our Bible studies. Frequently, they contain a message about who is up and who is down in political or social status. Where a person sits and how much food and drink they receive indicates status. Notice Joseph's banquet for his brothers in Genesis 43:31-34:

Then [Joseph] washed his face and came out; and he restrained himself, and said, "Serve the bread." So they set him a place by himself, and them by themselves, and the Egyptians who ate with him by themselves; because the Egyptians could not eat food with the Hebrews, for that is an abomination to the Egyptians. And they sat before him, the firstborn according to his birthright and the youngest according to his youth; and the men looked in astonishment at one another. Then he took servings to them from before him, but Benjamin's serving was five times as much as any of theirs. So they drank and were merry with him.

The magnificent banquet portrayed in Esther 1 sets the stage for everything else that unfolds in the riveting story of Esther's and Mordecai's faith, loyalty and courage and Haman's scheming treachery. At this banquet Artaxerxes—a powerful Persian king who is aloof yet generous—in a moment of impatient irritation and drunkenness, establishes a law with far-reaching consequences to those it affects. Later in the story, during a banquet Esther prepares for the king and Haman, she springs the trap on Haman that seals his fate.

Banquets are venues for political and social discourse and dealing. An invitation to attend one, especially from a person of prominence, is a distinct honor. Refusal to attend when invited or being refused entrance carries a strong, sobering message (Matthew 22:8-14). Banquets provide insights into Israelite cultural customs that teach us that in many ways we are not much different. In Genesis 21:8, Abraham calls a great feast when Isaac is weaned, and he is also involved when Melchizedek brings out bread and wine after Abraham's victory over the five kings (Genesis 14:18-19). In the much-beloved Psalm 23, "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies" (verse 5) refers broadly to the security of God's provision and specifically to a victory banquet over David's enemies.

Sometimes, though, the Bible shows that these normally happy cultural occasions are a venue for tragedy because evildoers use them to plan conspiracies. Judges 9:22-57 recounts a conspiracy that begins during the celebration of the grape harvest and does not end until many are dead, including nearly a thousand men in one portion of the uprising. In I Samuel 25, Nabal, during the annual sheep shearing, rejects David's appeal for food for his company in exchange for the protection they had provided. Though Nabal had prepared food to celebrate the end of the shearing, he will not share. He dies shortly thereafter.

II Samuel 13 records a particularly tragic affair in which food is a ploy used to set off tragic events, and during a sheepshearing celebration the tragedy is further aggravated:

Then Amnon said to Tamar, "Bring the food into the bedroom, that I may eat from your hand." And Tamar took the cakes which she had made, and brought them to Amnon her brother. Now when she had brought them to him to eat, he took hold of her and said to her, "Come lie with me, my sister." . . . [A]nd being stronger than she, he forced her and lay with her. . . . And it came to pass, after two full years, that Absalom had sheepshearers in Baal Hazor, which is near Ephraim; so Absalom invited all the king's

sons. Then Absalom came to the king and said, "Kindly note, your servant has sheepshearers; please, let the king and his servants go with your servant. But the king said to Absalom, "No my son, let us not all go now, lest we be a burden to you." . . . But Absalom urged him; so he let Amnon and all the king's sons go with him. Now Absalom had commanded his servants, saying, "Watch now, when Amnon's heart is merry with wine, and when I say to you, 'Strike Amnon!' Then kill him. Do not be afraid. Have I not commanded you? Be courageous and valiant." So the servants of Absalom did to Amnon as Absalom had commanded. (verses 10-11, 14, 23-25, 27-29)

Eating is involved in many famous sins. The best known of all sins—that of Adam and Eve in the Garden—has perhaps had the greatest negative impact of any sin ever committed! To some degree, it has influenced every person ever born. Esau rejects his birthright in favor of eating a stew Jacob had prepared. By simply eating at the wrong time, Esau reveals he prefers immediate gratification of a sensual desire to patiently waiting for God to give him the birthright. Through his sin of eating, he becomes a major Bible type of the worldly person, one who despises the things of God.

The Bible gives two excellent examples of men who do not allow the tantalizing attraction of food to stand between them and fulfilling a major responsibility given to them by their masters. The first is Abraham's servant, who must find a wife for Isaac. Genesis 24:33 reveals him, unlike Esau, striving to complete his duty before he ate: "And food was set before him to eat, but he said, 'I will not eat until I have told about my errand.'" He does not eat until the negotiations are finished. Verse 54 says, "And he and the men who were with him ate and drank and stayed all night. Then they arose in the morning, and he said, 'Send me away to my master.'"

