

Eating: How Good It Is! (Part Seven)

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If a person believes that it does not matter at all what or how much he eats or whether he ever exercises or gets proper amounts of sleep, will he not be subject to the consequences of such a lifestyle? Similarly, if a person believes he should carefully monitor his body's reactions to certain foods, how much he eats, his exercise and sleep patterns—and he carefully stays within what he has discovered works for him—will he not produce constructive results?

If a person does not care at all what he ingests into his mind and so involves himself in seeking out, witnessing and experiencing extreme forms of human behavior, will that not affect his conduct and how he thinks about and judges such activity? On the other hand, if a person diligently seeks out good things for his mind, will it not tend to produce positive thinking patterns?

These questions loosely illustrate major principles given and expounded upon in the Word of God. Paul writes in Galatians 6:7, "Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap." He adds in Romans 2:6, "[God] will render to every man according to his deeds." Because deeds provide strong evidence of what is in the heart, we could consider this the controlling principle of God's judgment. What more positive proof for judgment exists than the evidence one produces by his conduct? A person can act only according to the quality of what he has fed his mind. Even though a carnally well-fed mind will not eliminate human nature of itself, it still tends to produce better conduct.

Where Has Our Wall Gone?

The basis of the biblical way of life is that obedience to laws, especially God's, produces the good in life. Laws, as used here, are those forces whose actions or reactions occur consistently by nature. Because laws are consistent, those who exercise their powers can depend upon them to produce exactly what they were intended to produce for good or ill. God has given us free moral agency so that we can choose to produce good in our lives. In Deuteronomy 30:19, God commands us to choose life. Yet, we have no need of the knowledge of laws if we are carelessly going to ignore them, even when such knowledge is readily available to us.

Is not the church's present condition like so many sheep scattered upon a thousand hills? Some wander aimlessly, and others gather in small groups, perhaps with no leadership of a shepherd. Others drift more or less aimlessly from group to group. Others seem intent on shouldering other sheep along a path they have determined is right for them. Others meet in large groups restlessly milling about but making little movement in any direction.

Virtually all of them suffer from some degree of weakness, and some of them may be seriously diseased from a lack of proper attention. Scattering of the sort that grips the church is not the result of strength but of weakness; scattering is a fruit of spiritual disease (Deuteronomy 28:64). Disease stalks and attacks the weak.

Considering the history of the church over the past twenty or thirty years, is God giving us a message of the church's continuing internal state as He sees it through this metaphor? Disease occurs in a person's body when foreign substances invade it and overwhelm its immune system.

Ezra 9:9, which appears in the midst of Ezra's prayer, points to the importance of a wall compared to other gifts of God. "For we were slaves. Yet our God did not forsake us in our bondage; but He extended mercy to us in the sight of the kings of Persia, to revive us, to repair the house of our God, to rebuild its ruins, and to give us a wall in Judah and Jerusalem." In ancient times, a wall encircled a city to protect it from invasion. In biblical imagery, it serves as a symbol of a spiritual and moral defensive structure. The physical body's "wall" is its immune system.

While intended to be impenetrable, city walls were of course never completely exempt from penetration and destruction. Thus, depending upon the context "wall" appears in, it can also be a biblical image of vulnerability as well as security. Enemies sought every means to penetrate walled cities. Some scaled the walls, while others tunneled under them. Some battered through them, and others burned them with fire. Because of this vulnerability, walls can also be an image of misplaced trust. Youths tend to put their trust in their "walls" of physical strength and good health and older people, in their wisdom (Proverbs 20:29). Through the ages, people have risked putting confidence in themselves, money, armies, weapons, cultures and structures rather than God. We need to consider seriously whether our trust is misplaced.

Disease and Malnourishment

It should take little meditation for all to agree with the profound truth of David's admiring exclamation to God in Psalm 139:14: "I will praise You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; marvelous are Your works, and that my soul knows very well." We are utterly fantastic creations fashioned from a combination of minerals, water and spirit, and kept alive by chemical and electrical processes that work according to predetermined laws upheld by the word of God's power (Hebrews 1:3).

