

FOOD AND FAITH 3-2-14

(Ecclesiastes 5) There was an elderly man who lay dying in his bed. In death's agony, he suddenly smelled the aroma of his favorite chocolate chip cookies wafting up the stairs. He gathered his remaining strength and lifted himself from his bed. Leaning against the wall, he slowly made his way out of the bedroom, and with even greater effort, forced himself down the stairs, gripping the railing with both hands. With labored breath he leaned against the door frame, gazing into the kitchen. There, spread out upon newspapers on the kitchen table were literally hundreds of his favorite chocolate chip cookies. Was it heaven? Or was it one final act of heroic love from his devoted wife, seeing to it that he left this world a happy man? Mustering one great, final effort, he threw himself toward the table, landing on his knees in a rumped posture. His parched lips parted; the wondrous taste of the cookie was already in his mouth, seemingly bringing him back to life. The aged and withered hand shakingly made its way to a cookie at the edge of the table, when it was suddenly smacked with a spatula by his wife. "Stay out of those," she said, "they're for the funeral!" (pause) That story reminds us of the power and importance that food has in our lives. But we seldom speak of food, of eating, in the context of our studies in Scripture. It isn't because the Bible is silent. Much, in fact, is said about food in the Bible as we will see this morning in our look at the subject of food and faith.

Ecclesiastes 5:**18-19** *Here is what I have seen to be good and fitting: to eat, to drink and enjoy oneself in all one's labor in which he toils under the sun during the few years of his life which God has given him; for this is his reward. 19 Furthermore, as for every man to whom God has given riches and wealth, He has also empowered him to eat from them and to receive his reward and rejoice in his labor; this is the gift of God.* The basic perspective of Scripture on food is that it is a gift from God and is meant to be enjoyed. So far, so good, right? The Lord created us in such a way that we need a certain fuel in order to function and survive. And, in His goodness, He made the consumption of that fuel to be a great pleasure. When man was still in the garden of his innocence the many trees of the garden supplied the need and the pleasure in abundance. After the fall, God said man would have to work for his food, but still it is supplied by toil of man combined with the mercies of God. God has seen to it that we have what we need. Paul, in Acts 14:**16-17** *In the generations gone by He permitted all the nations to go their own ways; 17 and yet He did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good and gave you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness.*" In Genesis 9 when Noah got off the ark, the Lord

opened up a whole new world of foods when he invited Noah to eat of the animal kingdom as well as the plant kingdom. Eating has become not only a form of daily sustenance for us but also the centerpiece of our lives as families, and as churches, and is a key ingredient to our celebrations. In the ceremonial laws of the Old Testament God ordained various feasts and rituals involving food. In Nehemiah chapter 8 there was a great revival that occurred from the hearing of God's word. The people under Nehemiah were weeping and mourning, but the man of God called instead for a celebration of what God was doing. In Nehemiah 8:**10-12** *Then he said to them, "Go, eat of the fat, drink of the sweet, and send portions to him who has nothing prepared; for this day is holy to our Lord. Do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength." 11 So the Levites calmed all the people, saying, "Be still, for the day is holy; do not be grieved." 12 All the people went away to eat, to drink, to send portions and to celebrate a great festival, because they understood the words which had been made known to them.* Interesting isn't it? The Bible reminds us that man does not live by bread alone. The Bible warns us against gluttony. But the Bible also speaks affirmingly of the role that food and eating are to play in our lives. Even the glory that awaits us in heaven is described in the language of a feast. Food is God's gift. Enjoy it. Some, you know, have tried to make tasty food a forbidden pleasure. Not God. I Timothy 4:**1-5** *But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons, 2 by means of the hypocrisy of liars seared in their own conscience as with a branding iron, 3 men who forbid marriage and advocate abstaining from foods which God has created to be gratefully shared in by those who believe and know the truth. 4 For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with gratitude; 5 for it is sanctified by means of the word of God and prayer.*