A stern test of Jesus' character occurs when Satan tempts the fasting Jesus to use His powers to produce food: "Now when the tempter came to Him, he said, 'If you are the son of God, command that these stones become bread.' But He answered and said, 'It is written, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God"' (Matthew 4:3-4). Satan does not use "if" to cast doubt on Jesus' Sonship, but rather to get Him to reflect on what it meant. Part of what needed to be settled is whether He would give up His birthright as Esau had. Satan suggests to Jesus that, considering who He is, the highly exalted Son of God, He has every right to satisfy His needs regardless of circumstances. Satan appeals to any vanity Jesus might have to provide for Himself first as Esau had without regard to His obligation to others. Jesus' reply is simply, "I must perform My duty to the will of God first."

### **Eating and Spiritual and Physical Health**

Most of us will not find ourselves in a position where our sin, especially one involving eating, might adversely affect large portions of mankind. However, all of us are in a position to sin in the misuse of eating, thus affecting ourselves (perhaps even eternally) and those close to us. The two most common are the systematic destruction of our health through a nutritionally improper diet (even though the amount ingested may be near to what is needed) and gluttony, which is ingesting far more than the body needs to operate effectively, leading to obesity and ill health.

Suppose you lived during the time that the Temple in Jerusalem was in operation. As a faithful Levite, you were given stewardship to maintain the Temple and its grounds. How would you take care of that responsibility, knowing it was God's earthly dwelling place? Would you approach it in an irreverent, slap-dash, careless, lackadaisical, "I am too busy with other things" manner? Or would you be highly respectful and orderly and do whatever your hand found to do with all your might?

Spiritually, God has already given us this responsibility. In fact, it is a double-edged responsibility, both personal and corporate. In I Corinthians 3:16-17, Paul uses "temple" as a synonym for "church," referring to the whole body of believers. This is clearly an extension of his earlier use of the building metaphor. By it, he illustrates that each person, as part of the building, has some effect on the quality of the whole building by how he conducts his life. This metaphor ties all of us together as a team with the specific responsibility of doing all we can to build up and strengthen the church. Undoubtedly, the ministry bears the greater burden, but every member is involved.

Paul begins in verse 6 by giving himself and Apollos as examples. The King James Version makes the first part of verse 8 unclear: "Now he who plants [Paul] and he who waters [Apollos] are one." The Revised Standard Version clarifies this: "He who plants and he who waters are equal." They are not one as if they are identical or bound together like a set of Siamese twins. He means that they are equally important to the result.

Paul frequently emphasizes the team aspect. He writes in verse 9, "We are God's fellow workers." In verses 10-15, 17, he refers to "each one" and "anyone" frequently. No one has any room to think that it does not matter what he or she does or fails to do to make the body spiritually healthy. A great, dominant theme of Paul's teaching is the individual's personal responsibility for his life and that—somehow, somewhere, sometime—each will have to give account to God for what he has done.

How can Paul say the various parts of the body bear equal responsibility? This thought hearkens back to the Parable of the Talents. The master does not expect his three servants to produce the same quantity, but he expects each to be equally faithful in what he entrusted to their stewardship.

In verse 17, Paul uses "destroy" twice (see margin). It is a strong warning to those committing the sins named in other parts of the epistle—advocating false doctrine, strife, jealousy, sexual immorality and other permissive compromises—that God would hold them responsible despite how matters appeared at the time. He would destroy them because the church is holy because it belongs to God, and He has separated it from the world. Through their false doctrines or sinful conduct, whether they were aware or not, they were seeking or being used to destroy the spiritual health of the church. Each member bears responsibility for keeping himself holy and therefore spiritually healthy.

To understand this, perhaps we need nothing more than a deeper awareness that, despite the way things may presently look on the surface, our worldview—how we look at life and all its jumble of events—is quite narrow compared to God's. Once we see things from His perspective, we can see we bear a major responsibility to the body of Christ because God has included us in His great purpose.

Yet another level to this concept of responsibility to the body is, of course, taking care of our physical bodies. Because we belong to God, we are holy and are integral parts of the body of Christ, this responsibility weighs upon us with greater intensity than those who are not. In John 14:23, Jesus introduces the basis for this concept to illustrate the closeness of our relationship with God: "If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him." Under the Old Covenant, God is mysterious and distant and dwelling in the Temple. Under the New Covenant, we become the Temple, and God becomes knowable and personal.

In I Corinthians 6:15-20, Paul clearly confirms these concepts:

Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take the members of Christ and make them members of a harlot? Certainly not! Or do you not know that he who is joined to a harlot is one body with her? For "The two," He says, "shall become one flesh." But he who is joined to the Lord is one spirit with Him. Flee sexual immorality. Every sin that a man does is outside the body, but he who commits sexual immorality sins against his own body. Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit which is in you, which you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in you body and in your spirit, which are God's.