We may name a disease like polio, cancer, or pneumonia and feel as though we are its helpless victims, but in reality, because the immune system has become compromised or weakened by a series of stresses, it is unable to defend the body. This is a great simplification of the process, but it is fundamentally correct. For example, at any given time, cancer cells are present in the body, but the immune system produces antibodies to defend it, not allowing the cancer to gain an upper hand.

Even if a brand new invader enters it, the body will work—on its own because God has designed it thus—to produce an entirely new antibody to fight the new invader. This happens even when a person receives a transplanted organ from another. Though the transplanted organ may be healthy, the recipient's body recognizes it as an unwelcome invader and begins attacking it to destroy and purge it from the body. Doctors thus have to give the recipient anti-rejection medication. This illustrates that, even though we are all generally the same as humans, we are all specifically different because each person's genetic makeup is unique.

Even under normal circumstances, as with having cancer cells present within us, the immune system can be overwhelmed because it is too weak to fight the invader back sufficiently. The body then

becomes diseased, and symptoms of sickness begin to appear. Our basic responsibility in this is to balance our life so that, as much as possible, we protect the body from the stresses that will overwhelm the system.

The stress that frequently does the most damage to the majority of people is *malnourishment*. We feel full because we get plenty of food, but quantity is hardly an issue in Israelitish countries because God has blessed us so abundantly in fulfilling His promises to Abraham. Often, the generally ignored cause of health problems is the *quality* of what we are supposedly consuming to keep our systems fit. Rarely do very many question the nutritional value of what they are eating.

Let us consider these thoughts in light of the church. The Bible symbolically depicts the church as a body—specifically a female body—in which each member is a cell functioning to support the whole. Even the church body has cancer cells in it at any given time, called "tares," "heretics," "false prophets" or the like in various places. They bear some similarities to the real cells, most noteworthy perhaps is that, though unconverted and not truly of the body, they are deceptively religious folk and sometimes quite moral, at least in following most of the commandments. However, they tenaciously hold to their own opinions in defiance of biblical truth and make no effort to change their minds when confronted with these errors. The world contains many of such people, and sometimes they lurk within the fellowship of the church.

As long as the individual "cells" in the body strive to keep themselves well-nourished on the food intended to strengthen them spiritually, the spiritual cancer contained in the tares, heretics and false ministers pose little danger to the well being of the whole body. This does not negate the potential danger they pose. They occasionally manage to influence some—even convince a few to leave the fellowship of the church or put them into such a suspicious, distrusting, cynical or angry attitude that real spiritual growth virtually stops. It is similar to weeds crowding out the fruitful plants in an untended garden or like a cancer sapping the body's strength by using the body's nourishment for its own growth.

Come and Freely Eat!

With this preface in mind, it is vital to refresh our understanding of Isaiah 55:1-3:

Ho! Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat. Yes, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend money for what is not bread, and your wages for what does not satisfy? Listen diligently to Me, and eat what is good, and let your soul delight itself in abundance. Incline your ear, and come to Me. Hear, and your soul shall live; and I will make an everlasting covenant with you—the sure mercies of David.

Remember who is saying this and to whom. Jesus Christ, the God of the Old Testament and our Savior is speaking, not to the world in general as some may think, but to all those who have made the covenant with God.

Under the Old Covenant, this includes Israel and Judah, and under the New Covenant, the church. Verse 1 essentially invites us to come and eat freely, that is, without restriction, because all that He offers is good to eat. However, the English translation hides a tone of pity. In Hebrew, it pleads for us to take advantage of what God has made readily available. It bears a pleading tone because suffering and discouraged people seem to be doing all but the right things to help them overcome their

difficulties. These people are "spinning their wheels" in their preoccupation with Babylon, a type of the world.

By contrast, the tone of verse 2 is mildly chiding as well as urgently warning. It admonishes against spiritual foods that indeed may make one feel "full" but really do not nourish the spiritual life's genuine needs. Eventually, one feels that something is missing. Our Savior does not argue but asks, "Does all this really satisfy you? Is this the end to which you are called? Is this what life is all about?" He implies that those He has invited will have to choose to change their spiritual diet. Then He urges us to listen carefully. It is almost as if He says, "Listen! Listen!"