Alright, that should be clear enough, but of course, there is much more to the matter. The depravity of man is such, and the cunning of the devil is such that what God gives for our good, we pervert to our ill. What God gives us for happiness often becomes our misery, what God gives for edification we turn to our destruction. And for many, food is no longer a delight, but a struggle. The first sin involved eating. And it has been a problem ever since. In the early centuries of the church, certain great fathers developed a list of seven particular sins that became quite famous, and were called the seven deadly sins. Maybe some of you with Catholic backgrounds can name them. The list includes envy, pride, covetousness, sloth, lust, anger, and gluttony. Gluttony? One of the seven *deadly* sins? If you grew up Baptist like me you probably wouldn't put gluttony in the top twenty,

much less the top seven most destructive sins. But the Bible would adjust our perspective.

Proverbs 23:**20-21** *Do not be with heavy drinkers of wine, Or with gluttonous eaters of meat; 21 For the heavy drinker and the glutton will come to poverty, And drowsiness will clothe one with rags.*

Gluttony is indeed, a sin. But what exactly do we mean by “gluttony?” In our society we bemoan the problem of obesity. We care about being fat or thin. We have created a generation of young women who are terrified of being overweight. But being fat or thin is not the issue. Gluttony is the misuse or overuse of food. Eating too much for comfort or for health is gluttony. Spending too much money on your delicacies is gluttony. Hmm. Giving too much time and attention to your eating is also gluttony. For some this leads to obesity, for others it does not. I’ll tell you now, I struggle with gluttony. I have been guilty of this sin more times than I can count. Being fairly tall and very active makes it less obvious on me, but I have a long history of eating until I am uncomfortable. And I, unfortunately, even have a reputation for getting a little too enthusiastic about food. I don’t think I am alone here. Not by a long shot. The problem of food-abuse, gluttony, is vast and extensive. It is as pervasive within the church as it is without. Many of us eat too much, many of us eat too unhealthily, many of us daydream about our eating, and many of us spend way too much money on our consumption.

Is this a minor problem or a major one? I truly think it is a major problem, and a major problem that expresses itself in three areas. One is financial. Last week I ate breakfast next to a woman at a restaurant. She wore a work uniform that told me she had a low-paying job, but I watched her drop \$15 on breakfast. That is all too typical. In the five decades of my life the number of restaurants has skyrocketed. I ate out when I was growing up about twice a month. Kids now do it twenty times a month and think nothing of spending \$5 every day on a latte grande. Our society bombards us with enticing ads for foods and restaurants. And they work. And we spend. Proverbs 23:21 said the glutton comes to poverty.

Then secondly, not only does gluttony lead to financial ruin, it also can lead to physical ruin. This we know about. The leading subject in the print media in our nation is weight loss. We hear over and over again about what obesity does to health. It shortens your life, it saps your energy. If nothing else, the effects on your health earn for gluttony the title of a deadly sin.

Thirdly though, and most importantly, gluttony, in its various forms leads to spiritual ruin. God calls us to be soldiers, and we become Pillsbury doughboys, soft of body and mind and incapable of resisting the enemy. We become used to obeying the whimperings of our flesh. And most of all, our

eating becomes our god, our idol. We hunger not for righteousness because we hunger for fried shrimp and chocolate cake. And our bodies grow fat while our souls grow puny. When your bodily desires have the upper hand your soul will starve. Michael Quoist in his book *The Christian Response* says, "if your body makes all the decisions and gives all the orders, and if you obey, the physical can effectively destroy every other dimension of your personality. Your emotional life will be blunted and your spiritual life will be stifled and ultimately become anemic."

The abuse and misuse of food, gluttony, is not a joke. It is not something to be made light of. It is pervasive and serious. And it is also very difficult to overcome. You can't exactly go cold turkey and quit eating. Unlike drinking alcohol and smoking cigarettes you can't run away from food entirely. And the temptations are everywhere. What a challenge! Are you up to it? Huh? Yes? No? The answer is only yes because of the Spirit of God, but the answer is, "yes!" So, let's look at two basic and powerful applications of our study. Two keys to having a biblical relationship to food.

