

## **Eating: How Good It Is! (Part Five)**

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***Forerunner*, "Personal," July 2001**

Though we may possess certain knowledge about some concept, it may not truly convict us in the sense of what biblical living faith is. Mere agreement with God about His way of life frequently does not amount to what we need to take action. Faith involves trust, and trust is active, even though it sometimes involves only patiently waiting. Faith entails making practical use of knowledge—putting what we believe to work so that it actually produces righteousness.

In the biblical sense, faith—belief about or in something or someone—is dead, useless, unless we put it to use working toward the promised good result. When Paul admonishes us to "stir up the gift" in us (II Timothy 1:6), he is really telling us to discipline ourselves to put what we say we believe into action. He speaks most specifically about the gift of the Holy Spirit, but the intent of his admonition includes all of the truths we have received as a result of God giving us His Spirit.

Because of grace, the elect are responsible to God to act in agreement with these truths. To act contrary to them is to quench the Spirit. Resisting the truth stifles and smothers good results; it inhibits growth into God's image. Proverbs 25:28 says, "Whoever has no rule over his own spirit is like a city broken down, without walls." Such a person is defenseless against destructive forces that pressure him to submit. To do the right requires discipline, the self-control to act in agreement with truth, because virtually everything in life—including Satan, the world's enticements and our appetites—works against our fervent submission to God. Thus, Paul charges us to exercise the control to stir up the gift.

This same principle is true regarding good physical health. The public market makes available copious amounts of information on principles of good health. Upon examining it, we may find that we agree that we could use some of it to improve our health. What good does it do for us if we do not stir up our spirit, disciplining ourselves to make use of it?

### **Discipline Is Key**

Recently, I heard two comments on radio talk programs that touch on these principles. The first came from a program on which three men, all former professional athletes, were interviewing a fourth man. The flow of the conversation motivated the fourth man to turn the tables on the athletes by asking them what differentiates top professional teams from the also-rans. One, a former football player, immediately answered, "Discipline," and the other two quickly agreed. He explained that really good players discipline themselves to do the right thing regardless of how the game is going at any given moment or how well his own teammates are playing. He added, "When you have a whole team of men who do that, they win almost all the time."

A few days later on a different sports program, the host was interviewing another sports figure, an older man who had a connection to high-level college basketball. One question led him to say that, all things being equal, the talent level of the top-flight teams is about the same from one college to another and from one conference to another. It was his observation that what makes the difference is whether the coach can get his players to *believe* his system. He then remarked, "If the kids don't believe, they simply will not do it regardless of how athletically gifted they are." Out on the

basketball court in the heat of the game, such "unbelieving" athletes will essentially do their own thing. Thus, the heat of the game reveals what they really believe in. In most cases, without belief in the coach's system, they simply revert to the way they have always played.

These two interviews illustrate the principle of biblical faith applied to a game. We must first come to believe the way of life, then we must stir ourselves, discipline ourselves, to put it into practice regardless of how life is going or how our peers are doing. As a minister, it is my responsibility to find ways to help us believe in God and His way of life, but a minister cannot live life for anybody but himself.

We live our lives based on what we believe. God wants to bring us to the point where we believe Him rather than our own or this world's experiences. He wants us to believe His truths and have that faith motivate us to produce the good works He is creating us to perform. Such faith will not be dead.

### **Mankind's Responsibility**

I Corinthians 6:13-15, 19-20 constitutes a major plank of this series of articles:

Foods for the stomach and the stomach for foods, but God will destroy both it and them. Now the body is not for sexual immorality but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. And God both raised up the Lord and will also raise us up by His power. Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take the member of Christ and make them members of a harlot? Certainly not! . . . 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 your body and in your spirit, which are God's.

Maintaining good physical health is a stewardship responsibility that comes with our calling. We owe this obligation to our Creator God just as surely as we have spiritual responsibilities toward Him. We may deem these physical responsibilities as less important, but that does not nullify them.

Paul uses "body" in a dual sense, as both the spiritual body—the church—and the physical body of each member. Sin works to destroy both, and God did not create us to sin.

The sin here is fornication, *porneia*, which includes a broad range of sexual sins that pervert the right, godly use of sex. Paul uses it to illustrate sin's destructiveness. Sin is somewhat like junk food: It may "taste" good to the senses for a while, but before it is through, it will come back and harm us with its destructive properties. Junk food may taste good going down, but all the while, it is depriving the body of life-giving nutrients it needs to be truly strong.