It is difficult to imagine how much more clearly he could express our responsibility to maintain good health! It is actually a fourfold responsibility:

1. To God because He bought us at a price;
2. To Jesus Christ because we are part of His body;
3. To ourselves to come out of sin; and
4. To our loved ones to serve them.

Meeting all of these glorifies God. Paul's concern is that debauching the body by involving it in sin threatens the continuation of the relationships. It does not matter whether it is spiritual sin or what we might call "physical sin," a term that does not appear in the Bible. Evidently, Herbert W. Armstrong coined it to help people grasp what debauching of the body is.

We normally think of sin as breaking a law. This is not a wrong understanding, but the Bible's usage is much broader. Biblically, sin is falling short of the glory of God, or turning aside from the path of what is right. It is also missing the mark. Sin is the Bible's term to indicate a failure to do things right, and right is the way God would do it. Of course, some failures to do what is right are far more serious than others are.

Recall that Paul says, "You are not your own." In the Parable of the Unjust Steward in Luke 16:1-13, Jesus makes a similar statement that can apply to our responsibility to care for our bodies. Our bodies belong to God, but He has bestowed their care on us as a stewardship responsibility to glorify God in our body as well as our spirit. In the parable, Jesus mentions "unrighteous mammon" (verses 9, 11), which He also terms "what is least" (verse 10) and "what is another man's" (verse 12). Each term is synonymous with the other two.

Jesus does not say to ignore these. He simply points out that they are secondary to the "true riches" (verse 11), "what is your own" (verse 12), and "[what] is much" (verse 10). Similarly, each of these is synonymous with the other two. He points to a direct connection between the two levels of responsibility by saying, "He who is faithful in what is least is faithful also in much; and he who is unjust in what is least is unjust also in much" (verse 10). Care of our body falls within the parameters of unrighteous mammon, what is least and what is another man's.

Paul, in II Corinthians 6:16-18; 7:1, carries this responsibility a step further:

And what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For you are the temple of the living God. As God has said: "I will dwell in them and walk among them. I will be their

God, and they shall be My people." Therefore "Come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, and I will receive you." "I will be a Father to you, and you shall be My sons and daughters, says the LORD Almighty." Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.

This principle clearly covers the care of our bodies. In an overall sense, our stewardship is not merely to labor not to destroy the established relationship but to improve it. Good health is extremely valuable. Even though one can overcome poor health in one's vanity, of greater importance is that good health promotes the strengthening of the relationship. This is so because it is bound within the sanctification process. It is tied directly to growing, overcoming, purifying one's life, avoiding the pitfalls of life, living the abundant life, as well as to our witness before the world in glorifying God.

We can undertake a great deal of serious effort in keeping ourselves from committing sins like idolatry, fornication, adultery, lying or stealing, while virtually ignoring the physical care of the body itself. Oftentimes, we do this by being ignorant of the responsibility or foolishly thinking that maintaining or improving our health is of little concern. The younger among us may find it helpful to ask someone older—one whose health is deteriorating or who has had to deal with poor health much of his life—how important having good health throughout life is. In no way should this reduce our efforts to overcome spiritual weaknesses, but it should encourage us to add another area of overcoming that will glorify God.

Genesis 2:15 says, "Then the LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to tend [*dress*, KJV] and keep it." Dressing and keeping is an overall responsibility for everyone in what we are to do with life. It applies to life's spiritual and physical aspects. We are to begin where we are and cultivate, embellish and encourage growth, while at the same time preserving, guarding and protecting through maintenance from decay and deterioration.

A direct line connects this concept and Jesus' instruction in the Parable of the Unjust Steward. The spiritual level is more important, but God wants faithfulness in the physical level also because both are inextricably bound in yielding to Him in the building of character. Both require study, meditation and setting goals, as well as consistent, faithful application. We do both to glorify Him.

Unfortunately, some will not do what is necessary for success, perhaps because of ignorance of their responsibility. Others know but lack the character or the sense of responsibility. Some spend their time rationalizing and justifying the way they are or proclaim to themselves and others that they are victims of the system and have no way out. Nevertheless, God is in heaven, and He is the way out.

Eating is a major part of life, as substantiated by the Bible's 700 references to it. The abundant life that Jesus proclaims He wants all to lead hinges upon what we eat spiritually and physically. We must make a major effort to feed our minds and bodies with the best nutrition available, if we desire good spiritual and physical health.