He then exhorts us to eat what is good, that is, what He has specifically made for this purpose. In verse 3, His admonishment becomes abundantly clear when He says, "Come to Me [and] hear." What comes from Christ truly nourishes, satisfies and produces spiritual strength and richness, fortifying the spiritual wall that protects us from falling away.

Previously, we considered John 6:48, 53-58 in detail. Its immediate context concerns the Passover symbolism of flesh and blood, unleavened bread and wine. However, Passover is only the most obvious allusion. We can apply the "eating" principle Jesus uses to a much broader context including "eating" the words of His teaching about His entire way of life.

Let us notice three passages in this regard:

»Romans 10:17: So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.

» Romans 1:16-17: For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, "The just shall live by faith."

» Zephaniah 3:1-2: Woe to her who is rebellious and polluted, to the oppressing city! She has not obeyed His voice, she has not received correction; she has not trusted in the Lord; she has not drawn near to her God.

First, in the spiritual sense, "eating" occurs primarily when one hears and reads. A person ingests messages and concepts into the mind through words, which establish and nourish his pattern of life. Those words, if one permits it, create a faith upon which one bases the way he lives. This faith is almost entirely dependent upon the quality of what is heard and whether a person believes it enough to follow it. These verses reveal only the words of God or Christ, His gospel, His truths, will form the faith that leads to salvation because they will form the correct beliefs and thus the correct way of life. This is the faith of Christ; the person who has it believes what Christ believes. This is a simple, understandable, true formula.

The verses in Zephaniah show what happens when a person rejects or disbelieves His words. That person comes to great dismay. This does not mean we cannot have words other than God's in our mind, but the children of God must filter everything through God's words to test their validity before they allow themselves to believe them firmly enough to make them part of their belief system.

Put another way, there is faith and then there is *the* faith, the faith that brings salvation. This faith arises from believing God's words. What we believe will determine our conduct and attitudes

whether or not we stop to think about those beliefs because what is contained in the heart *will* come out (Matthew 12:34-35). Only God's words truly produce spiritual strength. In our recent past, "eating" and believing the wrong words set the church up for the scattering that has occurred. For quite a while, worldly things gradually corrupted the spiritual health of God's children, weakening them through spiritual malnourishment and changing their faith.

Life's Central Issue

I Corinthians 1:10 provides a first-century account of a congregation suffering from this process of ingesting the wrong words: "Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment." Division troubled this congregation because the members held dissimilar views on beliefs that are basic to spiritual unity. I Corinthians shows disorder, confusion, argument and offense as symptoms of spiritual weakness.

When the Tkach group began to teach their package of doctrinal changes, many in the church's fellowship were sitting ducks. In some cases, the spiritual "walls" had been compromised, and confusion, discouragement, accusation and scattering resulted. This fruit was produced because the church—the whole body—had not maintained good spiritual health. Practically, this spiritual disorder within the church occurred primarily because the minds of its individual parts were not being fed the spiritual food that will nourish a person's relationship with God. Long before we saw the evidence of division with our eyes, a spiritual famine had struck, setting the stage for scattering through malnourishment.

During the 1992 presidential campaign, then-candidate Bill Clinton uttered one of his more memorable lines. He said, in scorn and sarcasm to then-President George Bush, whose campaign was failing because he apparently failed to grasp the central issue in the voter's mind, "It's the economy, stupid!" Do we understand that for us now the central issue in life is dressing and keeping our relationship with God established through His revealing of Himself and His purpose? This, combined with the work of Jesus Christ, is our salvation. Please understand this simple picture. When Adam and Eve sinned, they cut themselves off from God and were put out of the Garden of Eden. They cut themselves off from access to the Holy Spirit, which God intended to be the source of nourishment for an abundant life and fulfilling His purpose.

Hebrews 2:1-3 contains the apostle Paul's earnest appeal to make every effort to hold on to what we have learned:

Therefore we must give the more earnest heed to the things we have heard, lest we drift away. For if the word spoken through angels proved steadfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just reward, how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation, which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed to us by those who heard Him.