In Genesis 1:28, God gave mankind dominion and responsibility to rule over His creation. Our own lives and bodies are the closest and most specific areas of God's creation over which we are to rule. In Genesis 2:15, God commands us to dress and keep His creation, giving us more specific direction in this obligation. To dress and keep means we are to beautify, enhance, embellish, and improve the raw product, along with maintaining it and inhibiting its decay and degeneration. In Genesis 4:7, God admonishes Cain—and us in principle—that a desire to go contrary to God's desires will always be part of this mix. Sin lies at the door, He warns, but we must master it. In essence, we must stir up the spirit in us to discipline ourselves. In combining these major principles, we can see that God means our major areas of operation in His purpose are those closest to us.

Observing people from all over the world makes it plain that God used a common design in creating mankind. However, He also built into the gene pool enough variety that individuals are specifically different in some respects. This requires of us that we study and increase our knowledge of our own body's specific needs to maximize and maintain good health. We are all responsible to deal with life and health beginning where we are.

To some extent, all of us are victims of our ancestor's sins, a fact God knew when He called us. When He revealed Himself to us, and we accepted His invitation to enter into the covenant, we found ourselves responsible for seeking first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness (Matthew 6:33). Included within this is striving to overcome toward maturity. We are to submit ourselves to grow in His image. This means working toward improving ourselves in knowledge, understanding, wisdom, attitude and character. Included within these giant areas is improving our physical health.

### **A Matter of Heart**

Proverbs 23:6-7 says, "Do not eat the bread of a miser, nor desire his delicacies; for as he thinks in his heart, so is he. 'Eat and drink!' he says to you, but his heart is not with you." The principle stated here is the key to improving one's physical health just as surely as it will improve one's spiritual health. The sense of the usage of "heart" here is synonymous with the English word "within," thus, what is within a person's mind is hidden from view when one looks from outside. Appearances can be very deceiving because what is within may be far different from what another can perceive. A person may appear smiling and jovial, but he may only be acting to achieve a scheme that ultimately profits him. Therefore, he is using others to achieve his end.

Proverbs 16:9 adds, "A man's heart plans his way, but the LORD directs his steps." Again, the idea is that a man's external actions have their genesis within him, in his heart. We often hear laments from those who want to improve their health or to lose some weight. Yet, for a person's health to change for the better, he must begin by preparing himself and building strong convictions from within. *How* a person thinks, combined with *what* he thinks about, produces the conditions and the activities we see externally.

In Mark 7:15, 21-23 Jesus uses the same principle in a negative sense:

There is nothing that enters a man from outside which can defile him; but the things which come out of him, those are the things that defile a man. . . . For from within, out of the heart of a man, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within and defile a man.

Evil proceeds from within to without but so does good. Just as sin proceeds from within, so does righteousness. In Psalm 51:10, David pleads with God to create a clean heart within him because he understands that from a clean heart proceed clean thoughts and thus clean conduct that will glorify God. God promises exactly this in Ezekiel 36:25-26:

Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.

Jeremiah 4:4, 14 adds another important and contrasting aspect of this principle:

Circumcise yourselves to the LORD, and take away the foreskins of your hearts, you men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem, lest My fury come forth like fire, and burn so that no one can quench it, because of the evil of your doings. . . . O Jerusalem, wash your heart from wickedness, that you may be saved. How long shall your evil thoughts lodge within you?

Clearly, this project requires both God and us to contribute to make this change occur.

Our responsibility is to step out in faith, trusting Him, yielding to His truths taught to us. We do this by putting it to work in our lives, but it is not always easily done. What we are, what we have become since birth, is deeply entrenched in our character, and our nature does not cede control easily. Notice the example of Israel: "And the LORD said to Moses, 'I have seen this people, and indeed it is a stiff-necked people!'" (Exodus 32:9). "Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey; for I will not go up in your midst, lest I consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people" (Exodus 33:3). "But they did not obey nor incline their ear, but made their neck stiff, that they might not hear nor receive instruction" (Jeremiah 17:23).

This theme runs throughout the Bible. When Hebrews 4:1-2 says that the Israelites failed in the wilderness because "the word which they heard . . . [was not] mixed with faith," Paul is referring to this principle. They simply would not yield their mind to admit that He was right. They seized upon their own opinions, observing them rather than what God commanded. Each individual Israelite may not have actually gone through the process of rejecting each command, but simply keeping their habitual attitudes and conduct produced the same end. Their actions and attitudes, then, like the basketball players who never "buy" the coach's system, spoke for them, revealing what they, in their heart of hearts, *really* believed.

In Luke 5:39, Jesus uses an illustration to help us understand this rejection syndrome: "And no one, having drunk old wine, immediately desires the new; for he says, 'The old wine is better.'" He teaches that man has a natural resistance to the things of God. A wider and equally true application is that we humans almost immediately resist anything different from what we believe at the time. This is both good and bad. The important thing is whether we honestly consider and appraise behaviors and ideas before rejecting them.