First of all, you must determine to establish Jesus as Lord of your diet. © Christ must be Lord of the fork. I like that. Is He that in your life? Have you submitted your consumption to His rule and governance? This is where we have to start. Whose servant are you? Whose orders do you follow? Philippians 3:19 speaks of those whose god is their belly, their appetite. What does that mean? I think you know. It means that our flesh, our cravings, call the shots, rule the day. Listen, what redeemed living means is that we enjoy the gifts but we serve the Giver. We enjoy the gifts but we serve the giver.© And we live in the awareness that our bodies are not our own. I Corinthians 6:**19-20** *Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? 20 For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body.* Get that principle through your head. Your body was not given to you in order for it to absorb as much pleasure as possible before you die. It is an instrument for God's service and God's glory. I Corinthians 10:**31** *Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.* We aren't living, and we aren't eating to serve ourselves, but to serve our King. Now, our King doesn't give us nice things, enjoyable things for us to trash them. We are given good gifts to enjoy, but, but, but, to enjoy according to the commands of the Giver!! So, we see our bodies as belonging to God, instruments of His service and that means we take care of them by developing habits of health. Now, preoccupation with bodily care can be detrimental to your soul. Some folks are too caught up in physical health pursuits; it has taken an inordinate place in their lives, but most of us fail to care enough and do enough to maintain our bodies. That is sub-

Christian. Everyone of you should have some dietary habits that flow out of your devotion to Christ. Those habits will differ from person to person. For me, I eat only two meals a day – which is Biblical. When God fed Elijah by the brook, the raven brought him bread and flesh in the morning and bread and flesh in the evening. Twice a day. That is one of my habits. I also don't eat after 9pm. Except for winters in Pittsburgh, I take a 22 hour fast once a week. I drink lots and lots of water. But listen, I am no model of good eating, believe me. My wife is fabulous – one of the finest eaters I know. I am humbled by her dietary self-control. I am also inspired because I know she doesn't do it to impress anybody – her discipline flows out of her love for Christ and her commitment that He alone is going to be Lord. That is the first key to having a biblical relationship to food.

The second key is to determine to make the Lord your refuge and your strength. ⑩. Psalm 46:1 *God is our refuge and strength, A very present help in trouble.* Your refuge is where you go when the pressures mount. Your refuge is where you go when you need protection from an enemy. For the Christian, our refuge is to be found in our relationship to God. The Bible speaks of this in a zillion places. But this is not natural for us. We learn from the time we are kids to find our refuge and our comfort in other things. And one of the main other things is food. Cathy, the weight-conscious single gal in the funny papers once quipped that there is no problem so great or so troubling that a banana split would not help. You understand that way of thinking? I do. Food becomes not just a way to titillate our taste buds, it becomes an escape from hard realities, very much like liquor and drugs. Gluttony shows that something is eating at us. True. And we are tempted, instead of retreating to the Lord, to retreat to our favorite dessert. That is bad for our bodies and even worse for our souls. Frank Farrell writes, *it is my conviction that a very large part of mankind's ills and of the world's misery is due to the rampant practice of trying to feed the soul with the body's food.* That is so good I want you to hear it again. *It is my conviction that a very large part of mankind's ills and of the world's misery is due to the rampant practice of trying to feed the soul with the body's food.* Years ago there was a popular book that perhaps many of you have read called *The Weigh Down Diet*. The author, Gwen Shamblin, makes the same point and urges us to relearn how to feed or nourish the human soul with a relationship to God. This is absolutely critical. And please, no one is suggesting that a relationship to God eliminates bodily needs. If you are truly hungry you need an apple, not a lecture on grace. But our eating problems do not arise from genuine physical hunger, but from a deficit, a lack in our souls. In the fourth chapter of John's gospel there is a fascinating exchange between Jesus and his disciples. His boys had gone into the city to find some food while Jesus stayed by