It is necessary for us to seek recurrent nourishment from the Word of God, and it is available only through an enduring relationship with the Creator. This spiritual relationship, like any human relationship, is multifaceted. Yet, quite simply, we as individuals and as a body neglected our relationship with God, and the result was division and scattering.

The world's spiritual junk food gradually became the source of our spiritual nourishment. It invaded our attitudes and behaviors, systematically weakening us as it produced the spiritual disease we call Laodiceanism. It deceived us because we outwardly appeared to be in good health. We judged that we were spiritually rich and increased with goods and had need of nothing. However, the reality was that a spiritual cancer was eroding our spiritual health. He who looks on the heart saw that we were wretched, miserable, poor, blind and naked. When the test came in the form of false doctrine, He found us lacking in spiritual strength and scattered us.

We can reduce this process to simple principles. Matthew 6:24 reminds us that it is impossible to serve two masters equally well. As time has shown, we were serving the self and the world rather than God. He revealed our spiritual weaknesses, and they have greatly diminished us.

Signs Along the Way

We can learn a great deal from the prophets' descriptions of conditions in Israel in the years just before God scattered them. Jeremiah 7:1-12 contains an especially vivid description, describing attitudes and conduct just before Babylon's invasion of Judah. Anybody who cares and diligently searches for the causes of our present scattered condition can easily find many of them.

Verse 4 reveals a casual, self-righteous and presumptuous self-confidence that, since they were fellowshipping with the "church," everything would be fine! Nevertheless, the enemy conquered Judah and took the people into captivity, so membership in the church is no guarantee that judgment will not come on us individually or collectively. Jeremiah expresses the Jews' prideful *assumption* of being above correction, an attitude that has its basis in a confused understanding of God's love and the purity of His holiness.

We must be prepared for God's Kingdom. The attitudes and conduct of these people, expressed here but applied to us now, show that we were not living up to God's expectations. We can learn, though, that fellowshipping with the church without the right attitudes and conduct can easily foster a delusion that all is well, while by God's judgment all clearly is not well! Verses 5-6 illustrate that their judgment of how to apply God's Word in their lives was severely compromised. They definitely did not love their neighbor as themselves; they were unmistakably self-centered. Is there more evidence here that we may have been the same?

Verse 10 expresses the extent this delusion had permeated their lives. By ignoring God's moral and ethical demands, they were in effect telling God that attending services released them from the guilt accrued during the rest of their lives. It was as if God's judgments did not apply to them. They were after all "in the church," right? It reads almost as if they felt they were doing God a favor by showing up! What is more, while there, they heard insipid messages telling them, "Peace, peace. Everything is okay. God's grace covers all."

Though ceremonially going through the motions, they lacked thorough dedication and devotion to God's way in every aspect of life. Beginning in verse 12, God reminds them that they should remember the history of former generations and take warning because they are on track to experience the same calamities. Have we in our time repeated their assumptions that everything is fine when it is not? It seems so, since the Laodicean assumes he is rich and increased with goods and needs nothing. The reality is that he is blind to his true condition and not clothed with God's righteousness.

God has called us into a courtship relationship leading to marriage with Jesus Christ. He makes clear what He expects from us as our part in this relationship. Jesus says to His disciples, "If you love Me, keep My commandments" (John 14:15). A love relationship requires each to sacrifice thoughtfully for the other. Keeping of the commandments does not "save" us, but it prepares us to live eternally with Him and shows our attitude of submission to Him.

Jeremiah 7:5-9 plainly portrays precious little concern for fellow man. In fact, most of the sins Jeremiah directly mentions are transgressions of the last five commandments. Only one sin, idolatry, focuses directly on the first four commandments. This suggests that a breakdown in human relationships quickly followed the disintegration of the relationship between God and Israel. Similarly, I John 4:20-21 calls upon those who say they love God and claim to be Christians to love the brethren. John goes so far as to say that, if we do not love the brethren, our claim to love God is a lie! This is another area in which many fell short, and it led to division, which continues to the present.