Are our minds honest enough that, when hearing God's Word truthfully expounded, we will consciously and promptly take action to change when wrong? The Israelites appear to have had an automatic *negative* reaction to God's Word. They definitely did not have a childlike, submissive attitude! The Bible records that their conduct never changed, nor did their attitudes. In the game of life, they kept right on doing things as they always had, so they died in the wilderness. They left Egypt, but Egypt never left them.

### **What Does It Take?**

Hebrews 3:12-14 touches on making changes regardless of whether they concern a spiritual or physical area of our lives:

Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God; but exhort one another daily, while it is called "Today," lest any of you

be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin. For we have become partakers of Christ if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end.

Unbelief, sin, or even poor health habits wear a cloak of deception; they are not what they appear to be on their surface. Hebrews 11:25, speaking of Moses' faith, says he, "[chose] rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin. . . ." If sin were always an immediately horrible experience, nobody would commit it.

An unhealthy diet is similar. Indulging one's appetite always tastes good. One commentator said, "If sin were without pleasure, only the mentally deranged would commit it because sin also contains death." But death, and in many cases the pains that lead to it, are hidden in the anticipation of the immediate pleasures experienced while committing the sin. How many have suffered an early and painful death by eating themselves to obesity? Did they think about their obese condition and what caused it? Did they regret it and contemplate what they needed to do to lose it? Probably, but the combination of sin's deceptions and their lack of conviction destroyed their self-discipline.

Notice what Jesus says about those who will grow in His way of life:

And the ones that fell among thorns are those who, when they have heard, go out and are choked with cares, riches, and pleasures of life, and bring no fruit to maturity. But the ones that fell on the good ground are those who, having heard the word with a noble [*honest*, KJV] and good heart, keep it and bear fruit with patience. (Luke 8:14-15)

Growth requires an honest and noble heart. We deceive ourselves through rationalizations and justifications, allowing our appetites to overwhelm what we know is true. Sin engulfs the mind with a cloud of alibis and cover-ups to hide from ourselves the wrongness of what we do. Sin promotes twisting and distorting of truth. We reason, "This isn't so bad"; "I'll do it just one more time"; "I'm too weak. God will just have to take me as I am"; "God will just have to do it for me." We have all reasoned ourselves into transgressing.

Have we been deceived into thinking of sin only in the sense of breaking one of the Ten Commandments? While sin *is* the transgression of the law (I John 3:4), its biblical usage is much broader. When we fail to think of sin in its broader sense, we stumble into a trap. It is far better to think of sin as falling short of the glory of God. The central concept of sin is failure—failure to live up to a standard, God Himself. The glory of God includes His attitudes, intents, and His very thinking processes, all of which produce the way He lives. For us to fall short in any of these areas is missing the mark—sin.

We are deceived, lured into actually transgressing, through neglect, carelessness, laziness, irresponsibility, ignorance, bull-headedness, fear, shortsightedness, and ingratitude for forgiveness and the awesome potential that God has freely and graciously handed to us on a golden platter of grace. We are detoured from progress to holiness and are enticed into sin by failing to see God and by not considering seriously the subtle influences on the fringes of actual transgression of the law. At the foundation of both spiritual and physical health is how we think and what we think about.

James 1:13-16 confirms this:

Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is drawn

away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death. Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren.

The way to stop sin, as well as to improve health, is to change our thinking. Between what God does and what we should do, we can do it. This is real conversion!

### **Our Attitude Toward Truth**

Notice II Thessalonians 2:9-10: "The coming of the lawless one is according to the working of Satan, with all power, signs, and lying wonders, and with all unrighteous deception among those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved." A major area that separates those who are being saved from those who are perishing is the love of the truth. Truth sanctifies; it sets those who love and use it apart for the rewards of applying it to gain eternal life or better health.

Salvation is a process. Consider this: When God brought Israel out of Egypt, He redeemed them, but the process was not finished. It had only begun and did not end until they entered the Promised Land, a type of God's Kingdom. God intended the journey through the wilderness to prepare them for living in the land. However, a whole generation died in that process because they did not love the truth God gave them throughout the journey. The journey symbolizes the process of being saved.

Salvation is not religious rite, nor is it just a catchy theological term given to make people feel at peace. It is the experience of being saved from what would otherwise destroy us, which takes place between the time of our redemption and actually being spirit beings in the Kingdom of God. God is using His creative powers to get us to respond to truth. It does not matter what area of life or where the truth comes from. Truth is truth, but some truths are more important than others.

Verses 11-12 add more: "And for this reason God will send them strong delusion, that they should believe the lie, that they all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness." To those who will not yield to a love of truth, Paul warns, God will send a "deluding energy." As they reject the truth and continue in sin, a deceptive force will build and pull them deeper into it like a drug addiction. This parallels Romans 1:28, where Paul says, "God gave them over to a debased [*reprobate*, KJV] mind." This is what happens to people who leave the church: They continue to move further and further from the truth.