Jacob's well outside the city. This is where he spoke to the Samaritan woman with the loose morals. Then the disciples arrive with some food. But Jesus is apparently too busy ministering and doesn't eat. So, in John 4 verse **31-34** *Meanwhile the disciples were urging Him, saying, "Rabbi, eat." 32 But He said to them, "I have food to eat that you do not know about." 33 So the disciples were saying to one another, "No one brought Him anything to eat, did he?" 34 Jesus *said to them, "My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me and to accomplish His work.* The word "food" is often used metaphorically in the New Testament. Your food is whatever gives you strength and energy. Jesus speaks of having a mysterious source of strength. What is that? Is it not his relationship to His Father? Certainly it is. He says, "my food is to do my Father's will, to know the smile of Him who sent me." Amazing! We read earlier in I Timothy 4 about how food is good if received with thanks. But in the very next verse in I Timothy 4:**6** *In pointing out these things to the brethren, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, constantly nourished on the words of the faith and of the sound doctrine which you have been following.* Do you see that? What does Paul say should nourish us? The words of faith and sound doctrine. If we are ever going to have a proper relationship to food our thinking must be corrected by Scripture. I once heard an ad on the radio in which a man actually promised that if you pay for his secret diet plan you will lose 10 pounds in two days. In the ad he actually said, "you can have a lean, mean body in only two days" with his system. Listen folks, that is sick. And we have to be in a sick world for that guy to get any attention. For most of us, losing weight is difficult. I don't believe it will ever be anything but difficult. There are some diets easier than others I am sure, but the starting point for us should be a changed attitude toward food that results from having our minds transformed by truth and our hearts filled up and strengthened by a relationship with God. Where are you turning for nourishment? For comfort? For refuge from the storm? For strength for the battle? Romans 14:**17** *the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.* We must make the Lord our refuge and our strength.

And the good news is that the Lord is stronger than all our cravings. He is stronger than the advertising industry. He is stronger than all our ingrained habits. Galatians 5:**16** *walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh.* Among the fruits of the Spirit named in that chapter, there is self-control. And you know Philippians 4:**13** *I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.* ® If that is so, then let us find strength in the Lord. Let's quit trying to feed the soul on the body's food. Let's find sustenance in the provision of our Savior. John chapter 6 records the

feeding of 5000 thru the miracle of Christ. He did not despise the needs of the body. He met those. But then later in that chapter he says this John 6:**27abc** *Do not work for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you. John 6:**31-35** Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread out of heaven to eat.'*” 32 *Jesus then said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, it is not Moses who has given you the bread out of heaven, but it is My Father who gives you the true bread out of heaven. 33 For the bread of God is that which comes down out of heaven, and gives life to the world.” 34 Then they said to Him, “Lord, always give us this bread.” 35 Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life; he who comes to Me will not hunger, and he who believes in Me will never thirst.* Here is the point. Feed your body with the food it needs. Fine. But your soul is to find and can find its satisfaction, and its strength in Christ and only in Christ. Everything else is an idol and a vain hope. He is the bread of life. Feed on Him. And, my friend, if you have no clue how to do that. If you have never fed your soul on the grace of Jesus then today is the day of your salvation. Call on His name, and in His name you ask God to feed your soul.

Are you a substance abuser? Have you taken God’s good gifts and made of them a curse? Have you given food a place in your life that is only meant for the Lord Himself? (pause) God forgive us. Pray with me now, and lets see if we can’t begin to retake ground that has been surrendered to some high-caloried idol. *Father, we are guilty. We have sought refuge in the things of this world instead of you. We have sought strength from idols. We have hungered after the mud-pies of this world instead of Christ. Forgive us. We have robbed ourselves and we have neglected You. So, Great Savior, we come from the best bliss that earth imparts, and we turn in our neediness, again to You. Forgive us. Fill us. Satisfy our hearts and train them to rely on You, to own you as our only Master, our only refuge and as the strength of our hearts. Now, as we come to your table to commune with you and each other. May we discover the sufficiency of Christ and truly feed our souls on Him. Amen*