This indicates that self-absorbed people indulged themselves at others' expense. Self-absorption produces strained marital relationships and ultimately divorce, and alienated children as they and their parents go in wildly different directions. Within congregations, it yields shallow and casual relationships that show little true concern. Its fruit are intolerance, impatience, strong opinions about trivial things, offense, judging and division.

It produces busy people who feel as if they are accomplishing a great deal because they seem to get many things done. The church member may even prosper more than at any other time in his life. However, the busy-ness is spent on things of minor spiritual importance. Meanwhile, the relationship with God, while existent, is allowed to be neglected. That is what Laodiceanism is. People bring it in from the world where God is a figurehead but with whom there is no relationship. It is a deceitful fruit of too much time, attention and energy focused on the wrong things. Laodiceanism is deceitful because the Bible reveals that the person afflicted with it is unaware that he has it. He is blind to it, but God certainly is not because He is being neglected in this relationship. How can He possibly marry someone who will not draw close to Him because of involvement in so many other things?

The Major Key to Good Health

The only way we can truly "eat" Jesus Christ is through a dynamic, growing relationship with Him. We do this by seeking Him through His Word, communicating with Him through prayer and wholeheartedly conforming to *His* way of life, not the world's. We must partake of the whole process, and what we take in we must chew over, digest, assimilate and use.

A previous article described the American diet as an imbalanced "too much and too little." We get plenty in terms of quantity, but too frequently, much of what we eat the body never assimilates and uses. It goes in and passes out, often because we do not eat enough truly nourishing foods, like live fruits and vegetables that contain many of the enzymes our bodies need to assimilate food. Perhaps in the course of life we have failed to keep our digestive tracts clean and well supplied with the beneficial bacterial organisms necessary for breaking down the food passing through. If so, we might eat enough food but receive little nourishment from it.

Ignoring the proper functions of the body's processes is risky business over the course of time. Americans and Canadians are paying the price in poor health. According to the World Health Organization, the United States now ranks *seventeenth* among the nations of the world in terms of

mortality rate! In other words, the people of sixteen nations live healthier, longer lives than the richest, most God-blessed nation that has ever existed in mankind's history!

Frequently, there exists a grave imbalance in our spiritual and physical diets. The spiritual is, of course, far more important. We most certainly cannot afford to neglect our relationship with God in the same careless or ignorant manner we often neglect our bodies. This relationship is not only the major key for good spiritual health, but it is also the major key to good mental and physical health.

Notice the wonderful promises God gives in Isaiah 58:6-12, to those who are keeping His commands within loving relationships with Him and fellowman:

Is this not the fast that I have chosen: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, to let the oppressed go free, and that you break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and that you bring to your house the poor who are cast out; when you see the naked, that you cover him, and not hide yourself from your own flesh? Then your light shall break forth like the morning, your healing shall spring forth speedily, and your righteousness shall go before you; the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry, and He will say, "Here I am." If you take away the yoke from your midst, the pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness, if you extend your soul to the hungry and satisfy the afflicted soul, then your light shall dawn in the darkness, and your darkness shall be as the noonday. The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your soul in drought, and strengthen your bones; you shall be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water, whose waters do not fail. Those from among you shall build the old waste places; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; and you shall be called the Repairer of the Breach, the Restorer of Streets to Dwell In.

This is just one example of how important this relationship is to our physical well-being.

It is our responsibility to dress and keep those things given into our care. God admonishes us that whatever our hand finds to do we should do it with all our might (Ecclesiastes 9:10). Death is an enemy, the last enemy to be destroyed in God's plan (I Corinthians 15:26), and it needs to be fought tooth and toenail. Far too often, a long and painful period of very poor health precedes death because too many of us are giving in by neglecting those things that bring good health and a long abundant life— forfeiting it inch-by-inch, spoonful-by-spoonful. Is our Creator and Judge pleased with the way we are caring for the precious life He has given us?

James 1:17-18 says, "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and come down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning. Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures." Life itself is a great gift because it opens the potential for the ultimate gift of eternal life. Show God you care! Nurture what He has freely given. And neglect the relationship with God at your own risk.