### **Proper Food for the Mind**

Philippians 4:6-9 clarifies the quality of what God wants us to feed our minds and adds further instruction:

Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things. The things which you learned and received and heard and saw in me, these do, and the God of peace will be with you.

We need to pay careful attention to this sequence of instructions because it contains much that can help us attain both good spiritual and physical health. In the past fifty years, men have come to understand how deteriorating and destructive stress is to life. Paul's counsel, written nearly two thousand years ago, tells us not to be driven by anxiety or fearfulness about life. Even earlier, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus admonishes us to "take no anxious thought." The stress of anxiety is wearying, setting us up for multiple afflictions. If we really "see" God, we should know that He is with us. Should we not feel great assurance in His promise never to allow us to be tempted above what we can bear? Faith is a prime solution for anxiety.

Paul continues, urging us to let God know our needs in every matter of life. As Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, He already knows our needs, but He wants *us* to recognize, evaluate, and communicate them to Him, accompanied by thoughtful expressions of thanksgiving for what He has already given, as well as His promises of blessings in the future. Do we see what this process achieves? It disciplines us to think within certain well-defined parameters that have Him and His way at the center of our life.

Paul then asserts that one benefit of this is tranquility of mind, respite from the restlessness so common to the carnal mind, which is constantly searching for new stimulation to satisfy its insatiable longings. This peace of God will stand guard over our minds like a sentinel, allowing us to meet and cope with the problems of life.

Verse 8 begins with the word "finally." While not technically wrong, it does not adequately convey Paul's intent. We can understand it better as "in this connection" or "in this regard as I close this letter." In relation to anxiety, the peace of God, and coping with the problems of life, our minds should be occupied with things that are true, noble, just, pure, lovely, of good report, virtuous and praiseworthy. Through this discipline, we program our minds with the right things; what goes into the mind determines what comes out in words, actions and attitudes.

This is a biblical version of the "garbage in, garbage out; wholesome in, wholesome out" cliché. It specifically expands on Jesus' statement, "For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks" (Matthew 12:34). We could take this further and say that out of the abundance of the heart the mind thinks and feels, and the body acts.

In verse 9, Paul defines what is wholesome specifically as what they had learned, received, heard and seen in him. He is indirectly telling them to eat Jesus Christ because he, Paul, as His apostle to the Gentiles, was His agent to them and their teacher of His way of life.

### **Back to the Starting Point**

In one sense, we have come full circle back to the starting point in the parallel between spiritual and physical eating. The quality of what goes in determines the quality of what comes out—but it will produce good results only if we believe and practice it with patient discipline. One cannot have a truly healthy life without a spiritually healthy mind as well as a physically healthy body. Paul affirms in I Thessalonians 5:23, "Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely; and may your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ."

This verse does not define man as a trinity. It is a Hebraism, a common saying among the people, which simply means "the whole" or "every part." A.T. Robertson, in his authoritative *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, defines it as "every part of each of you." It corresponds to loving God "with all

your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind," but it is somewhat paraphrased and placed in a specific context.

Good mental and physical health are achieved by the same basic processes as good spiritual health and salvation. It begins by putting first things first. In Philippians 4:8, what did Paul say we should think upon first? Whatever is true! Jesus says in John 8:32 that it is truth that sets us free. In John 17:17, He states that God's Word is truth and it sanctifies us.

However, we must also understand that God's Word is not the only place truth resides. It contains the truth most essential to good relationships, to salvation, and to fulfilling God's purpose. But God has left many things in the physical realm for mankind to discover and pass on so they can be known, shared, and used. Truth used correctly will set its users apart. Those who seek it out and use it are distinguished, made different, by their very use of it. Those who use God's truth are set apart for salvation. Those who seek out and use truths about good mental and physical health will be set apart for better, improved mental and physical health. God lays this stewardship responsibility on those He has called to salvation.

Jesus states in John 8:34, "Most assuredly, I say to you, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin." As mentioned earlier, the basic concept of sin is failure—failure to live up to a standard, failure to hit the bull's eye, failure to stay on the path. The slavery Jesus speaks of is bondage to a pattern of thinking that produces failure. This is what God wants to deliver and convert us from. All who come out of the world have been addicted, held in bondage, to ways of thinking that produce failure, mental illness, physical disease and death. God desires to give us freedom through applying truth in faith and love for the Father, His Son and the brethren.

He has revealed Himself, His way and His truth. Do we believe it? Will we discipline ourselves to use the truth? This is the responsibility that faces us. It has been done, and we can do it. Will you?